

Deuteronomy 32:8-14 (NRSV)

Song of Moses (excerpt)

When the Most High apportioned the nations,
when he divided humankind,
he fixed the boundaries of the peoples
according to the number of the gods;
the Lord's own portion was his people,
Jacob his allotted share.
He sustained^[c] him in a desert land,
in a howling wilderness waste;
he shielded him, cared for him,
guarded him as the apple of his eye.
As an eagle stirs up its nest
and hovers over its young,
as it spreads its wings, takes them up,
and bears them aloft on its pinions,
the Lord alone guided him;
no foreign god was with him.
He set him atop the heights of the land
and fed him with produce of the field;
he nursed him with honey from the crags,
with oil from flinty rock,
curds from the herd, and milk from the flock,
with fat of lambs and rams,
Bashan bulls and goats,
together with the choicest wheat—
you drank fine wine from the blood of grapes.

Romans 8:26-39 (NRSV)

²⁶Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with groanings too deep for words. ²⁷ And God, who searches hearts, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.
²⁸We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.³¹ What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³² He who did not withhold his own Son but gave him up for all of us, how will he not with him also give us everything else? ³³ Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? It is Christ^[f] who died, or rather, who was raised, who is also at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. ³⁵ Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will affliction or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? ³⁶ As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”

³⁷No, in all these things we are more than victorious through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

About 20 years ago I traveled to northern NM to present an organ recital and literature workshop. I had decided to fly because of time constraints and departed from the Las Cruces Airport on Mesa Airlines. On the return flight, a huge thunderstorm developed, one which the pilot could not avoid. The small propellor plane held 6-8 passengers, and the incredible forces of wind and lightning tossed the plane about as though it was a tiny piece of paper, pitching and diving about with hardly any ability to withstand the terrible yet awesome forces of nature.

The other passengers were either quietly moaning, crying – or screaming in stark fear that the plane might crash to the ground. The pilot, with our lives in his hands, was trying his best to concentrate on the situation and keep the plane aloft. It was also a matter of his life, or death.

I sat quietly, observing the incredibly beautiful yet ominous scene just outside my window. It was fascinating to be IN the storm and is like no other experience I have ever had in my rather protected, everyday life. The situation was obviously and completely beyond my capacity to control, and, strangely, it was okay with me. I was not afraid. It was my first realization that I was not afraid to die. I was intently mesmerized by the awesome power of God within the thunderclouds -- and I was assured of my faith. I was securely in his hands at that moment, no matter what happened next. To this day it is difficult for me to use the word “awesome” in light conversation because I have seen and experienced real awesomeness!

Moses’ deep, abiding faith inspired him to write the song contained in Deuteronomy Chapter 32. Moses had suffered greatly in the desert as he led the Israelites to Canaan, enduring attacks from warring tribes, constant grumbling and ultimate rebellion from his people, lack of water and food, apostasy and disloyalty among his own family. Except for the miraculous grace of God, we do not see how he could have stood up under it all. Moses wrote the song for the people to sing, to remember their experiences during the arduous journey, with all its bitter twists and turns, and significant mistakes, leaving a testimony of God’s sovereignty, providence, and miraculous saving acts as they struggled to survive in the barren land. He proclaims not only the awesome power of God, but also the faithful love of God, who had sustained his people the entire time. It is in the Song of Moses that we read of the eagle teaching her fledglings to fly, first encouraging them out of the nest, then swooping under them to gently lift them up when they are struggling to stay aloft.

This is the baby birds’ first experience of separation – from their mother, and the physical security of the nest. There is certainly danger and fear of falling but the reward is their accomplishment and growth – to be able to fly on one’s own! The ability to be self-sufficient and find one’s own food, build one’s own nest! . . . but first they must separate.

At the very heart of what it means to be human is separation from those things and those people we love. To be human is to have loss and grief and to know the painful power of separation. In Romans 8, Paul speaks not only of death, but also of many matters that threaten separation from God. With every choice we make along the way it is necessary to separate from some other option. We cannot do everything, so, when we do anything, we must exclude something else. Such exclusion, such “leaving behind,” is a source of great pain in human living. Even the most natural thing, like growing up, involves leaving something behind.

Young ones cannot become an adult without leaving childhood behind.

One does not stay young forever, so as we age we must leave behind our young adulthood with all its brimming potential.

We as adults expect our parents to die before we do, but it is not always so;

We encourage our children to take wings and fly from us as they mature and grow into adulthood, but we miss them.

All these instances describe the very essence of being human. We must concede – and acknowledge -- that we can count on being separated from those things and those people we love. These beginning separations are tests to prove and hone our development to emotional and spiritual maturity.

Paul understands the conflict of our humanity and the influences of cosmic forces that confound and separate us from God: He mentions three that are particularly pertinent to us today:

Hardship – Yes, Life *is* hard – We struggle to be born and take our first breath of life; we separate from our mother into the wide world; and thus begins many separations that grow in difficulty and challenge us to more complex separations: the first day of school, the last day of high school, entrance to college or training, finding one’s own independent life and career; and nearly every day, even on our best day, we are apt to struggle with a difficulty of some sort – to build and nurture a relationship; to learn and truly understand; to teach; to care for a loved one; to grieve over illness or loss. . .

Distress -- When we cannot complete what we so want to finish, we are in distress. When we have done all that we can do, and it is still not enough, we are in distress. Divorce, loss of employment, failing health, struggles with addiction, every kind of failure. When we are aging and must acquiesce to life on the sidelines with waning physical strength. Like the waters flowing over a sinking ship, distress overwhelms us.

Persecution-- It is a prevalent Biblical term, but it is also a present-day occurrence manifesting in many forms, all over the world. The prevalence of persecution makes this force especially significant. The violence done to women, men, and children remains a cosmic force with devastating capacity to separate. These hardships are even more difficult to sweep aside mentally and spiritually when they are recurring and constant. The constancy of these assaults on others are indeed ever-present today and continue to fester largely undisturbed -- either by complicity with the powers that be; or with complacency that urges us to look away from the obvious truth. Even those who fail to shout out against these powers can be transformed by the power of God, who continually searches ‘the heart’ and helps us in our weakness. Even when we do not know how to pray, the ‘Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.’

Life is hard! How does Hope prevail amid all this suffering and possible separation from God? The Apostle Paul provides the answer that rests on the mighty power of God to save us. He asks,

35Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

37No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

38For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

These verses describe predestination with a promise -- the great promise of God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Suffering does not lead us somewhere; instead we are brought to an end, so only Christ and his new creation remains. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, provides the true comfort to a suffering Christian: No charge can be brought against God's elect, because "it is God who justifies", and this was done by Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, and *who intercedes for us*". *Predestination with a promise allows us to pray through the Spirit with assurance against our own feelings of doubt and despair.*

Jose and Karina, our new friends from Peru, met with Rev Norm, Barbara and Joel Trudell and I last week, to discuss the Baptism of Karina and their 2-month-old baby Mathias. Included in the conversation were questions from Pastor Norm regarding their experiences of faith and spiritual life. They spoke of their 8-month journey, filled with hardship, danger, near-starvation, evil forces -- and loss of hope among many in the group who traveled together. Jose and Karina agreed that those who were not able to hold on to their faith in God, who would have seen them through the hard times, lost hope and died. They realized from their terrifying experiences along the way that only their faith helped them survive. Karina expressed her sense of hope this way when we first met her in April: She said, "I had no jacket, and when I went to lie down at night, I was so cold. But I knew, in the morning the sun would rise again."

Life is hard, yet our hardships in life are mitigated by our faith and trust in God, and our sense of hope that comes from our deep connection to Christ through the Holy Spirit.

The text in Romans 8: 26-39 is not about how we accomplish our own redemption; it explains how God has already redeemed us through the suffering of Jesus Christ and makes all things work together for good for those who love him. God actively accomplishes the redemption of all things in creation. God works with us, who are the first fruits of God's redemption, through God's Spirit that is within us.

Paul's focus is on the work of God. It is not preoccupied with individual salvation nor a nuanced argument on the nature of predestination. Nor is it a sign of futility or separation from God. God's plan is and has always been the redemption of creation; we will be restored into the image of God in which we were called into being and meant to live. These God has already accomplished! If we cannot see its completion yet, we can trust in God's sovereign rule, which we have already seen begun. The plural pronouns "we" and "us" focus not on an individual's walk of faith or struggles in prayer, but God's redemption of his people, and all of creation with them.

Shall these cosmic forces prevail? Shall these things have the capacity to undo us, to undo the most central element of our lives -- God's love? Paul says emphatically, "No, no, no!" Ultimately, "in all things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us". God's love for us

in Christ Jesus triumphs over every power of this earth and beyond this earth. If we have hope in the midst of our suffering, it rests in this love: God's love that makes us God's own beloved children, one with the Christ, to share his glory. Nothing can ever take this hope away.

Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Nothing?

Absolutely Nothing!

Let us pray: Almighty God, how uniquely Awesome you are! Nothing compares to the depth of your love, the wisdom of your Words, or the blessings of your Son, Jesus, the Master of Life, who abides in us through the Holy Spirit. Continue in the coming days to encourage us, to help us grow and mature, deepen our faith and assurance of your holy presence in our lives, and continue to hope, even when life is hard. Amen.