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Wait with Eager Longing

Core Faith

EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, YEAR A

Romans 8 calls us to see creation's groaning as bound up with our own salvation, inviting us to exercise dominion not as exploitation but as Christ-shaped care for a world longing to be reborn in hope.

REFERENCES

Genesis 28:10-19a

Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24

Romans 8:12-25

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

COLORS

Green

Preaching Notes

Focus Text: Romans 8:12-25

It is difficult to know where to start with this text. There is so much packed into these verses that one could preach a season's worth of sermons from the ideas and images found here. Almost any verse could become the center of the sermon or the focus of worship this week. How do we choose?

Then there is what seems at first to be a significant conflict in this long text. We begin with a call to live not by flesh but by spirit. Then, midway through, we have a lyrical passage about our

relationship with creation itself. Can you get more fleshly than worrying about the environment? And is that what we are asked to consider here?

Years ago, my wife came to one of my Bible studies because the members had heard me talk about all the things we do or don't do to be "green," to be ecological. So, she came and made a presentation on the choices we make daily, the homework we should do on companies and their impact on the environment, and which companies we should support and which ones we should avoid. There were weights and counterweights, balances and trade-offs, choices around every turn. Finally, after some time, members of the class said, "This is hard! Maybe too hard."

Why should we bother worrying about our impact on the environment, reducing our carbon footprint, and "reduce, reuse, recycle"? Surely, my little bit isn't going to make much of a difference. And are things really that bad? Aren't we being alarmist? Aren't there conflicting views of the human impact on climate and the planet as a whole? Can't we wait and see? Go about our business and trust that it will all come out okay? And if not, if worst comes to worst, aren't we as Christians not really all that worried about this world anyway? It's just temporary; we're just passing through. Right? It'll all get swept away, and the new heaven will be established, better than this one by far. Right?

Who better to look beyond this world to the next one than Paul? Who better to get our priorities straight, our vision properly focused, our eyes on the prize? We're straining forward, he tells us, for the finish line, the goal that lies ahead. Surely, he won't be concerned about this world, since his whole focus is on the next one. Right?

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation 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.

Romans 8:19-21 NRSV

Well, now that's a bit of a surprise. "The whole creation," he writes. Groaning in labor pains, hurting because of what it wants to birth, what it wants to bring forth. Of course, we say, he's talking spiritually, he's speaking metaphorically, about spiritual matters, not physical ones. Or is he? It seems like Paul is hinting that our salvation is tied up with the bondage and decay of all creation. The fate of the world, the fate of the plane, is woven into our fate, into our future, and our hope.

Not only that, but all that God has made relies on us. Not just us, but our better selves, our true selves, our lives as the sons and daughters of God. That is a roundabout way of saying that we treat our world as though it were part of God and part of us.

It is not God; that's an important distinction. We don't worship the creation. We aren't tree worshipers and mountain disciples; we're not grass gurus (any kind of grass, for that matter!) or flora and fauna followers. No, we are followers of Jesus the Christ, worshipers of the Creator of all we see and all we are. Creation is not God. Yet, we get a glimpse of the Creator when we comprehend the creation. We know the artist when we examine and protect the work of art. We commune with the author when we spend time in the writing.

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands...

Psalm 8:3-6a NRSV

To approach God, we need a better sense of ourselves. We need a proper perspective on who we are. One of the places to grasp that perspective is in the contemplation of nature. You can't stand on the rim of the Grand Canyon and not be humbled by the grandeur and beauty of the place, overwhelmed by the forces of time and nature that carved this natural wonder. You can't walk the beach of any ocean and watch the pounding of the surf and the power of the currents and not feel small and helpless despite our ability to fashion machinery and dwellings we think can withstand this power, until the storm surge comes and our efforts are swept away in a few tumultuous seconds. You can't contemplate the vastness of the universe and feel more significant than a speck of dust. Yet, the psalmist tells us, God loves us, cares for us, blesses us, honors us, and gives us dominion.

Now there's a word that needs another look: dominion. It's a word that has gotten us into trouble, I believe, because we look at one side only—the power side, the authority side. “You have made them” – people, that is, you and me – “a little lower than God.” “You have crowned them with glory and honor.” Woo hoo! I don't know the Hebrew for woo hoo, frankly. And even if I did, I wouldn't find it in this psalm. It's not there. This isn't about power. This isn't about dominating, about using, exploiting, abusing, and casting aside. No, it is about caring, as God cares for creation. It is being mindful of the planet where we live. It is caring for creatures and habitats as God cares for us. Don't think creation deserves that care? Do we? The psalm begins and ends with a doublet

about God. Our translation reads, “O Lord, our Sovereign.” Older translations read, “O Lord, our Lord.” It is a reminder that all our “dominion” is the power to care as God cares, to be mindful—to be woke!—as God is mindful of all of creation, including us.

Yeah, it’s hard. It takes effort and energy. It takes planning and going out of our way to be mindful and caring. But it’s worth it, because it’s our home, and it is the world that is dying to be born again, groaning to be fulfilled as God intended—groaning in hope.

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