

All Roads Lead Here: Creation's Longing

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Ecclesiastes 1:1-9; Luke 19:37-40; Romans 8:16-24a

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Romans 8:16-24a. This is the word of the LORD. "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs -- heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved."

We think patriotically this time of year. The 4th of July comes early in the month, but I still associate July with fireworks and American flags. And one special thing about America is the beauty of the country itself. "America the Beautiful" is our nation's unofficial anthem. It was written in 1903 by Katherine Bates, an English professor traveling from Massachusetts to Pikes Peak in Colorado. The first verse is all about God's creation -- "O beautiful for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain, for purple mountain's majesties above the fruited plain! America, America, God shed His grace on thee, and crowned thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea!"

Despite the occasional blizzard and too little sunlight in the winter, Michigan is a beautiful place that reflects God's goodness. You don't have to travel very far past the city lines to see His creation in its glory. But we have a love/hate relationship with Nature. It can be dangerous and unforgiving. God's creation includes the animal kingdom, which we often fear.

We love nature's beauty and the peace it brings, yet we also like the comforts of the city and the modern technology we have that can threaten it. We don't know what to think about our responsibility to the environment. And when we hear of natural disasters, we wonder, "what was God thinking when He made hurricanes and tornados and earthquakes a part of nature?"

Today's passage helps us understand not only nature but ourselves. Because in today's passage, Paul sees direct parallels between the story of creation and the story of believers. Nature reflects our own situation with God. We see the tale of God crafted into the world we see around us. And the good news is, God will reconcile the whole of creation. The twisted and evil and warped parts of creation, God will eventually remove as He remakes not only His children but His incredible universe.

Here's our first key thought from today's passage: *just like humanity, creation was made perfectly but is now fallen.* At one point, the universe was a paradise. The garden of Eden was paradise within a paradise. In Genesis 1, God makes each part of the universe and then each part of our earth, and He sees that each one is good. At the end of creation, at the end of the sixth day once He has created humanity, God looks at the whole of all creation and He sees that it is *very* good. We see the immense beauty and goodness of nature as it stands now and we say, "Wow!"

It is impossible to imagine what it was like then. I think nature in its perfect state before the fall must have been like what happens now when you get way outside the city, maybe in the middle of the state or up in the UP, and all of a sudden, stars you can barely see in the city because of the light pollution are a blaze of light in the sky. It's breathtaking. From the perfection described in God's creation at its beginning, I think it was like that. We have just the faintest clue of the beauty God is capable of creating.

And for a while, it stays perfect. But then the fall comes. Adam and Eve are tempted in the Garden of Eden, they choose poorly, and everything begins to cave in from there. Sin, disobedience of God's ways, enters the world. Death enters the world. But what we don't think about is that the fall of humanity into sin affects creation in a gigantic way.

When God confronts the serpent that tempted Adam and Eve, He says, "Because you have done this, cursed are you more than all cattle, and more than every beast of the field." We focus on the serpent's curse. But did you notice the wording? The serpent is cursed *more than* the other animals. That means every living creature is cursed! When God confronts Adam, He warns Adam that because of his decision, the ground is cursed. The land that once responded to Adam now fights him; Adam will plant good seed only to have to pull up weeds and thistles.

Death enters the equation because God immediately covers Adam and Eve with animal skins – animals He prepared not only to cover their nakedness but their disobedience. And pretty soon, the fabric of space and time begins to unravel. In the earliest chapters of Genesis, people live 700, 800, 900 years. By the flood, God declares we'll see maybe 120 years. Very soon after, lifespans drop off. Until the miracles of modern science, many people didn't live to see 65.

We can either see the opening six chapters of Genesis as somehow wrong, that they had the numbers mixed up or just told it incorrectly, or the fall of creation changed the very dimensionality of the universe. It's possible that time itself changed. We barely understand time as it is. The study of relativity has taught us that time itself is not a constant, that time acts differently as we approach the speed of light. What if time itself was changed by the fall into sin? It would explain why the universe looks old to scientists and still explain how God created it in six days. It's hard to fathom, but Scripture points to it as a possibility. And what does Paul say? "Creation is in bondage to decay." Decay itself is the passage of time that destroys all things. The fall made things throughout creation go astray.

We are used to hearing awful events called "acts of God." Fires, tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, animal attacks, natural disasters – and there is truth that God ultimately is in control of all those things. None of them happens without His permission. But all of those things are not God wanting to torture us. They are a direct result of humanity's fall into sin.

We often ask rhetorically after some huge event where lives are lost, “Why did this happen? Why did God let it happen? Where was God?” But all those questions miss the bigger picture – that the truly awful things that happen in nature resulted from our disobedience to God. There is no direct correlation – it isn’t like one person survives a flood because they are not as big a sinner as someone who doesn’t. But God allows some of the natural happenings we see so we recognize the depth and breadth of what sin has done to His good creation.

But that’s not where it ends, thankfully. Our second key is this: *just like humanity, creation longs for restoration*. We heard the opening of Ecclesiastes today, and it’s not very happy. The teacher starts by saying, “Meaningless, meaningless, all is meaningless!” The book of Ecclesiastes works as a counterbalance to the book of Proverbs, which tells us the way things should be and should work. Ecclesiastes says, “Things don’t always work as they should.”

But there’s a reason I chose that passage for us today. That’s because of that word “meaningless.” Our passage from Romans today says the creation was subjected to “frustration.” The word “meaningless” was translated into Greek by Hebrew scholars long before Jesus came on the scene. The word they used to translate “meaningless” was *mataiotes*, the same word that Paul uses to describe the frustration of creation. Creation was subjected to vanity, to meaninglessness, to emptiness, to a void, because of the broken relationship with God.

But that is not God’s end game. Creation will be liberated from bondage to decay. “The creation waits in eager expectation,” Paul says. “The whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.” Everything points to God doing something new. Jesus says the very rocks want to cry out in praise of Him. Psalm 148 tells nature to praise God. “Praise the LORD from the earth, you great sea creatures and all ocean depths, lightning and hail, snow and clouds, stormy winds that do his bidding, you mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars, wild animals and all cattle, small creatures and flying birds.”

Now we shouldn’t think that nature has a personality or a brain or a will, something like “Mother Nature.” That’s not what the idea here is. We don’t believe creation has a soul. But we do know there’s more to creation than just us. There are the other created beings, the angels, whose destiny is tied up in ours, and who have very real thoughts and wills like we do. Even the animals have a rudimentary sense of reason and knowledge – nothing like ours, but it’s still there. Any of us who’ve ever had a pet knows it. We see it in our backyard with the woodland creatures out there in the summertime. Creation is groaning for release because every creature, every part of nature, even the stars and planets, change and age and die.

The restoration is coming. The suffering will end. As Paul puts it, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.” We are children of God awaiting our full adoption and entry into the Kingdom of God in all its glory. We suffer now, but what is that suffering in comparison to what is coming? But we too groan just like creation, Paul says. We want to be different. We want to be remade and made whole.

It's another sign that we belong to God – we want something more. We long for the “not quite yet” of God's Kingdom. The Christian's longings are different from an unbeliever's longings. The person of the world has longings, but longings for things of this world – amusements, entertainments, distractions, power, wealth, sex, fame, fortune, everything this world has to offer. Christians long too, but our longings are for God to get His due, for us to no longer be distracted by the sin nature, for us to worship Him as cleansed, righteous, and holy children forever in His presence.

Creation longs for the sons and daughters of God to be revealed because when God's children are revealed to the world, that redemption of the universe will occur. As Jesus promised, “Heaven and earth will pass away.” Then in Revelation 21, we learn of the new heavens and the new earth, which far surpass anything we've known. When that happens, the remade creation will not be bound by death but be set free by the Spirit of God. The prophet Isaiah writes of a time when the wolf and the lamb live together with the lion and the calf and the yearling. Death will no longer rule over God's creation. No wonder creation wants to see God's grand finale for our universe finally come to pass!

That leads into today's final thought: *hope for creation and hope for believers is intertwined in Jesus*. The universe is winding down. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection enter us into the final age of human history – it's a long age, but the last one before God judges the world and sets things right. And while we have made technological strides, humanity has not evolved in the way we treat one another. If anything, we're getting worse wherever Christian doctrine and morality are no longer foundations of society.

The earth is getting worse too – there's no doubt we've polluted it. Whether you believe in climate change or global warming or not, there's no doubt we've destroyed huge sections of our natural world as we've industrialized it. We took a quick trip up to Oscoda the past couple of days and saw the Lumberman's Monument – but that whole area had to be reforested because the lumber industry destroyed it in the 1800s. As the world population grows, we'll destroy more and more – if we don't create some catastrophic event that very quickly destroys the planet.

But hope for our world and our universe doesn't lie with fixing everything that has gone wrong with it. We can't fix it, just as we can't fix what's wrong with us. Restoration, renewal, and reconciliation of all that exists is in God's hands, not our own. They will occur through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. We hope in Him and His saving hand, not in ourselves.

We live in hope. In fact, our hope in Christ is going to be our central topic next week. We're not ignoring it; we'll be coming back to it as Paul does. But we must see our proper place in the order of things. We aren't going to fix creation. But creation eagerly anticipates – it hopes for and longs for – the time when we are saved so it will be saved too.

What does this all mean for us? Just a couple of final thoughts. One is this: *the situation our world is in reflects the Biblical story*. When talking with someone who's concerned about the environment, about the earth, that's OK, that's a good thing. Creation is not separate from the Bible. Everything in it reflects both God's handiwork and the results of sin. Does someone you know want to save the wolves or the bears or the forests or the seas? Not a bad thing.

All of those things acknowledge there is something wrong with our world. That's the first step in coming to believe in Christ. We have to realize that something is wrong for us to want to make a change in our world and ourselves. When we look at the Bible, we realize the central thing wrong with the world is us; we need salvation from our disobedience to God. We need Jesus to redeem us from those choices that set the universe on its head. Once our hearts have been changed by the Holy Spirit, our relationship with God's creation begins to take on a new shape and purpose. And the reason we care for creation takes on a new meaning.

The second and final thought: *we are caretakers of God's creation*. That was ultimately Adam's job in the garden, to tend it. God adopted the Israelites and gave them a bountiful land to care for as their inheritance. And while Christians aren't told explicitly to care for the earth, God tells us throughout Scripture to enjoy the earth and to tend it.

This doesn't mean we can save the world. That's not going to happen. A lot of people think we can keep the planet from dying by buying carbon credits and planting a tree or two. It is my own personal opinion that a lot of that is just a way to make certain people a lot of money. If saving the world requires everyone to stop flying and driving and using cell phones and heat and air conditioning, it's not going to happen. And moreover, we're pretty arrogant to think that we have the means to fix what we started messing up in the fall.

That said, as caretakers of God's creation, we do have a responsibility to generations that come after us to leave them their inheritance. The best way we can leave something behind is to avoid excess stuff, to not buy everything that interests us, to live not primitively but simply. When we live simply, we not only avoid loving the world too much, it also leaves more of its resources behind for those who come after us.

But perhaps the biggest way we can be caretakers in this generation is to care about creation. Appreciate it. Enjoy it. I am not an outdoors person, yet I love to look out on our backyard and see the forest. I give thanks regularly to God for the beauty of the sunrise and the sunset. I thank Him for providing a world where, despite all its flaws, we have food to eat and water to drink.

And I thank Him that He made His creation beautiful to us. He didn't have to make it so the stars would put a sense of wonder in us. He didn't have to make the rainbow or the setting sun so brilliantly gorgeous to our eyes. But He did. Don't get so caught up in the world to miss that the creation around us, as flawed as it has become, speaks to God's design and God's hand in all things.

We have hope in Jesus Christ. We hope in Him not just to save us and redeem us but to save and redeem the whole of creation. With the creation, we eagerly await the date of Christ's return so that our hope is made sight. And with the creation, we long for things to be made right so that we can praise God for all His mighty works and worship Him as the maker and creator of all good things.