

Children’s Moment (*carabiner and cup with clip required*)

Good morning, girls and boys.

“Have you ever been separated from someone? Maybe you were at the store with an adult and they for just a moment. Maybe you went on a trip without someone and you missed that person terribly. How did you feel? Scared? Alone? Worried? When we are separated from people we love, we certainly may feel that way.

Paul tells us no matter what happens, nothing can separate us from the love God has for us. He’s absolutely sure of this. (*Hold the carabiner in your hand.*) How many of you have seen one of these? This is a carabiner. It is a clip that campers and hikers use. Many times, you will see someone on a ropes course or zipline clipped to the rope with a carabiner.

Maybe you have seen someone use this as they climb rocks. When people go camping, they may clip something they don’t want to lose to a carabiner. I can clip this to my belt loop, and because I love cool drinks, I clip my cup to the carabiner. I can go for a hike (*walk around*). I can jump up and down (*demonstrate jumping*), and the cup doesn’t come off the clip. I love this carabiner because no matter what I do, nothing will separate my cup.

This carabiner reminds me of God’s love. Nothing can separate God’s love for me. Paul wrote, (*read from your Bible*), “Not even the highest places or the lowest, or anything else in all creation can separate us. Nothing at all can ever separate us from God’s love.”

How does it make you feel to know that no matter where you go, nothing can separate God’s love from you? (*Allow children to respond.*)

Let’s pray ...

God, remind us you are always with us, no matter where we go. If we go to the highest mountain, you are with us. If we go to the bottom of the sea, you are with us. There is nowhere we can go that your love doesn’t go with us. Fill our hearts with the knowledge of your love. Amen.”¹

¹ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/nothing-shall-separate-us/eighth-sunday-after-pentecost-year-a-lectionary-planning-notes/eighth-sunday-after-pentecost-year-a-childrens-lessons>

Message: “Expectant Hope”

Where do you find hope? That’s the question we’re going to reflect on together over the next couple of weeks. I have to admit, we’re making a course change in the fall sermon series. I was talking with Esperanza and a few other people about three weeks ago. I asked them what they felt we needed right now. The answer: we need hope.

That led me to the question: where do we find hope? My study led me to this narrative by Rev. N.T. Wright. “I walked through the woods several times before I realized what the signpost meant.

The woods were thick, with a few paths through it. I knew some of the paths well and had a few favorites. There was one that lead around the lake and another that led to a splendid little clearing where you would usually see rabbits and squirrels. There was another one that went by ancient oak trees, where my imagination would wander.

But there was another path I had never taken. It looked overgrown and I couldn’t see where it would go. I never bothered with it because I’m usually in a hurry to exercise and then get back to work.

I also didn’t pay attention to a small sign at the start of the path, almost hidden behind some bushes. It had what looked like the letter “V” at the top, a foot or so above the ground. For all I knew, it could just be a mark on the wood. It didn’t necessarily mean anything.

Until one day, when I went by the place and someone had cleared the bushes, revealing the other letters and an arrow pointing down the path. The other three letters, downwards from the “V,” were “I,” “E” and “W.” A view? What sort of view? Intrigued, I took the path for the first time.

To begin with, it was as I expected: overgrown with brambles and thorns. I wasn’t the only one who ignored it. It was muddy, making me wish I had better shoes. It also turned sharply and began to climb steeply. I was out of breath after a few minutes, but after a brief pause, I kept going, getting more excited.

Suddenly, instead of thick trees all around, I saw clear sky emerging. Then I was out of the trees and in front of a slab of rock. I

scrambled up it and stood there, calling myself names for never finding the spot before.

It was a view! I was looking down on the whole large wood, but also the little town beyond it. I could see other hills in the distance and smoke rising from the villages in between. Half the country seemed to lie there before me. And I might never have known.² It was a view that Rev. Wright has never forgotten.

Our reading from Romans 8:22-28 is like that view. Standing at that point, we can see, with clarity, the whole plan of salvation for all of God’s creation. Once you’ve glimpsed this view, you’ll never forget it.

It will give you hope.

Now, to be honest, most of us read Paul’s letter to the church in Rome and hurry past these verses. We’re more interested in hearing how Jesus justifies and saves us. We’re eager for moral lessons and a fresh experience of the spirit. Or we’re looking forward to the great question about the relationship between Israel and the Gentiles.

Most of us miss the small sign inviting us to turn this way and walk up this path. We miss it because of the bushes and brambles in life that distract us. We’re busy people, trying to fit our Bible reading into a few minutes so we can get on with our day.

The message of creation on tiptoe with expectation, like a woman in labor, isn’t what we expect. The strange idea of God subjecting creation to futility or uncertainty and of creation then being rescued, just isn’t what people want to hear or know how to interpret. So the path to this view has been covered over with thorns and thistles. Rather than saying “strange ideas” and passing by, let’s pause. This is a place to visit.

From the top of this hill, you can see forever. The words aren’t irrelevant or just some passing thoughts Paul wrote down. The text follows the climax of the chapter that is the climax of the entire letter. It’s central, vital to Paul’s thinking.

² N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone*, Westminster John Knox, 2004, pp. 148-153

Eugene Peterson translates the view this way in The Message:

“... I don't think there's any comparison between the present hard times and the coming good times. The created world itself can hardly wait for what's coming next. Everything in creation is being more or less held back. God reins it in until both creation and all the creatures are ready and can be released at the same moment into the glorious times ahead. Meanwhile, the joyful anticipation deepens.

All around us we observe a pregnant creation. The difficult times of pain throughout the world are simply birth pangs. But it's not only around us; it's within us. The Spirit of God is arousing us within. We're also feeling the birth pangs. These sterile and barren bodies of ours are yearning for full deliverance. That is why waiting does not diminish us, any more than waiting diminishes a pregnant mother. We are enlarged in the waiting. We, of course, don't see what is enlarging us. But the longer we wait, the larger we become, and the more joyful our expectancy” (Romans 8:18-25).

God is making a special revelation for us. That means we have a special part in creation. It's not “in us”, which would imply that we're just going to be pleased with ourselves. It's not just a show that we're going to watch, like fireworks. God's glory will be revealed when the whole world shares in the Messiah's saving grace.

That's what all of creation is waiting for. It's waiting for us, for you and me, for all of God's children to be revealed. We will be reborn spiritually, as the true children of God, those who overcome the thorns and brambles of life to travel forgotten paths sharing in God's glory for all of creation.

That's not a dream. It's a promise.

What we are to do is look for the signs. These are signs of hope. On the days when it seems like the world is burning and the apocalypse is near, God's good creation is present, expecting joy after a time of suffering. But, like an expectant mother, we know that our joy and God's presence are not yet present in the way they will be. Things will get better.

God isn't punishing us for turning away or for the corruption we sow wherever we go. God is working to put the world back on track with the original plan. That plan calls for human beings to take their place under God, worshipping our creator and being good stewards for the world.

Creation isn't waiting to share the freedom of God's children. Creation is waiting to benefit when God's children come into their own, when we wake up and realize our place and role in the kingdom of God. Creation is waiting – on tiptoe, for the freedom it will enjoy when those who are made in God's image will tend to creation with wisdom and care.

It isn't easy. We groan and sigh when we experience the tension between God's glorious promise and the present reality. There's a reason why Paul wrote, “*O miserable human that I am*” (Romans 7:24). We can feel trapped, frustrated and depressed by the tension between the good we want to do and the selfish things we end up doing and see others doing.

We know God's Spirit is working within us. We catch glimpses of God's Spirit working in people in our households, our neighbors, across the country and around the world. We know there is a great harvest, a revival, to come. Yet the Spirit has not yet completed the work of full renewal. The child is due yet has not come. This is a sign of the good still to come.

This leaves us with a striking view. This is what Christian hope looks like. It's hope that, like faith, is not seen. And, if it's seen, it isn't hope. We glimpse the signs, we can sense God's presence. We can be certain of God's promise. And that gives us hope. Yes, we're groaning and waiting, eager but patient; that's how we wait for the glory God will reveal. This sense of becoming is how we know and experience God.

One of Paul's most remarkable images is something he could never experience: birth pangs. Men, we can learn a lot from our wives, partners, mothers, grandmothers, sisters and daughters, for they uniquely and powerfully know the pain and hope of creation. We all are called to share in that suffering and joy.

The church is called to share the pain and hope of all people and creation. The whole of creation is in labor, longing for God’s new world to be born. As Christ’s body, we aren’t to separate or distance ourselves from the pain of the world. We’re to be in prayer at precisely the place where the world is in pain. That’s part of our calling, our role within God’s purpose for the new creation.

Solomon’s words resonate with our lives and this call to hopeful prayer:

“The memory of my suffering and homelessness is bitterness and poison. I can’t help but remember and am depressed. I call all this to mind - therefore, I will wait.

*Certainly the faithful love of the Lord hasn’t ended;
certainly God’s compassion isn’t through!*

*They are renewed every morning. Great is your faithfulness.
I think: The Lord is my portion! Therefore, I’ll wait for him.*

*The Lord is good to those who hope in him, to the person who seeks him.
It’s good to wait in silence for the Lord’s deliverance.”*
(Lamentations 3:19-26).

Where do you find hope? Look for the signs; they’re all around you. God’s Spirit is at work in you and the people around you, those you encounter each day. Look with fresh eyes, listen with an open heart and show you care with God’s love. When you do, you will know joy even when you are suffering. And that’s hope.

Lamentations 3:19-24 (25-33) (CEB)

The memory of my suffering and homelessness is bitterness and poison.
I can't help but remember and am depressed.
I call all this to mind - therefore, I will wait.

Certainly the faithful love of the Lord hasn't ended; certainly God's
compassion isn't through!

They are renewed every morning. Great is your faithfulness.
I think: The Lord is my portion! Therefore, I'll wait for him.

The Lord is good to those who hope in him, to the person who seeks
him.

It's good to wait in silence for the Lord's deliverance.

It's good for a man to carry a yoke in his youth.

He should sit alone and be silent when God lays it on him.

He should put his mouth in the dirt - perhaps there is hope.

He should offer his cheek for a blow; he should be filled with shame.

My Lord definitely won't reject forever.

Although he has caused grief, he will show compassion in measure with
his covenant loyalty.

He definitely doesn't enjoy affliction, making humans suffer.

Romans 8:22-28 (CEB)

We know that the whole creation is groaning together and suffering
labor pains up until now. And it's not only the creation. We ourselves
who have the Spirit as the first crop of the harvest also groan inside as
we wait to be adopted and for our bodies to be set free. We were saved
in hope. If we see what we hope for, that isn't hope. Who hopes for what
they already see? But if we hope for what we don't see, we wait for it
with patience.

In the same way, the Spirit comes to help our weakness. We don't know
what we should pray, but the Spirit himself pleads our case with
unexpressed groans. The one who searches hearts knows how the Spirit
thinks, because he pleads for the saints, consistent with God's will. We
know that God works all things together for good for the ones who love
God, for those who are called according to his purpose.