

St. Paul: On The Same page

for 07.20.14 Pentecost 6a

Day One: Isaiah 44:6-8

“Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: “I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god. ⁷ Who is like me? Let him proclaim it. Let him declare and set it before me, since I appointed an ancient people. Let them declare what is to come, and what will happen.”

How does God prove that he is greater than all other “gods”? The people of Israel have doubted God. Faced by other nations, they are afraid that they will be conquered, so they have often turned to the “gods” of those nations.

They don’t think they have rejected God. They are just “hedging their bets” to make sure that they have done all they can to protect themselves.

How can God convince them that he is their only Savior? He tells them through Isaiah, “who is like me?” Who else can “declare what is to come, and what will happen”?

We think of foretelling the future as a parlor trick. We don’t take it seriously because we think it can’t be done. But what if the prophet, speaking as God directs, really can tell what will happen in the distant future? What would that mean?

Telling what will happen in the future reveals who controls the future. If the stars control your future (astrology), then it is the stars or the universe that determines your life. If the lines on your palm reveal your future, then it is the one who drew them there that controls your future.

If the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob could predict the rise of Babylon, the exile of the Israelites, their return after 70 years, and most importantly the coming of the Redeemer, then it is God who holds the future – and the present and the past – in his hands.

Are you sometimes afraid? Who will you turn to? Who is like him?

Prayer: *O God, there is no one like you. Lord, help me to trust in you, knowing that my past is your creation, my present is your gift, and my future is in your hand. Amen.*

Day Two: Romans 8:18-27

¹⁸For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. ¹⁹For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. ²⁰For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

When someone you love is suffering, how do you comfort them? Some people pretend it's not that bad. "Hey, it could be worse!"

Some people compare your sufferings with their own. "You think that's bad? You should see what happened to me!"

Both of those arguments lead only to more suffering. There is the bad thing happening to you, and then there is even worse.

But Paul has a different answer. He admits that "the sufferings of the present time" can be pretty bad. But instead of comparing them to how bad they could be – he compares them to how great God's blessings will be.

What might you say to a piece of iron being shaped by the blacksmith's hammer? "I wonder what you will be tomorrow!" Today you are going through the heat and the hammering, but tomorrow what will you be? Just a piece of wrought iron, a hinge or a coat hook? Or will you be a bright and shining sword, or a beautiful work of art?

Today all of creation is going through the heat and the hammering. If all that we see is trouble, and our only comfort is that our troubles could be worse, that is cold comfort indeed.

But the whole "creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God." The entire creation, not just us, is waiting eagerly to see what the Master Craftsman will make of us. And this is what Paul says it will be: We will be set free from bondage to obtain "the freedom of the glory of the children of God."

Prayer: *Dear Father, some of my days seem hard and my burdens heavy. But I have seen your good work. Give me patience while you work in my life, until you reveal your wonderful plan. Amen.*

Day Three: Romans 8 (cont)

²⁶*Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.* ²⁷*And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.*

Paul tells us, in our times of suffering, to look toward the future. But how? When we're confused, depressed, even despairing, we cannot think or see clearly. Sometimes all that we can see is the sadness right in front of us.

Have you ever tried to comfort a child that is frightened in the middle of the night? Or have you ever tried to reason with a child who is sick or who is in pain and who doesn't understand why she has to endure the doctor's treatment? As the nurses are probing, trying to start another IV, what can you tell a little child that will help her feel better?

Words don't help much. Reasons don't help much. In times like these we just hold our child. We weep with her.

We stay awake with her. We sing or hum or rock with her.

In the 8th chapter of his letter to the Romans, Paul is giving us reasons to rejoice in the victory we have in Jesus. But at the same time he recognizes that we still go through times of deep grief. Instead of trying to explain them away, Paul assures us that God understands. And God's Spirit does not abandon us. Even in deep grief, even when we have no words to speak, the Spirit holds us, groans with us, and lifts up our needs to the Father when we have no words for prayer.

"The whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth," Paul said. And we see the sad brokenness all around us. But God also groans with us. God enters into our suffering, our loss, and he lifts it up and transforms it into victory.

Read the remaining words of Romans 8. Memorize them. They are the sign of joy to come.

Prayer: *Dear Comforter, you dwell within me as Jesus promised. Fill my prayers, guide my thoughts and desires, and bring me into the perfect will of my Father. Amen.*

Day Four: Matt 13:24-43

³⁰*Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory...*

³²*From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near.* ³³*So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates.* ³⁴*Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.* ³⁵*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.*

³⁶*But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.* ³⁷*For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.*

I don't think we can even count all of the times that people have predicted the end of the world. And trying to interpret the symbolic language of Revelation, hundreds of would-be prophets have made wrong pronouncements about the path of the future. We've learned the hard way that we cannot predict the Last Day.

But there are some things about the future that we can know.

- There will be signs of Jesus' return.
- Wars, diseases, and other terrible things will continue to increase.
- This world will, one day, pass away.
- And our Savior will bring final victory over sin and death.

We don't know a date. We don't need to know every detail. What we need to know is what Jesus told his disciples, that he would come again in victory. We often read Jesus' words as if they are frightening. But they were intended to reassure his followers that, although they will see bad things happening, they were not to fear.

We also do not need to be afraid. We are not surprised by evil things, and we know our Lord will come!

Prayer: *Dear Jesus, come quickly. Give us patience until that day, and confidence in your victory. Amen.*