

When the going gets tough, the Kingdom is near.

Let us pray. *God of bounty and promise, send now the Holy Spirit to enlighten our hearts and inspire our minds to embrace the hope of the wonderful future you have in store for us, who believe in Jesus, who forever reigns with you and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Two weeks ago when Emily and I were attending a renewal conference in North Carolina we heard about a man who had recently attended his college reunion. It had been some years since he had seen most of his classmates. As was to be expected, age had wrought its usual changes to peoples' faces, making their appearance other than when they were younger. In other words to put it kindly, people did not look like their former selves. At the reunion while the man was surveying a sea of faces, he thought he recognized a woman who looked like Helen Brown. Quickly, he navigated his way to where she was standing and said, "You look like Helen Brown." In shock her face tightened with irritation, as she replied, "You don't look so hot in blue."

We laugh at the play on words, "You look like Helen Brown." Yet, the comedy here unfortunately reminds us of an inescapable reality. Like the woman mistaken for Helen Brown, we harbor a suspicion that there is indeed something wrong with the world and the people who populate it. It is no paranoia on our part when we anticipate that the world would sooner be unkind to us than gracious. For some reason the world is less eager to pay us a compliment and more ready to insult or harm us.

The tragic loss of life brought on by nature gone wild in a tsunami, the damage inflicted by a furious hurricane, or the recent barbaric taking of lives in London by terrorists are dismal reminders that all is not well with the world. Such horrors do not even include the personal horrors which challenge some of us: disease, divorce, unhappy children or financial difficulty. There is more than enough pain, suffering and death to make us mistrust the world's intentions towards us.

Some have aspired to explain the reason behind such destruction and misery in our lives. Billy Graham's daughter, Anne, was once interviewed on *The Early Show*. She was asked in respect to the 9-11 attacks, "How could God let something like this happen?" She responded, "I believe God is deeply saddened by this, just as we are, but for years we've been telling God to get out of our schools, to get out of our government and to get out of our lives. And being the gentleman He is, I believe He has calmly backed out. How can we expect God to give us His blessing and His protection if we demand He leave us alone?" If we say there is to be no prayer or reading of the Bible in our schools, well, we reap what we sow."

Anne Graham has offered one explanation for the terrible plight of the world, but, let us consider another.

Once upon a time in the kingdom of heaven, God was missing for six days. Eventually, Michael the Archangel found him, resting on the seventh day. He inquired of God, "Where have you been?" God proudly pointed through the clouds, "Look, Michael. Look at what I've created." Michael looked puzzled and said, "What is it?" "It's a planet," replied God, "and I've put life on it and I call it Earth and it's going to be a great place of balance." "Balance?" inquired Michael, still confused. God

explained, pointing to different parts of earth. “For example, northern Europe will be a place of great opportunity and wealth but cold and harsh while southern Europe is going to be poor but sunny and pleasant. I have made some lands abundant in water and other lands parched deserts. The Archangel, impressed by God's work, then pointed to a land mass and said, “What's that one?” “Oh,” said God. “That's Erie County, NY, the most glorious place on earth. There will be beautiful hills, grasslands, farms, streams, abundant wild game and birds, and woodlands. The people from Erie County are going to be handsome, modest, intelligent and humorous. They will be extremely sociable, hardworking and high achieving, and known throughout the world as diplomats and carriers of peace.” Michael gasped in wonder and admiration but then exclaimed, “What about balance, God? You said there would be balance!” “Ah,” God replied, “wait until you see the idiots I put in their county legislature!”

Whether we think the reason for all the misery in the world is because, as Anne Graham suggests, we have kicked God out of school and country or it is because God has engineered a balance between good and bad in the world, neither explanation makes the pain in our lives go away. And, that's what we want. Isn't it — for the pain to go away? This then begs a huge, agonizing question from our reading in Romans. How can St. Paul be so dismissive of the pain and suffering in this world. He doesn't deny it by any means. Rather, he seems to discount it as if it were nothing more than a needle prick.

Just moments ago in v. 18 we heard him say: “*I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.*” Well, the glory of which Paul speaks must really, really be something. Imagine for a moment what it would take to make you forget the worst of your troubles, the worst of your nightmares. Can you imagine such a thing which would put all your losses, all your pains into such a perspective as to make them seem as if they hardly mattered at all? That would be some kind of sedative! A pharmaceutical company would love to have the patent on a drug that could do that.

Here's the real kicker, though. Paul tells us that the pain and suffering in this world are really part of a process. In fact in v. 22 he compares the suffering in this world to a woman giving birth. “*We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now.*” This seems kind of bazaar doesn't it? Many of us, I suspect, would entertain Anne Graham's idea that suffering might be caused by our kicking God out of our lives, resulting in His judgement. Some of us might believe that life is a balance between good and bad. But, how many of us are ready to believe that the pain and suffering in this world are part of a great process — that it has direction and purpose or for that matter is somehow a good thing. Not many, I suspect. Not many of us would be willing to say that the damage wrought by extreme natural forces, like hurricanes or tsunamis are ultimately a good thing, or that the misery humans inflict upon one another is part of the birthing of something better. Would we?

Yes, it would be a stretch of faith for us to believe that God's purpose for a better world and a better tomorrow are being worked out in suffering (i.e., His will is being accomplished in suffering). But if this is true, if suffering is part of God's purposive will for us to make a better tomorrow for us, then we should take comfort that He is most surely with us in our suffering. Did you hear that? We should take comfort that God is most surely with us in our suffering. How can this be? Let's answer this by taking a brief moment to reflect upon Jesus' work when He walked this planet.

Recall Jesus' miracles and when they were performed. Nearly everyone of them was accomplished in the midst of lack, deprivation, pain and even death. Jesus defined his messiahship in Matthew 11:5 by saying: “*the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the*

deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.” What is a saviour if he doesn’t save us from something? It was in the midst of miserable circumstances that God in Christ made himself manifest. Do you see that? Furthermore, it was in the context of misery that Jesus declared what? That the Kingdom of Heaven was near. Has it ever occurred to you in the midst of your suffering or someone else’s that the Kingdom of Heaven might be near?

Think about Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5. *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”* In effect what Jesus has done is offer a theology of hope in the midst of suffering. You see not only are the sufferings of this present time not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us, they can in fact be windows through which God further reaches out to offer us his love and blessings in the present. St. Paul substantiated this reality when he said: *“For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”* (Romans 8:38-39).

However, in our reading today Paul is talking about more than God’s current presence during difficult times in our lives. There is a future tense to his words, just as there is a future tense to Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount: *“shall be comforted, shall inherit the earth, shall be satisfied.”* Paul is envisioning a future salvation for us that will engulf the entire cosmos and reverse and transcend the consequences of the fall. This is the glory he says is awaiting us; that will make all our troubles, all our sorrows fade away. And, now we have recalled the real reason for misery in the world. Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden. Yet, as creation fell when Adam sinned, so too will it be transformed when the children of God, you and I, experience the completion of redemption. To repeat, when Adam and Eve sinned the whole of creation fell with them. This is why St. Paul says in v. 21: *“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.* The created world has a vested interest in seeing that we humans are fully redeemed. Consider this: even the grass you mowed this week has a vested interest in seeing us fully redeemed. I like the way St. Ambrose in the 4th century put it. *“The moon toils for you and by reason of the will of God is made subject. The moon groans and travails in pain in its changes. The moon frequently awaits your release from sin, so that it may be released from the servitude in which all creation shares.”*

In the back of St. Paul’s mind, as he writes these words to the Romans, are the words of the Prophet Isaiah (65:17): where God said, *“For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind.”* Several science fiction movies pick-up on this idea of a renewed world. The movie, *Total Recall*, with Arnold Schwarzenegger pictures the planet, Mars, made liveable by the release of oxygen into the atmosphere. The movie, *Dune*, tells of a planet made more habitable when its messianic character supernaturally causes it to rain when it had never rained there before.

As humans we know that the world is incomplete and that we are incomplete. We long for that day when we shall be satisfied, where, as Revelation (21:3-4) puts it: [God] *“will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.”*

For us as Christians, however, that longing to be satisfied is perhaps even more poignant. Who here has not said or thought, “God, if I am your child, if you love me, why then have you allowed such

terrible things to happen in my life.” I don’t need to remind you of your own personal miseries. Do I?

This, then, is why Paul said in v. 23: “*we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.*” Because we Christians have the first fruits of the Holy Spirit, we groan. Sometimes late at night, when insomnia is your bed partner, it seems you can almost hear that groan. It is that cumulative groan striving, even while many sleep, for the welfare and betterment of our children, ourselves and the future of the world.

Having tasted the first fruits of the Spirit, we long for completion. Indeed, we have had a taste of what will be. If you have seen the Broadway production of the musical, *Oliver*, you will remember when speaking of food Oliver asks, “Please sir, may I have some more.” As Christians we want more of God’s kingdom not simply because we have had a taste of God’s eternal reward for us in the deposit of the Holy Spirit, but, also because the Spiritual DNA, instilled in us by having faith in Jesus, yearns to fully express itself. We are like young birds longing to fly or a child, who crawls but suspects he or she can walk. On a long automobile trip you have heard your children whine: “Are we there yet.” As Christians we too long to arrive — to get to that place — that eternal vacation so to speak — full of rest, enjoyment and no pain. Do we not? “The already not yet” tension between what God has already done for us believers and what he has yet to do is all too evident.

But, let us not short-change ourselves or St. Paul’s words for that matter. The glory about to be revealed to us is more than the paradise, which Jesus promised the thief, being crucified with Him. The glory Paul is encouraging us to look forward to is the very resurrection of our bodies. This is other than and greater than what happens to us after we die. Paul puts it this way in 2 Corinthians 5:2-4: “*Here indeed we groan, and long to put on our heavenly dwelling, so that by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we sigh with anxiety; not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.*” Though paradise is far better than this mortal world, it has no comparison to the joy and bliss we will experience in God’s presence when we receive our resurrected bodies.

The story is told of a cop who stopped a kid for speeding. Walking over to the car, the officer said, “I’ve been waiting for you all day.” The kid replied, “Yeah, well I got here as fast as I could.” When the cop finally stopped laughing, he sent the kid on his way without a ticket.

What we need to remember as Christians is that no matter how fast we are going God will be there ahead of us. Whatever our destination, even one that is full of pain and misery, He, like the kindly police officer, is already there ahead of us. God is there in the midst of our suffering to offer us the comfort of His presence and the promise of a brighter tomorrow. Ultimately, that means a resurrected body. That has been Paul’s message to us today.

Let us not forget, then, that when things go wrong in our lives or the lives of others that the Kingdom of Heaven is near. Jesus ministered to those in need: the blind, the lame, the lepers, and the poor. But, that also means that we have to look for the Kingdom. The Pharisees of Jesus’ time saw Him do all matter of miraculous works, but could not see the Kingdom. How do you know when you have seen the Kingdom? You know you have seen the Kingdom when you have had a change of heart — a change that leads to greater faith and trust in God’s love and provision for you.

So, let us remember to keep an eye out for God even in the midst of our suffering. And, similarly to keep eye for others in their suffering — telling and showing them that the Kingdom of Heaven is near — that God is with them even in their pain. Immanuel-God is with us.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.