

For several weeks now, we've been making our way through the book of Romans. And, if you hadn't noticed, at each step we've tended to focus on one person of the Triune God. We've seen Christ, our Deliverer, rescuing us from our sin. We've seen God, our Father, claiming us as his children. And today, we see God, the Holy Spirit, at work in our lives. But to see the Holy Spirit requires a different perspective than we're used to.

In Psalm 139, David asks the question, "*Where shall I go from your Spirit?*" Then he answers the question by listing all the places he might go. If he goes up to the heights of heaven, God's Spirit is there. If he goes down to the depths of the grave, God's Spirit is there. If he goes to the farthest parts of the sea, the most dangerous, unpredictable place you could go in the ancient world, even there he will find God's Spirit.

In our text this morning, St Paul talks a lot about where we find the Spirit of God as well. But he doesn't look to the heights of heaven, nor to the depths of the grave, nor to the farthest parts of the sea. No, Paul looks around and he sees the Spirit right here. Right here in our joys. But, in particular, right here in our sorrows. In our suffering.

Because Paul has a rather distinctive perspective on suffering. He begins by saying, "*The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.*" That's an interesting thing to say, when you think about it. How many people do you know who, in the midst of a crisis – in the midst of pain or fear or grief – can take a step back like that and say, "Hmm... I wonder if this is all going to be worth it. Yes... yes, I think it will. I think I'm going to be glad I suffered like this."

We just don't do that. And yet, that's exactly what Paul is saying here. He's looking at the present and he's looking at the future, and he's saying, "The future is going to be so good, we're going to forget that what we're currently going through ever even happened."

How can he say that? Well, because he's not just looking at his own narrow view of life. He's looking at creation from God's perspective. And what he sees is a creation that was, in the beginning, a beautiful creation. A good creation. A perfect creation.

Adam and Eve, however, brought suffering into God's creation. They disobeyed God and brought God's curse into the world. "*The day you eat of it, you shall die.*" God tells them. The beauty of creation was subjected to the bondage of decay. And in our continuing sin and rebellion, it only bound to decay that much faster. Humanity, on it's own, will never fix this broken world. Because we are the reason it is broken.

And yet, the God who imposed this punishment upon us is also the God who reverses this punishment. And that's the glory that Paul has seen in Jesus Christ. The beginning of a new creation. The beginning of eternal life. Like the very firstfruits that promise a future harvest, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the promise of a new and never-ending life. Paul looks at Christ and he sees God beginning a work that can only result in something amazing. Something glorious. Something worth suffering for.

So Paul writes to the Romans to help them endure in this painful moment. And his words come to us to help us endure here today. As we heard last week, in Christ, we have been made into the children of God. His death has destroyed the power of sin over you and his resurrection has brought you the promise of a new creation.

Yet we hope for something we do not see. If we did see it, it wouldn't be hope anymore. Which means when you look at God's people in this present age, Paul says, you will inevitably see people imprisoned and suffering, groaning because they want what everybody wants... to be free of all this pain.

So here we stand, stuck between the suffering of this present world, on the one hand, and the hope of glory yet to be revealed, on the other hand. And in this place, the apostle Paul asks us to trust in the work of the Holy Spirit.

*“If I make my bed in the grave, you are there.”* David wrote in the psalm. Paul's message to us is really no different than David's a thousand years earlier. The Spirit of God is here. No matter how dark the place you are in. No matter the persecution, the sorrow, or the pain. He who has ears, let him hear. Open your ears to God's Word and you will hear him. You will hear the Spirit of God, crying out in this place with you. Crying out for you.

This is what Paul is revealing to the church in this letter. The Spirit of God cries out for God's people. The world is groaning as it awaits the revelation of the sons of God. As it awaits the new creation that fixes, permanently, all this pain.

And God's people, especially, are groaning. Groaning in the midst of persecution. Groaning in the midst of sin and temptation. Groaning in the midst of death and grief.

And yet, we don't groan alone. The Spirit groans with us. Paul writes, *“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.”*

The Spirit intercedes for us with groans too deep for words. The truth is there are times when we're just simply at a loss for words. The suffering we have seen in this world, the longing we have for the new creation is so strong and so deep that we can't even find words to express it.

What do you say when you go to a funeral? What do you say when a friend tells you he has cancer? How do you respond when there are tornadoes and floods, fires and terrorist attacks?

We don't even know how to talk to each other in times like these. How in the world do we talk to God? And yet, at moments like these, God doesn't ask us to speak. He asks us to listen. To hear the groaning of the Holy Spirit, spoken through Word and Sacrament. Who takes our suffering and turns it into prayer.

Just as Paul sees the sufferings of this moment and compares them to the glory yet to come, the Spirit also takes our suffering and shows us God's glory. The glorious desires of God for his people. Paul says that *“the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”*

The Spirit knows not only the depth of our suffering. The Spirit also knows the plan of God for His people. 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 our lives, forming our faith, working in and through us to bring about His kingdom.

But more often than not, we don't see this happening. We can't see this plan of God. We can't see his overall design. Sometimes the future looks so very bleak. But the Holy Spirit is our Comforter and Counselor. The Spirit knows the mind of God and the Spirit knows the suffering of God's people.

And, as Paul proclaims, the Spirit joins these two opposites together. The groans of God's people and the glory of God's plan are brought together by the Spirit for us in prayer. The prayer we always want to make. That cries out to God in desperation, “Our Father in heaven!” And yet also trusts God enough to say, “Thy will be done.”

It's the prayer of a Church who stands before God living in one world and yet sure of another. When we experience suffering and find ourselves not sure how to put all of this into words, the Spirit himself speaks for us. He brings our petitions to the throne of the Father. And our suffering is made all the more personal to God because of our faith that He will renew all things through the death and resurrection of his Son.

At home, at work, falling asleep or rising in the morning, in the heights of heaven or the depths of the grave, the Spirit sees you. The Spirit is with you. And the Spirit is praying for you. When you don't know what to say... don't say anything at all. Open your Bible. Come to worship. Kneel before this altar. And let the Spirit speak to you of God's love and God's plan for your redemption. Amen.