

Sunday, July 23, 2017 – Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Preacher: Rev. Douglas J. Brouwer

Scripture: Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24 and Romans 8:12-25

Sermon title: “The creation waits with eager longing”

With the sermon this week, my brief, three-part sermon series on Romans 7 and 8 comes to an end. As you will see, Romans 8 continues after verse 25 (which is where Sunday’s lesson ends), so I encourage you to read the chapter in its entirety. Martin Luther once encouraged his congregation to memorize the ENTIRE Letter to the Romans, so it shouldn’t seem too burdensome to read the chapter through – and perhaps again in another translation. Romans 8 is so good, so meaty, that it warrants frequent readings!

1. So we move from last week’s assurance that “there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” to this week’s reflection on the hope we have that sustains us and keeps us going. It’s interesting – isn’t it? – that Paul would mention our “sufferings” as he begins to write about “the glory about to be revealed.” I think this tells us that Paul is firmly grounded in reality. He knows the present situation as well as anyone. For now we suffer. And maybe our suffering is heightened precisely because we have this hope within us. The whole creation feels this longing for the “revealing of the children of God.” Do you feel it too?
2. My friend Scott Hoezee notes that “creation” includes more than human beings: God has given even the non-human creation hope. There is liberation on the way for all creatures of our God and King. A time is coming when decay, pollution, species extinction, oil-slicks on pristine beaches, ozone depletion, and global climate change will be no more. Somehow, in ways Paul leaves tantalizingly unexplained, the creation knows this. So much so that in verse 19 Paul uses a wonderfully colorful image that has been totally obscured in translation. The phrase rendered as “eager expectation” means literally “to crane one’s neck.” It’s the image of a little child ... on tippy-toes, arching and craning his neck.... This is the posture you assume not just when you are excited but when you are *certain* that something wonderful is coming down the pike.

How long has it been since you have felt that “eager longing”?

3. I hope you recognize that it is our faith which produces in us a tension between the way things are and the way God has in mind for things to be. Without faith there would not be the same sort of tension or longing. As believers we carry around in our hearts a feeling of incompleteness. I see two implications here: one is that our faith pushes us to work for justice, to be good stewards of creation, and to do whatever we can to bring about that new life to come. And the other is that we must not deal with our feeling of incompleteness by accepting the way things are. Certainly that is a strong temptation – in other words, to go along with things as they are. How have you responded to this feeling of incompleteness?
4. It occurs to me that there’s another response we need to avoid, and this is “It’s all part of God’s plan, so I’m not worried.” Do you see how that’s also not the same thing as “eager longing” or “groaning.” Saying “I’m not upset” about the state of the world seems to ignore the awful reality (and our responsibility) as we wait.
5. To me, verse 26 is one of the most interesting and reassuring verses in all of scripture. When I don’t know how to pray, when words fail me, the Spirit “intercedes with sighs too deep for words.” Remarkable, isn’t it? Can you think of an event in recent months (or years) that has left you unsure of what to pray for or how to pray? I think of terrorist bombings or mass shootings in the U.S. The sheer scale of death and suffering leaves me speechless. What is there to pray for? How do we pray in the face of that? Maybe we need to be silent and allow the Spirit to take over, to prompt those “sighs too deep for words.” Does this sound reassuring to you? Do you feel as though you should find the right words for every situation? Isn’t it okay to simply be quiet in the face of evil, suffering, horror, and so forth? Here’s where it would be a good idea to read verse 28!