

**SERMON: “Not Ashamed of the Gospel” Part 7
“The Far Horizon of Hope”**

April 18, 2010

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: O God our Creator and Redeemer, let your word stretch wide our hearts and minds, that we may catch a glimpse of the glory that is to be, when, by the power of your redeeming love, creation itself is set free from its bondage to decay, to become at last what from the beginning you intended it to be. This we ask in the name of Him through whom and for whom all things were made; Christ the Lord of all creation.

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 24:4-6

New Testament Lesson: Romans 8:18-25

“April is the cruelest month,” writes the poet T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*. But obviously Eliot never lived in Greenville. In Greenville and throughout the South, April is one of the loveliest months of the year. Almost over night the whole world has burst forth with new life and beauty...dogwoods and daffodils, azaleas and forsythia, lush green grass and new leaves on the trees. The past couple of weeks here in Greenville have been spectacular. I think this is the prettiest Spring I’ve ever seen.

So surely the poet is wrong. April is not “the cruelest month.” April is one of the loveliest months...*unless*... you are allergic to the pollen that has turned our cars and driveways yellow...or unless you live in the tornado belt from Texas through the mid-west... or unless you are trying to get a flight out of Paris or London after the explosion of the volcano in Iceland. For some the lovely month of April can be cruel indeed.

Susan and I will never forget the evening of **April 3rd, 1974**. The day began like any other early spring day. There were showers on the east coast and some storms expected in the mid-west. Children went to school in the neighborhood. People went to work as usual. I had a meeting that night at a church just off the belt-way in Lexington, Kentucky. What none of us knew at the time was that a series of storms of unbelievable ferocity was forming. It turned out to be the second worst storm system of the century. Before the night was over Brandenburg, KY, and Zenia, Ohio, would almost be blown off the map. Driving home from the meeting that evening, I was listening to reports on the radio of the destruction headed our way. Every few seconds the whole sky would light up like an artillery bombardment. As I came down a long hill on the edge of the city, I could see that parts of the city had already lost power.

That night Susan and I and our children spent an anxious night in our basement as a series of tornadoes left a path of destruction that looked as if someone had taken a giant lawnmower and mowed down everything in its path. It was the most awesome vision of Nature’s fury I’ve ever experienced. For many in a ten state region, the lovely month of April was the “cruelest month” indeed.

Whenever people suggest that they find all of God they need to know in the beauties of Nature, I want to pull out the newspaper from April 4th, 1974, and hold up the headline **“Kentucky’s Most Tragic Day!”** Of course, there is great beauty in Nature. We need to see it and appreciate it and give thanks to God for it. John Calvin was right. For those with eyes of faith, the whole world is the “theater of God’s glory.” The psalmist declares, **“The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims God’s handiwork.”** Yes, there is much in creation that points to the glory and majesty of its Creator.

And yet, there is also great destructiveness in Nature. Set beside the loveliness of Nature “robed in the blooming garb of spring,” as the old hymn puts it, the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, or the suffering caused by the earthquake in Haiti or the Christmas tsunami in Sumatra. The awesome beauty of Nature and its awful destructiveness are both part of the same reality, and both need to be taken into account.

One of the Genesis stories of creation ends with God surveying all that God had made and declaring it “very good.” There is much in creation that is wonderfully, beautifully, gloriously good! And yet there is also much that is **not good**, or at least not in terms of how it affects human beings. There may be a very good reason for cancer and cobras being part of God’s creation. But for the life of me I don’t know what it is. What are we to make of that which even in the lovely month of April seems cruel and capricious in Nature? And what does it all mean to the God we worship as the “Maker of heaven and on earth”?

This morning and again next week we come to the magnificent 8th chapter of Paul’s Letter to the Romans. Here the gospel of which Paul is not ashamed finds perhaps its most profound expression. Here Paul explores the far frontiers of hope. Here he gives voice to a hope as vast as creation itself. It is a hope not only for the salvation of those who believe, but a hope for the whole created order. Paul clearly links the two—our hope for redemption in Jesus Christ is bound inseparably with our hope for all that God has made in all of creation.

Before Paul speaks of hope, he begins with an **acknowledgment of the reality of suffering**. Suffering is an inevitable part of life. It is both a part of life in a risky, precarious world “east of Eden,” and it is a part of the life of costly discipleship in a world of Sin and Death. Paul knew first-hand both forms of suffering quite well.

Don’t forget that many of his letters were not written in a book-lined study on his way to receiving life-time tenure. They were written from a jail cell on his way to execution. In his Second Letter to the Church at Corinth, Paul recounts some of what he has suffered. “Five times I have received...the forty lashes less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods, once I received a stoning. Three times I have been shipwrecked...in danger from rivers, from robbers, from my own people, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren, in toil and hardship through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.”

And in the very next chapter of the letter, Paul refers to what he calls his “**thorn in the flesh...** sent to keep me from being too elated.” Three times he says he begged the Lord to take it away from him, only to be told, “Not yet, not now.” “**My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.**” (2 Cor.12:8-9) Paul knew as well as anyone who ever lived the suffering that comes both from the unruly forces of Nature and from the “cost of discipleship” itself.

And yet Paul could write to the church in the very city in which he would later be executed, “**I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the glory to be revealed to us.**” Suffering is real—it is terribly, painfully real. But it does not have the final word, in our lives or in God’s creation. It is “**not worth comparing to the glory to be revealed to us.**”

Paul will address the issue of our personal suffering in the words we will consider next week from Romans 8:28-39, one of the greatest passages in all of Scripture. But before

he deals with suffering on a personal level, Paul deals first with the suffering that seems to be built into creation itself. Paul writes,

“For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation itself was subjected to futility not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”

That is a very difficult sentence to unpack. It seems that Paul has packed a whole theology of Nature into one long, complex sentence. There is a great deal in what he says here, and in many other places, that I do not understand. But there are at least a few things that I think I do understand in what Paul is saying here. That’s what I want to focus on this morning.

First, Paul says that **creation itself** is in need of redemption. Nature itself is affected by our sin. The whole created order falls under the judgment of God **“who subjected it to futility, not of its own will by the will of him who subjected it.”**

The Bible suggests that there is a shadow side to creation that, at least in part, is the result of human sin. Scripture insists that the goodness of God’s creation has been corrupted by our sinfulness. “Cursed is the ground because of you,” says the Lord God to his first disobedient creatures, “thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you...you are dust and to dust you shall return.” (Gen. 3:17b-18, 19)

That same theme of creation itself sharing in the effects of our sinfulness is found repeatedly in the prophets of Israel. Isaiah puts it starkly in the words we read this morning:

“The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers; the heavens languish together with the earth. The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt...”

There is an ongoing debate in our country as to what extent global climate change is caused by human activity, but there is no debate in Scripture as to the fact that human sinfulness pollutes the order of Nature in ways we may not even be aware of.

And so if Nature itself is affected by our sin, then our redemption as human beings positively affects the whole creation. Paul goes on,

“for the creation itself was subjected to futility not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”

Hope for the world and hope for humanity are inseparably linked in biblical faith. No full salvation for one is possible apart from the other. Paul says,

“We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.”

Again I cannot fully understand, much less ever explain, all that means, but I do know that I cannot experience the fullness of God's salvation apart from the redemption of the whole created order. My hope is not for some other-worldly salvation, in some ethereal realm of pure spirituality. My hope is for nothing less than a New Creation, in which all that is good and fine and lovely in God's first creation will finally be freed from its bondage to Death and decay, freed from the effects of our sinfulness, so as to be at last what God intended for the beginning.

Paul calls this thing for which we hope "**the redemption of our bodies.**" "The redemption of our bodies!" Not the "salvation of our souls," but the "**redemption of our bodies.**" William Barclay has a phrase that I appreciate very much where he says that the goal of biblical faith is not "**soul salvation**" but "**whole salvation.**" He gets it from Paul. "**For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God...**" **Whole salvation!** The final redeeming of all that God has made to be what God made it to be.

All of this would seem to have little basis in reality were it not for what we celebrated two weeks ago, and every Lord's Day, **the bodily resurrection of Jesus** from the dead. Hope for the "**redemption of our bodies,**" and hope for the **redemption of creation** itself are linked in the **resurrection of Jesus Christ.** His resurrected body is the promise and the prototype of the New Creation. Last week we sang a lovely hymn which ends with these words, "A new creation comes to life and grows, As Christ's new body takes on flesh and blood. The universe restored and whole will sing, Alleluia! Amen!" Paul would agree wholeheartedly.

Again let me say that although I do not understand all this means, I do believe what little I can understand with every fiber of my being. It is just this hope for the whole of creation by which I am saved from despair and hopelessness—something that I, and we all, desperately need these days.

Now clearly this hoped-for redemption is not yet a reality among us. At best "we see only broken and scattered signs that the renewal of all things is under way." But as Paul reminds us, "**Hope that is *seen* is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not yet see, we wait for it with patience.**" Amid the sufferings of this present time, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we, too, can wait with patience for the redemption God has promised. For in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead we are given a glimpse of God's New Creation, and we are assured that in the fullness of time the Lord of Life and Death will indeed make all things new and set all things right, as he promised...in the gospel of which we are not ashamed. To him be all glory and majesty, all dominion and power, now and forever more. Alleluia! Amen!

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