

December 31, 2020 – Romans 8:31-39

2020 was a really tough year for most. It was tough on our health, as cases of COVID-19 swept through the nation. Leaving a great many of us sick and miserable. Or worse, hospitalized and near death.

It was tough on us financially, as businesses closed, unemployment soared, and the stock market reeled in uncertainty. It was tough on us politically, as a contentious election led to disputes within our government and division in our communities. It was tough on us emotionally, as we were separated from friends and family members, isolated and fearful about what the future held.

And it was tough on us spiritually. We spent weeks with churches closed in Missouri. Far longer in other states. And even when we could get to church, many people didn't feel safe coming to worship and going to Bible Studies.

We did the best we could with Facebook and Zoom and printed sermons placed in the mail. But it's not the same as real, in-person, Word and Sacrament. Nor should it be.

It was a tough year. And that was, of course, on top of all the other normal tough things of life that occasionally come our way. Cancer. Natural disaster. Family disputes. Pain and death.

And frankly, it's hard to be optimistic after a year like that. Certainly, we become grateful for the little things we still have. Good friends to call on the phone. Loving families to help us get through it all. A roof over our heads and clothes on our backs. We appreciate those little things.

But we're not exactly hopeful for the future. Cheerful about what may come. Expectant that tomorrow will be better than today. After nearly a year of every day seeming a little worse than the day that came before, it's hard to see 2021 as anything other than a looming storm cloud of impending disaster.

And I think, in many ways, that's the same attitude that St Paul's audience in Rome must have had. We don't know a lot about the circumstances of the Roman church when Paul wrote to them. Basically only what he tells us.

They're a young church who are curious about Paul's teachings. They know about the Old Testament, know about Jesus, they believe in Jesus. And Paul is eager to visit them and teach them more about Jesus. But he also knows that won't happen for a bit, so why not start now and get some important details out of the way?

We also know that they are dealing with persecution. Paul references it often and it's not surprising. This is the seat of the Roman Empire, after all. They're surrounded on every side by pagan, Greco-Roman idolatry. They are forced at every moment to fight against a society that worships the emperor as a god. And they are trying to survive under emperors who are increasingly hostile to both Jews and Christians, and who are descending every day in to greater and greater perversity and cruelty.

It's not an easy place to live. And they are becoming rather hopeless. They are constantly accused of crimes they didn't commit. They are subjected to ridicule and scorn. They are crucified on crosses and fed to lions for the entertainment of cheering crowds. And there is no end in sight. There is nothing optimistic about their lives.

And so Paul tells them in the verses just prior to our Epistle reading that suffering isn't anything new. Not for God's people. Not for humanity. Not for the universe in general. All of creation has been groaning, suffering, dying, for almost as long as it has existed.

Why? Well, in the simplest terms, because of sin. Sin has held creation captive. It has put creation in a bondage to corruption. Creation doesn't want to be corrupt. It doesn't want to wither and die. It doesn't want to be subjected to futility.

Because that's what this life is. Solomon wasn't wrong. *“Vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun... I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.”*

Paul absolutely agrees. Creation itself agrees. A life that ends in death is pointless. A creation that ends in corruption is futile. It's all vanity. Meaningless. Empty.

But though creation was subjected to futility. Though humanity's sinfulness held it in a bondage to corruption and death. There was something still worth waiting for: the revealing of the sons of God.

A revealing that happened because the Son of God was revealed to us. Because on Christmas morning his mother gave birth to him. Angels announced him. And shepherds worshipped him. The Son of God was revealed to us, and now by baptism we are revealed as sons of God.

And that is reason for hope. Reason for joy. Reason for optimism. It doesn't seem like it at first, of course. At first, all we see is the corruption of this world that stands against us. The forces of this world that level charges against us. Satan, the Adversary, who accuses and condemns us. The tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger and sword that causes us to suffer and slaughters us like sheep.

We see these things and we think that this world is hopeless. We despair. Like Solomon, we see the vanity of life. And all our joy is gone.

But then we realize that if God is for us, who can be against us? If he did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, do you really think it's so hopeless after all? If he would do that for us, won't he also graciously give us all things?

How can the world level charges against us or the devil condemn us? It is God who justifies and he is has sent his son to die for us, to rise for us, to intercede for us. The world may hate you and Satan may throw your sins in your face. But the only one whose opinion matters is Jesus. And he is sitting at the right hand of God, telling His Father, “That man is my disciple. That woman is one of my people. That child is baptized in my blood.”

Why? Because he loves us. And nothing can separate us from his love. Not tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger or sword. Not even death itself.

Maybe 2021 will be better than 2020. But maybe it won't. Maybe we'll spend 2021 feeling like sheep who are being lined up and slaughtered. Maybe nothing good will happen during it at all.

But we will still have reason for hope. We will still have reason for joy. We will still be optimistic about the future.

Why? Because we are loved by Jesus Christ. And nothing will separate us from that love. Not the happiness of life or the sorrow of death. Not the holiness of angels or the corruption of earthly rulers. Not the certainty of today or the danger of tomorrow. Not anything in all of creation.

We have conquered 2020. And we will conquer 2021. And every year after that. Because we are more than conquerers through him who loved us. We are more than conquerers because the victory is already won.

It was won for us in a stable inside Bethlehem. It was won for us in the Jordan River and the wilderness of temptation. It was won for us in countless miracles and acts of healing. It was won for us at the Last Supper and the Garden of Gethsemane.

Most of all, it was won for us on the cross of Calvary and the empty tomb three days later. The victory was won for us 2020 years ago. And we are in “Anno Domini”. The year of our Lord.

This is the Lord's year. He has come. He has conquered. And we are more than conquerers because he loves us. And nothing will separate us from that love. Amen.