

Beyond Compare

Romans 8:12-25

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Prayer: As we seek your word with humility, we recognize our powerlessness to fulfill our high intentions by ourselves. Like children, who must depend on others for their well-being, we come to you for spiritual nourishment and freedom from bondage to sin and the forces of destruction. May we find in these scriptures, the source of new life and true peace...

The scriptures today describe the futility that so much of our lives are defined by. These words were written by Paul to a church in Rome, 2000 years ago. When he speaks about the futility that they are living with, he uses two examples: the legacy of slavery, and the degradation of the environment.

Which seems shockingly, strikingly, current, right about now.

We are grappling with the legacy of slavery right now as much as we ever have in this country. Black and brown people in our country are being sickened by COVID -19 and dying from it at higher rates than other populations. The statistical rates of incarceration are much higher for people of color in the United States than for white people. Some of us met this week (over Zoom) with leaders of a local group, Concerned Parents of Color here in West Hartford. While we were delighted to meet them, we were so saddened to learn that children of color, their own children, are experiencing our community as a dangerous place, a place of ridicule and prejudice, unwelcoming because of the color of their skin. Children. As parents, they need to make some noise, get noticed, improve conditions for their kids. Of course they do. We believe them.

Likewise, we are struggling with the degradation of the environment as much as we ever have been. The climate crisis, the suspicion of science, the politicizing of the natural world we share – the air we breathe, the land, the trees, the sky, the oceans. All of us need clean water, clean air, and COVID19 has reminded us that a walk in nature when travel is not possible, restores the soul.

Paul wants the early Christians in Rome not to get pulled back into discouragement about these legacy problems, but to remember who they are, and what the promises are that govern a life of faith. His words are "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us..." So these problems are ***beyond compare*** to the promises that we can live on, live in, begin to embody in our own lives. Paul's purpose is to remind the early Christians to live in hope.

That's the whole problem though. Hope is easy to let slip when all the evidence is contrary.

This is where science and religion part ways. Good science is carefully crafted on inquiry and facts. Good religion is what is carried in the heart, the faith in what is not seen, the hope we live in despite the obstacles. Love has its own logic despite set-backs, faith carries us towards justice, hope rests only in the heart of God.

An open question for the early Christians was whether someone who was an indentured slave (different from chattel slavery as it came to be practiced here in the United States) could be a Christian if they were serving someone who was not also a Christian. The legacy of slavery that Paul wants to confront includes here the mindset of slavery – that falls back into fearfulness. Paul's answer to that is yes. That each believer in the early church is not a throwaway, no matter who you are in this world, his words are that you are the very heir of God almighty "joint heirs with Christ," adopted into the family by the very spirit of God. He says it in several letters: in Christ Jesus you are neither slave nor free, male nor female, Jew nor gentile, for you are all one. He calls them heirs to glory here – do not sell yourself short and let yourself be enslaved to futility.

Not that there isn't plenty of futility to go around out there. Do not let futility define you. "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us... For the creation waits with eager longing..."

Some of you may have noticed that there is a comet visible in the night sky right now, if you can find someplace away from streetlights. They're calling it comet NEOWISE. In the night sky it is just down from the big dipper towards the horizon. NEOWISE is a frozen ball of ice which will not return for another 6,800 years.

6800 years ago is about the time the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt, struggling with their enslavers, who turned from benign to abusive. They struggled with a season of famine, drought in their land which brought them to Egypt. They were struggling with the legacy of slavery, the degradation of the environment.

Even then.

Apparently, this is turning out to be more of a long term project than could have been predicted. So friends, take care of yourselves, look to your households and loved ones, and lean into hope.

When the comet comes back, it is very possible that our faith, our hope, our life together will be a blessing on the generations to come. Today we have opportunities for change which haven't been available previously. We are separated by this pandemic, but we are together in important ways. The Holy Spirit is alive and well and at work in our world.

This week, don't just be not a racist, be anti-racist. Undo it. This week, do not just fret about the environment, care for it actively. This week, do not fall back into discouragement, but remember you are a beloved child of God, and God is already with you, forgiving, renewing, and inspiring.

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