

Present Sufferings, Future Glory

7/19/20

SJN

God's Word come to us this morning from our Epistle lesson where we hear these words once more from St. Paul: "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us." (Romans 8:18) This is the Word of the Lord.

January 9, 2020 – WHO Announces Mysterious Coronavirus-Related Pneumonia in Wuhan, China

January 20 – CDC Says 3 US Airports will begin screening for the virus

January 21 – CDC confirms the first US Coronavirus Case.. At this point, the 2019 novel coronavirus has killed 4 and infected more than 200 in China, before Dr. Zhong Nanshan finally confirms that it can be transmitted from person to person. However, the WHO is still unsure of the necessity of declaring a public health emergency.

10 days later - on January 31- the WHO issues a Global Health Emergency

On February 2 – Global air travel from China is restricted

February 3 – The US declares a Public Health Emergency

February 10 – China's Death Toll Exceeds those of the SARS outbreak from 17 years ago, totaling 908 reported deaths in China in the last month compared with 774 deaths in the SARS crisis.

February 25 – CDC says that COVID-19 is heading toward Pandemic status.. and on March 11, the WHO declares it as such

March 13 – President Trump Declares COVID-19 a National Emergency and issues a Travel Ban on Non-US Citizens traveling from Europe.

March 17 – The Trump Administration asks Congress to send Americans direct financial relief

March 19 – California Issues Statewide Stay-at-Home Order and on March 23, Ohio announces one as well.

The massive shutdown across most of the country chokes the economy. Millions are laid off of work or furloughed. And families become isolated from loved ones.

March 25 – Reports find extended shutdowns can Delay a second wave and ‘flatten’ the curve.

March 26 – The Senate passes the CARES Act and the next day President Trump signs it into Law

April 16 – “Gating Criteria” is developed as a way to Reopen the economy as the virus curve ‘flattens’

On May 1, Ohio starts to re-open

Flash forward to today and 19 Ohio counties are now at Level 3 on the virus scale with a couple nearing Level 4. Another shutdown looms as cases rise. What.. are we to do?

Beloved.. there is much fear and suffering in our country, our state, our county and even in our community. You all know something about the sufferings of this present time.. and it’s not just limited to COVID. Suffering.. particularly the suffering of those we love.. has a way of consuming all our vision. Like a massive vacuum it sucks our vitality and energy right down.

Today, however.. the Holy Spirit - through St. Paul - gives us all a different way of thinking about suffering. You see, friends.. the Spirit holds all the pain and all sorrow of this life.. up against the glory that awaits each one of us. And He finds that the sufferings.. are simply outweighed. “The sufferings of this present time.. are not worth comparing.. with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18).

So, St Paul writes to the Romans to help them stand in their painful moment.. looking forward to the final revealing of God’s Son. And his words come to us.. to help us stand here today. In Christ, we have been made into the children of God. And this is sure. This is certain. His death has destroyed the power of sin for you .. and His resurrection has brought you the promise of a new creation.

Yet what you are .. is not fully seen and experienced in this world. Take a deep close look at God’s people, Paul says.. and you will see a people, just like you sitting here.. imprisoned and suffering.. groaning because they desire to be free.

And so we stand - awkwardly positioned between the sufferings of this present world.. and the glory yet to be revealed. And in this place of in-between... the apostle Paul asks us to meditate on our situation.. and to trust in the work of the Holy Spirit.

If we meditate on our situation, brothers and sisters.. we can see deep suffering among God's people. In America.. Christianity used to be a strong cultural force. Prayer was said in public schools. At graduation, high schools would hold baccalaureate services led by ministers. We don't see this much anymore.. and it makes the necessity of our Christian Day School that much more apparent.

St. Paul knew the suffering status of Christians in this world. In Rome, Christianity was not a legal established religion. It confronted barriers to the expression of its faith. Christians sought to worship one God .. in a city that had many gods. Christians sought to confess "Jesus is Lord" .. in a city that confessed "Caesar is Lord." Christians worshipped a person who had been associated with insurrection.. was publicly tried and condemned and crucified. This suffering Jesus.. ruled over a suffering people.

Christians were marginalized.. and things today are pretty similar to how they used to be then. During the Christmas Season, one could find a nativity prominently displayed in their public square. That connection between Christianity and American culture.. is dying. In some states – like California - Christians aren't allowed to sing in worship.. which is a fundamental part of Lutheran worship! Masks must be worn... yet large crowds gathered or marching in public streets.. elbow-to-elbow.. go without any mandates.. because their message is important... as if the message of Christ crucified for the sins of the whole world.. is worthless.

We find ourselves being marginalized.. pushed further and further away from public notice.. written into a smaller and smaller corner of the public square.. where we are viewed.. as unwelcomed.. different.. intolerant.. even extreme.

Such experiences are frightening. It looks like we are losing strength.. like we will not survive. Across the board, church attendance is dropping. Some might even wonder if God has abandoned us. How can we be God's people - the church - in a post-Christian - and sometimes anti-Christian -- nation?

And these are not new questions. The Roman Christians were meeting in small homes rather than huge and beautiful churches. They were populated by slaves rather than powerful rulers. Soon.. they would experience persecution.

They would carry their dead into caves and tunnels carved under ground.. and hold worship services there.. in the dark - in the place of the dead - crying out to the firstborn of the dead. He opens our ears so we hear one more cry, one more groan... the groaning of the Spirit.. the Holy Spirit who is interceding for you.

St. Paul writes in his Epistle, “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. 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” (Romans 8:26-27). In these words, Paul joins groans.. with a glorious vision.

On the one hand.. the Spirit intercedes for us with groans too deep for words. There are times when we are at a loss for words. The suffering we have seen in our lives, in our community, in this world... the longing we have for the new creation ... these are so strong and so deep that we cannot find words to express it. What do you say when you go to a funeral? You stand there.. your heart filled with groans that words cannot express. What do you say when you hear that the diagnosis is cancer? When tornados rip through towns leaving only rubble in its wake. We have trouble speaking to one another.. and even more trouble speaking.. to God. At moments like this, Paul asks us to listen. To hear the groaning. The Spirit takes our suffering.. and He puts it into prayer.

On the other hand.. these groans of the Spirit are joined to glory. The glorious desires of God for his people... for all creation. Paul says that “the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God” (Rom. 8:27). The Spirit knows the deep mysteries of our suffering. The Spirit also knows the deep mysteries of God... God’s vision of a new creation. You have been joined by baptism to God’s new creation in Christ. God is at work in you. He is shaping your lives, forming your faith, working in small and sometimes painful ways.. as He continues His promise to bring about His kingdom.

When you experience suffering, friends.. and you find yourselves not sure how to put all of this into words – take heart - the Spirit Himself speaks for you. He brings your petitions to the throne of the Father. Your suffering touches God’s glory in the words of the Spirit.. for through the suffering of God’s Son.. God’s glory is made certain.. for you.

Christianity may indeed be losing cultural power in America.. COVID will come and go.. as will the next virus or illness or plague.. but there is no loss – none - of a sure and certain hope in Christ Jesus. God rules - sovereignly - over all creation.

The Spirit knows the mind of God.. and He hears our cries and prays for us according to God's will. He sees your life.. He knows your suffering.. and He has sent His Spirit to be present for you.. to bring you peace, and comfort and assurance of life eternal.

He listens to your groans.. and He puts your life into prayer according to God's will.. that you would be conformed to the image of the Son of God. Although you suffer in this world, beloved.. you are heirs.. of the next.. predestined and called by the Spirit.. justified by faith in the crucified and risen Jesus.. eagerly awaiting the glory of the resurrection of the dead.. and life everlasting.

In closing, I leave you these comforting words from Jesus.. as recorded in John's Gospel: "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world." (John 16:33) This is the Word of the Lord. Amen.