

Gloria Patri

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost.
As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, reign without end. Amen, amen.

Rom 8:18-25

Sue McGowan

Paul wrote this letter to the Roman church community sometime during his third missionary journey (57 AD). He had hoped to visit personally, but when that was not possible he wrote this letter to serve as a careful and systematic theological introduction in the hope that the church in Rome would become the base of operations for his next planned missionary journey to Spain.

In this passage Paul picks up on the idea that we will live the Christ-life, going through all that he has gone through, including sacrifice and suffering. But rather than dwelling on the cost of following Christ he 'raises our heads' to see the coming glory, not just for Jesus' followers but the transformation of all creation. It is in this hope that we experience saving grace and can endure and grow even in suffering.

¹⁸ I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰ for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ 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. ²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³ and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Luke 21:25-36

Rosemary Dawson

Unlike the other gospels Luke gives his own introduction to the gospel, explaining to one named "Theophilus" (his name means 'the one who loves God') that he wants to give an accurate account of God's work in Christ.

This passage is a part of literature called an 'apocalypse'. Many readers often emphasize the predictions of the 'last days' before God judges the world. However, in context it is a prophetic warning of both immediate world crises and a word of vision for the end. The reading interweaves historical events (such as the fall of Jerusalem 70 AD) with descriptions, signs, symbols and figures of speech which point to what is occurring in the greater scope of the supernatural world. Although it may seem strange to us, it assures us that God is at work now (even in crises) to bring about God's reign in a new age. Such a vision calls for faith, hope and courage.

²⁵ "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. ²⁶ People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷ Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. ²⁸ Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

²⁹ Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰ as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³² Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³⁴“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, ³⁵ like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶ Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

Special Music

“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.”
Plainsong arr. by Robert D. Vandall

Sermon

Holding On To Hope

Good Morning. I want to say ‘Happy Advent’ but that seems off base, especially today. Even as our society is putting up Christmas decorations, the church is hearing words of warning and judgement - not such a celebration. I think we would all rather be singing ‘Happy Holidays’ rather than face the music that seems to be playing on the Biblical top 10. But, if we are to follow Christ fully, to understand and appreciate his message, his work and his call, hear it we must.

Today’s Gospel reading, Jesus’ words, can seem frightening to us, or at least disturbing, if not downright confusing. What we heard today is from the end of what is often called the ‘Little Apocalypse’. Jesus has been speaking prophetically, warning of wars, insurrections, earthquakes, plagues and famines, as well as persecution and death for his followers. All these words came when Jesus himself would be crucified in just a few days, and his intent is to prepare his disciples not just for the days to come, but for the generations to come.

Looking ahead, Jesus sees the great battle which has been happening since the beginning of creation. In verse 20 Jesus foresees the destruction of Israel by Rome, not because it was extraordinary or unanticipated but because it was obvious to anyone paying attention. It is like the scientists who have been warning about global warming decades before our experience of mega-hurricanes and uncontrollable fire storms. Jesus sees in the events of the world order surrounding him a battle, not just between governments and cultures, but a cosmic battle – the battle between domination and equity, discrimination and justice, violence and peace, corruption and righteousness. It is the battle between good and evil. Such a battle is always earth-shattering, whether it comes in signs of sun, moon and stars, or signs of protest and advocacy, unrest and conflict.

But Jesus is not telling his followers all this disturbing news to freak us out, rather he calls us to ‘stand up and lift up’ – literally to ‘unfold and rise up’. So often, when things are difficult and even overwhelming, we want to curl up in a ball and hide. But Jesus tells us to live by an opposing stand. Jesus calls us into a position of hope and courage because, he promises, ‘your redemption is at hand’.

Now, many folks read this promise only in terms of ‘the Day of the Lord’, the last and final day of God’s judgement on the earth. So, they likewise assume that the ‘redemption’ is Christ’s second coming and our final glorification. And on the Day of the Lord that will be so. But on this side of eternity, in this moment of struggle, that ‘redemption’ literally means liberation – freedom from all that oppresses us, freedom for all who are oppressed and struggling. And that is our hope, is it not, as we struggle for equity, for gay rights and racial justice (and so many other battles for righteousness). Don’t we long for all people to be free, to be equally valued, respected and supported?

It is God’s promise that such redemption is coming, even in the midst of our struggles, because that is God’s design for all creation, so that “everything God made, creation itself, will be set free from the

tyranny of inevitable decay and share fully in the glorious freedom that belongs to the children of God”, as Paul says in Romans 8:21.

The struggle is hard and long, and so we must take hold of our hope, know that God is equally struggling with us in the pursuit of a world of righteousness and peace. This hope rests in the promises of God and in the very character of God. And it is this hope that ‘unfolds and lifts up our heads’. This hope, not only leads us to ‘wait for it’ and anticipate a coming world of godliness and goodness, but also strengthens us and moves us to live for the one who won the battle - on the cross.

Is it an easy hope? No, it’s not. It seems to fly in the face of all the world would have us believe. But it is true hope, a sure and certain hope. It is a hope so many have held on to before us - from Peter and Paul, right through to Martin Luther King and Malala Yousafzai, even the family and friends of Amhad Arbery. And it is a hope we too are called to hold on to through all the days of our lives.

Let us therefore live fully and faithfully, with hope, courage and peace. Amen.

***Hymn**

Hail to the Lord’s Anointed

1. Hail to the Lord's Anointed, great David's greater Son!
Hail in the time appointed, his reign on earth begun!
He comes to break oppression, to set the captive free;
to take away transgression, and rule in equity.

2. He comes with succor speedy to those who suffer wrong;
to help the poor and needy, and bid the weak be strong;
to give them songs for sighing, their darkness turn to light,
whose souls, condemned and dying, are precious in his sight.

Joys and Concerns

Prayers of the People

Faithful God, we come before you today hopeful in your mercy, grace and strength. We thank you for Jesus Christ, who entered human history intent to achieve your will for the redemption of all humankind, and by your power and wisdom he accomplished your purpose through the cross. We thank you that today we share in his Spirit, laboring together to make your promises real in our day. It is a great challenge O God, and so we come seeking your strength and encouragement.

We pray for your church and for this congregation. May we hold firmly to your promises, rest in your grace and pursue your good purposes for ourselves and for all peoples, here in our community and throughout the world. We pray for our world and for its leaders. Grant people in every area of authority and power the hope that seeks true justice, equity and peace, and the wisdom to pursue it with uprightness. We pray also for all who are suffering today. May your gracious promises be their hope and strength. May the poor find abundance, the oppressed be vindicated, and the forsaken receive hope. Grant your courage to the disheartened, your healing to the sick and your comfort to the mourning. We especially lift up... and we thank you for.... We praise you, O God, for the sureness of your coming reign, through Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray....

The Lord's Prayer

Choral Response Remember Me

Offering

As our hope in God's reign grows, so does our commitment to God's ways. As our love for God and others increases, so does our generosity. The circle of our concern widens, and our passion for justice expands. Through our giving we join in Christ's redeeming work. Let us dedicate our gifts with joy.

Thank you, God, for making us aware of the hope of your reign and the promise of your presence. Thank you for the love and strength we share as a community of faith, and for the awareness of those who still need your justice and grace. May the gifts and service we offer lift the burdens of many, and further the coming of your reign. Amen.

Doxology (choose the one that is best for your faith)

Praise God from whom all blessings flow, praise him all creatures here below,
praise him above ye heavenly hosts, praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost

Praise God from whom all blessings flow, Praise God all creatures here below
Praise God for all that Love has done; Creator, Christ and Spirit One. Amen

***Common Commission**

Let us go forth into the world in peace, being of good courage, holding fast to that which is good, rendering to no one evil for evil, strengthening the faint-hearted, supporting the weak, helping the afflicted, honoring all persons, loving and serving the Lord, and rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

*** Benediction**

Go now into the world.

And may the God of hope fill you with joy and peace in your faith, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit, your whole life and outlook may be radiant with hope. Romans 15:13 Phillips adj.

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. Amen.

Postlude "Passacaglia," by John Carter.

music provided by Chris Harris and Lynne Walker