

INI

Romans 8,18-25

Trinity 4 — 28 June 2015

Greeting: To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you. Amen.

We hear a portion of the first lesson, which was read earlier:

For I consider the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him Who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God..

So far the text. Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O LORD, our strength and our redeemer.

Introduction. Which one of us has not at one point or another experienced a sense of futility? Of saying, “What’s the point?” or, “Why bother?”

The ancient Greeks knew about frustration. Indeed, the punishment for one of their mythological kings, Sisyphus, speaks about futility on an eternal scale.

Sisyphus was a king of Corinth, and when he died he went to Hades. There he was given a punishment for the misdeeds of his life. He was to roll a rock as big as himself up an hill, and then it was to roll down the other side. But before that rock ever reached the peak, its weight caused it to fall back upon itself and it rolled down the hill.

So each and every day Sisyphus would push the rock to the top of the hill, and then, when he had almost reached the summit, the rock would roll back down. This was his punishment. Thus, into our language we have come to speak of such tasks as “Labors of Sisyphus,” of a “Sisyphian task,” and these are

endless

pointless

heartbreaking

meaningless tasks.

It is a poetic version of a typical Dilbert cartoon where the workers come in each day and deal with a management structure that is more stupid and pointless than humanly imaginable.

But the Scriptures know of and speak of this sense of futility as well. Indeed, the book of Ecclesiastes, by Solomon, has portions that, from a human perspective, seem to speak to this universal sense of futility. Listen to how it begins:

“Vanity of vanities,” says the Preacher, “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.”

Another translation, “Futility.” And a bit later,

And there is nothing new under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 1,9)

Indeed, throughout the book, “life under the sun,” or “nothing new under the sun” seems to be a synonym for “Vanity” or “futility.”

What’s the point? Why bother?

But in Paul’s letter to the Romans, and specifically in our Epistle

lesson for today, Paul comments on this sense of futility, but points us to hope. That brings us to the theme of today’s sermon, “**Hope in the Midst of Futility.**” We’ll discuss this in three parts:

- 1) Why Futility?**
- 2) What is Hope?;** and,
- 3) Living In The Midst of Frustration.**

1) Why Futility?. There are synonyms for futility. Words such as

emptiness

purposelessness

transitoriness

meaninglessness

All of them speak to the same hollow feeling inside. Life can be a grind. Is there any point?

As I’ve said, such feelings are nothing new. The Greeks spoke about them – remember Sisyphus? The Hindus also speak about cycles of creation, which last for millennia, and then everything begins again – kind of like a cosmic gerbil wheel where the gerbil just goes round and round, no beginning and no end, and, of course, no point. Buddhists speak about the word as “maya,” or “illusion.” Of course, Solomon in Ecclesiastes, writes “there is nothing new under the sun.”

The question, of course, is whether there is a reason for these feelings of ennui, for these feelings of emptiness, that transcend time and cultures?

God’s Word, the Bible, tells us indeed there is such a reason. Paul alludes to it when he writes that the creation was “subjected to futility.”

Something unnatural happened to the natural order of things.

To understand this unnatural thing that happened we turn back to the book of Genesis, and there read:

Then to Adam He [the LORD] said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying,

‘You shall not eat from it’; |

Cursed is the ground because of you; |

In toil [or, *sorrow*] you shall eat of it |

All the days of your life; |

¹⁸ Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; |
And you shall eat the plants of the field; |

¹⁹ By the sweat of your face | You shall eat bread, |
Till you return to the ground, | Because from it you
were taken;

For you are dust, |

And to dust you shall return.” (Genesis 3,17-19)

The subjection to futility is the curse of sin. Whether people know the reason or not, much less whether they believe it, because our first parents, Adam and Eve, rebelled against God, sin and death came into the world. In the place of purpose and life, all peoples in all ages and in all cultures are confronted with toil and death. I admit, this is not a cheery thought. In fact, the thought is down right depressing. Thus we ask:

2) What Is Hope? God, however, did not leave our first parents with only a sense of futility, but God also gave them a sense of hope. Before speaking to Adam, God spoke to Satan, the snake, and said,

I will put enmity

Between you and the woman,

and between your seed and her Seed;

He shall bruise your head,
And you shall bruise His heel.

The Seed of the Woman is the promise of a Messiah, One sent by God to “bruise the head” of the devil. Thus, throughout the entire Old Testament, there is the promise of One Who is to come. This is a message of hope, not in what people can do by the strength of their own hands or by the power of their own thoughts, but what God can and will do.

Hope against the power of sin and death finally finds its fulfillment in the person of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. He is Hope become flesh, God pleased to dwell among us. Indeed, Satan bruised Jesus’ heel, for Jesus went to the Cross. But in dying and then rising from the dead, Jesus bruised Satan’s head. For in the sacrificial death of Jesus, in the death of He Who knew no sin, we find that sin, death, and the power of the devil have been conquered. Jesus is the firstfruits of them who have risen from the dead.

Now we come to:

3) Living In the Midst of Frustration. It must be said, however, that the hope offered by God in Jesus is a beginning and not an end, because it is a hope that is placed in the midst of a world that still seems to be characterized by toil and death.

All creation groans, says Paul. All creation knows that there must be something better than this cycle of toil and death. Indeed, even believers groan. Elsewhere Paul expressed himself in these words:

For indeed in this house – that is, this body – we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven; ³ inasmuch as we, having put it on, shall not be found naked. ⁴ For indeed while we are in this tent – that is, this body –, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed, but to be clothed, in order that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. (2 Corinthians

5,2.4)

and a bit earlier in Romans Paul says,

Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from this body of death? (Romans 7,24)

We live lives in tension, lives of frustration, between what is and what will be. What is, is plain; however, what will be, should give us hope.

In North American culture we want to be positive, we want to have cures and fixes for everything.

Perhaps we can compare and contrast this with two novels of about 40 to 50 years ago.

The first book is *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, by American Richard Bach. A young seagull is instructed by Chang and Fletcher to realize his inner potential and become a super seagull, to become an unlimited seagull, capable of flying 340 miles per hour. Thus, by dint of his inner strength and inner resolution he can overcome his ordinary limitations. No groaning for redemption, but self-actualization.

Following up on this thought is the North American phenomena of self-help, of pulling yourself up by your bootstraps. The saying, “God helps those who help themselves” is not Biblical, but came from that deist, Benjamin Franklin. It finds its ultimate expression in Mary Baker Glover Patterson Eddy’s teachings in so-called Christian Science – pain is an illusion. This is nonsense; and worse than nonsense, it is ultimately a denial of the Cross of Christ.

The other book is by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *One Day In the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, which finds Ivan in one of Stalin’s gulags, that is, prison camps. This is about one day in a gulag, and Ivan’s confrontation with a Christian, Alyoska, a fellow prisoner. Ivan, ever the cynic, scoffs

at Alyoska's praying. But Alyoska tells Ivan he does not pray for escape or a reduction of his sentence, but he prays, "Thy will be done," that he, Alyoska, may do God's will here in the midst of a frozen hell on earth. Why? Because through the forgiveness won by Christ, in the midst of the groaning of the frozen earth, there is a hope laid up for him in heaven that will redeem his life here on earth.

Jesus, then, does not give us a Jonathan Seagull escape, but the strength in forgiveness and hope to persevere. Think again of Paul's words, "Who will deliver me?"

Luther on this passage.

Thus, St Paul reduces all suffering on earth to a little drop and tiny spark; but of yonder life, for which we are to hope, he makes a boundless sea and a great fire.... In calling it a glory to be revealed he indicates why it is that we suffer so unwillingly, namely, that our faith is still weak and hesitates to look into the glory which is hidden and waiting to be revealed in us. For were it a glory that we could see with our eyes, then indeed we would be fine, patient martyrs! If a man should stand on yonder shore of the Elbe [River] with a chest filled with gold florins and said, "Whoever will dare swim across shall have the chest filled with gold," how quickly everyone would start to swim across to get the gold that the eye can see.

Luther goes on to speak of the great glory that is ahead of us. This is a great glory which of which we get but a brief foretaste in this life.

We have been adopted by God through Christ; in Baptism we have our names sealed by the very name of God — not on account of what we have done, but what God has done for us in Christ. In His Supper, we are invited to have that hope renewed by having our sins forgiven; again, not on account of what we have done, but what Christ has done for us.

Conclusion. Futility is about us, great and small. Let me use a small

almost trivial example. We eat, and then wash the dishes. Again and again. Who will deliver me from this seeming cycle of futility? Maytag? Westinghouse? Bosch? But for some, this can be but a symptom of futility which can surround us in our daily lives.

In the midst of a life characterized by toil and death, which in turn are but the consequences of sin, Jesus offers hope through forgiveness. We do not come to Jesus, but He comes to us. This is not the hope that can be seen, but it is a hope veiled in the frustrations of living. Thus, in forgiveness, we live in a redemption that has a beginning, but in Christ has no end. This hope is imperishable, it is a hope that lasts, and is a hope that gives life meaning now and forever. Amen.

Now, may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

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