

St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church + Modesto, California
The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
July 14, AD 2002

Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

Romans 8:18-25

¹⁸ I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. ¹⁹ The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ²³ Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. (NIV)

Seeing Life

Dear brothers and sisters of our Lord,

In the last weeks we've been hearing the Word of God from a letter written by one of God's apostles, Paul. In his letter to Christians in the city of Rome, he has told us about life. Not just physical life, but life that never ends—life with God. We have heard about getting life, living life and keeping life. Today Paul speaks to us about ultimately seeing life.

We can't yet see the life we have

A few years ago, shortly after we moved to California, I remember noticing a lot of news reports about bears. I remember hearing story after story about bears at Yosemite and at campgrounds in the Sierra, lumbering up to tents and cars unafraid, looking for something to eat. I remember a ranger explaining that some cubs have grown up thinking that the way to get a meal is to break into a car or truck and take it out.

It was about two or three years before I visited Yosemite after those bear stories. (Okay, that was more a function of a busy schedule than a fear of bears. Really!)

Seriously, though, have you noticed the large number of news stories that deal with dog mauling? Last summer was called the "summer of the shark" because of the shark attacks in the news. I learned the other night, though—and whether this is good news or bad news, you'll have to decide—that the number of shark attacks last summer was not really any greater than in previous years. There was just less other news to cover.

What I'm getting at is this: things in the animal kingdom and the world of nature don't work the way they should. When people and animals intersect, it's plain to see that we don't live in perfect harmony with them. And look at the world around you: wildfires, natural disasters, legitimate concerns about the environment and the world God gave us—all indicators that things aren't as they should be.

Why not? God created this world perfect. Flawless. Everything working just right. Even people and all animals living together peaceably. What happened?

In short, we happened. As we reviewed a couple weeks ago, Adam and Eve, the first people, had everything. They got to inhabit a literally perfect world. And, as the crowning achievement of God's creation, they as human beings were given charge over the world. God commissioned them to care for

and manage the world he had made—a world that even now, thousands of years later, equipped with all our technology, we have not been able to figure out in all its complexity.

Then they lost it. Adam and Eve decided to try to live as God's equals, not his loved creatures, and they turned on him. And things have never been the same.

To bring home to Adam and all of us, his descendants, just how serious this rebellion was, God said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' 'Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food ... (Genesis 3:17-19)

Things weren't going to work the way they had. Or we could say that things weren't going to work, period.

You know how this goes. When is the last time that you had a whole day—one full day, from beginning to end—that went exactly right? I mean everything, exactly as you had planned. Perfect weather. Every traffic light green. Not even a slowdown on your commute. No hassles or frustrations or disappointments through the whole day. Smiles from your kids and your boss and your customers. Dinner with the whole family and no telemarketers. When is the last time you had a day like that?

Have you *ever* had a day like that?

Me neither.

As surprising as this may seem, this is part of God's plan. It all goes back to what he said to Adam after Adam sinned. The Apostle Paul, in our section for today, phrases it like this: For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it. God "subjected the creation to frustration." He made it so there would be weeds in our lawns. He allowed them to grow. He allows more painful things than weeds to grow, too. Many of you know that all too well.

But why? Why would God do this? Why would he let this world—why would he let *us* fall apart like this?

The short answer? So we wouldn't get too attached to this world.

This world we live in, says Paul, is important, but it's not all there is. God doesn't want us to think that this world, crumbling as it is, is the goal and final home of us all. There's so much more. There's the life of the world to come.

If everything in this world worked just right, we might well conclude that everything was okay when in fact it is not. Our sins still cause a rift between us and God. God gives us clues to let us know that there is a problem between him and us. He leads us to long for a solution. Then he gives us Jesus. He gives us the good news that Jesus has removed our sins from us through his death on the cross. He proclaims to us forgiveness, a renewed connection to him and the free gift of life with him.

This life with God is ours in Christ. But we can't see it, can we? We look at ourselves and we see hunger, thirst, crying, pain, death and tears. We sure don't look like the children of God.

But we are. We have life. God has given it to us. We just can't see it yet.

Have you ever been to a concert with an opening act? Or maybe a movie years ago with a short feature before the movie began? A few years ago a friend described to me a concert he went to that had an excellent opening act. It brought the house down. Problem was, that act wasn't the main one. My friend—and he suspected he was not alone—left that night disappointed. The opening act had been so good that few people were excited by the main one.

God wants us to remember that this life here and now is the opening act. Something greater is yet to come. God doesn't want our minds just on this life. He wants us thinking about Jesus, the one who rescues us from the sin that we see all around us and even in us. He wants us thinking and talking about a greater destiny than just a mansion on this earth. He wants us to think about the day when we and the whole creation will *see* the life that we have. We will all *see* that we are children of God.

But the waiting will be worth it

This is coming. The day when God will pull back the veil of sin forever to reveal a perfect world—this day is coming. We know so because God said so. And Jesus proves it. The fact that Jesus died, but then came back to life in a transformed and glorified body proves to us that God is not going to let things rot and decay. He's going to turn them around and make all things new. The old order of things is life and then death. But with God, it's the opposite: death and then life.

We have this life to look forward to. We have it, right now. Jesus once said, I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me *has* [present tense!] eternal life... (John 5:24) This life is ours right now. We just can't see it yet.

Paul says that we live now in hope of seeing the life that Jesus has given us. Before we talk about hope, though, we should be clear about something. When the Bible uses the word hope, it doesn't mean what we usually mean when we talk about hope. We might say something like, "I sure hope it cools off tomorrow—maybe to a high of 75 degrees!" What is the likelihood of that happening? Small. Very small. When we say we *hope* for something, we usually mean that we *wish* for something.

That's not what Paul means here. When Paul says that we hope for the day when we will be revealed as the children of God, he has no doubt that it really will happen. This is not just wishful thinking. This is a certainty. As certainly as Jesus rose, we too will rise. But we don't know when. We can't see it yet.

That's what faith is all about. The Bible says, Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. (Hebrews 11:1) God promises us that our sins are fully forgiven. We believe it. We can't see it, but we believe it because God said it. God has said that the day is coming when he will remove sin completely from us and we will get to see who we really are. God said it. We believe it. We just can't see it yet. We live in faith. And, as someone has said, faith turned toward the future is hope.

It's hard to wait. It's hard for us, because we know that there's more to our life in Jesus than we see now. We know God didn't create these bodies of ours to fall apart, but that's what we're doing. Paul describes it as being in labor: We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

We groan. And yet we hope. God has promised that there's more to come. And so we suffer through the labor pains, all the while waiting for new life to emerge.

The question for us is, Will this hope, this expectation of glory, prove to be worthwhile? Is all the suffering I go through now—while I live in hope—worth it?

This section of the Bible reminds me of an incident at our dinner table last week. My two-year-old was told that she could have some ice cream, but only if she ate another bite of the casserole on her plate. When this quid pro quo deal was explained to her, this tortured expression swept over her face. You could tell what she was thinking: "Is it worth it? Is choking down a noodle that I can see on my plate worth getting some ice cream that I can't see?" After a few minutes of soul-searching, she decided it was.

"Is it worth it? Is suffering all the grief of this present world going to be worth it? Will the life of the world to come and the glory I'll have there—will make my suffering now seem worthwhile?" These are the questions we ask. And the suffering we must endure is far beyond eating a noodle casserole we don't like.

We should listen to Paul here. Paul was a man who suffered a great deal, including multiple beatings, jail time, near death after a shipwreck, more verbal abuse than we can imagine and eventually, according to a fairly reliable tradition, the death penalty. Paul has us envision an old-fashioned balance scale, kind of like a playground seesaw or teeter-totter. He has us think of all the pain—physical, emotional, psychological—all the suffering, all the heart-rending grief, all the end-of-my-rope, wits-end frustration—he has us imagine all of these piled onto one side of the scale. Will the gloriously happy and perfect life that God has in store for me, will all that happiness balance the scale? Will the glory that's coming be equal to the suffering I feel now?

Paul says No. The glory that's coming will not be equal to the suffering I feel now; *it will be greater!* The pain I know now in all its horrid intensity will not measure up to the joy that I will feel when I'm in heaven. All the memories of suffering will evaporate. I will live in the presence of my loving God and experience nothing but his good will.

My body will be transformed. No more aches and pains. No more glasses or contacts. No more prescriptions. No more band-aids. No more Kleenex. No more wheelchairs. No more canes. No more hospital beds. Just a body that will function perfectly forever.

My soul will be free from even the presence of sin. That old person I was without God, that sinful nature of mine—gone. The struggle to do what I want to do, the struggle not to sin—gone. I will move in perfection, in harmony with the will of God. No more guilt. I'll revel in the love of God and see him face to face.

And the world? No more disasters. No more calamities. No more accidents or earthquakes or fires. Instead, an entire earth renovated to be the perfect place for human beings that God intended it to be in the beginning.

Paul, this man who suffered so much—and many of you here today know intense suffering as he did—put it this way: I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. All the waiting here will be worth it, and then some.

We have life in Christ. That's easy to forget, though. We just can't see it! Most of the time, we look and feel more dead than alive.

But that's why we come here, isn't it? To be reminded that in spite of all appearances, we are alive. We are the children of the one and only almighty God. He wanted us so much that he died for us. He redeemed us, that is, he paid a price so that we would be freed. We are freed now from the condemnation brought by our sin. And in the future we will be freed from the very presence of sin. We will live, just as Jesus lives now, risen from death and glorified.

In Christ, we have life. We got it as a free gift. In Christ, we live life. We live as the baptized children of God that we are. In Christ, we keep life, using the power of his forgiveness each day to battle the old, sinful person within us. And in Christ, we live in the certain hope of seeing life in all its glory. Amen.