

The Nature of Christian Hope

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

“I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor 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.” Rom 8:38–39

Friends, this morning we are blessed by a word of Scripture that has been a towering inspiration to Christians throughout the centuries. In Paul’s letter to the Christians in Rome, the apostle offers a profound working out of what it means to live in hope. But first, a dash of cold water: Paul does some truth-telling about how believers are weak. We are weak—even when we yearn for God, even when we know the power of Christ, even when we have spent years or decades in the faith.

- When we’re daunted by the violence of the world or distracted by challenges in our lives, our joy in the Gospel can be diluted by anxiety.¹
- When we’re not sure what we believe or we’re slammed by spiritual wrestling, we barely know how to reach out to God in prayer. In such times, our prayer life can dry up entirely.²
- When our hard work for justice and peace seems to be going nowhere, we can become jaded, losing sight of the hope we have in the Gospel.

Paul knows all this.

Yet he calls us to hope, and in Romans 8, he gives us some truly magnificent words of encouragement!

- * Paul offers us spiritual consolation with his bold claim that the Holy Spirit intercedes powerfully on our behalf when we have no words. The Holy Spirit stands in prayerful solidarity with us in everything we go through!
- * Paul tells us God knows us and “God is for us.” God searches our hearts—knows us more deeply than we know ourselves³—and still loves us! It does not matter who or what is coming at us. Scheming adversaries, systemic oppression, spiritual warfare by principalities and powers: it does not matter, because God is for us. In the work we do for justice, for healing, for restoration of this dying planet—God is with us!
- * And Paul is riveting in his thunderous affirmation that absolutely nothing can “separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus”! Not hardship, distress, persecution, or famine. Not even being stripped of everything we have, facing peril or death itself. Nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord!”⁴

Make no mistake: Paul knew hardship. Paul was beaten and flogged; he suffered imprisonments, shipwrecks, ^{Acts 27} and the bite of a venomous snake should have killed him. ^{Acts 28:3–6} He was tormented by an unspecified “thorn in the flesh” that Satan tried to use to keep him “from being too elated” ^{2 Cor 12:7} about the Gospel.

Look, Paul went through almost every fearful circumstance you can imagine. On the far side of all that, he assures us: absolutely nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord!

So how can we come to trust that in our own lives? Just getting through the day can be hard enough, right? How can we grow spiritually toward unassailable joy and confidence in God's love?

That's not a rhetorical question. There's an answer!

How can we learn to trust the love of God?

Through the Holy Spirit, that's how.

Paul says the Holy Spirit grounds us in the love of God in Christ. He talks a lot about the Holy Spirit in his letters. Here are some important things Paul says in Romans about the Spirit.

✓ “God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit” Rom 5:5.

Wow. From baptism on, the love of God through the Holy Spirit has been with you—poured into each one of you, always with you!

✓ “To set [our minds] on the flesh is death, but to set [our minds] on the Spirit is life and peace.” 8:6 So beautiful.

✓ “The Spirit of God dwells in you”—in you! 8:9, 11

✓ “The Spirit helps us in our weakness” (this is today's lesson), “for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but [the] Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.” 8:26; cf. v. 27

- ✓ Jesus teaches us to seek first the kingdom of God.⁵ What is the kingdom? Here's what Paul says: "the kingdom of God is ... righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit"! ^{14:17}

The Spirit is our Advocate when it seems like we're utterly alone.

The Spirit is our Guide when we're hopelessly lost.

The Spirit is our Helper when it seems like nothing can help.

The Spirit is the Voice that prays for us when we have no words.

The Spirit is Life and Peace and Joy beyond the telling!⁶

Paul says the Spirit is with us every single minute, no matter what we're dealing with. In every gladness and every affliction, the Spirit

stands with us,

breathes with us,

and prays for us,

weaving our life more deeply into the loving purposes of God.

We have the gift of the Holy Spirit from the risen Christ himself! (That's John 20: Jesus breathes on the disciples and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit.")^{John 20:22} So, friends, a chief joy of the Christian life is learning to trust the Holy Spirit, this astonishing gift from our risen Lord. I want that for you so much—for each of you here, and for this beloved congregation of St. Thomas's: to trust the Holy Spirit more and more deeply.

Now, you may already know the Spirit. Not sure? Think back. You might recall a time you were wandering in a spiritual desert, feeling irritated, disengaged, cynical—and an insight came to you like a beautiful spring of water bubbling up and soaking into dry ground. Maybe it felt like you could grow again, like you could lean toward the things that nourish you, blossom and bear fruit again! Well, the Holy Spirit works like that.

Maybe there was a time your heart was animated by a sense of enfolding compassion. Maybe it felt like loving energy all around you, or like a message out of the blue showing you how beloved you are! The Holy Spirit works like that, too.

Maybe you had an experience of radiant clarity about something with which you'd struggled for a long time. Maybe it felt like a powerful moment of recognition, or like newfound strength, or like the landscape around you had changed in marvelous ways when you weren't looking! The Holy Spirit works like that.

Now, maybe it's been a long time, or maybe you've never had that kind of spiritual experience. That's totally fine. The Holy Spirit is with us in every moment, whether we realize it or not! You can pray about it, of course, if you long to know the Holy Spirit more deeply. Jesus urges us to ask, seek, and knock. ^{Matt 7:7-8 // Luke 11:9-10} Pray for a glimpse of the Holy Spirit in your life!

I want to close with three images that can help you stay on the lookout for the Spirit in your daily life. The images are water, fire, and wind.

WATER falls as rain, filling springs and rivers and lakes and oceans, sustaining mammals, birds, and marine life, green plants, flowering shrubs, meadows, and forests across this entire world that God so loves! ^{John 3:16} The Holy Spirit is like that. Whenever you see rain, think of the Holy Spirit.

FIRE warms us when it is cold and dark. Fire can remove impurities, tempering steel and iron so that tools can be made stronger and less vulnerable to corrosion. The Holy Spirit is like that. Whenever you see a candle or enjoy the warmth of a fire in the fireplace, think of the Holy Spirit.

WIND, an inexhaustible source of energy, can reshape entire landscapes—mountains, deserts, coastlines. Wind teaches us something vitally important for our faith: that something invisible can be real and indescribably powerful! The Holy Spirit is like that. Whenever you delight in a summer breeze or see trees bending in gusts of wind, think of the Holy Spirit.

When the going gets tough, remember: the Spirit is with you like rain, like fire, like a holy wind transfiguring the landscape all around you! Open your heart to the love of God in Christ Jesus, and give thanks for the Spirit, who is praying for you always, even in this very moment.

In the Name of the One to whom the Spirit bears witness: ^{John 15:26}

Jesus Christ, to whom be all honor, glory, and praise, now and forever. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Carolyn J. Sharp

30 July 2023

Proper 12A

Gen 29:15–28; Ps 105:1–11, 45; Rom 8:26–39; Matt 13:31–33, 44–52

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¹ My point is by no means that anxiety itself is any kind of spiritual weakness. Anxiety and fear are organic, adaptive, generally healthy responses to stressors and threats that can do harm. My concern is that believers too often allow our affective processes—including emotions, attachments, and moods—to determine or limit our joy in the Gospel.

² Scholarly resources I find erudite, theologically wise, and pertinent for preaching on Romans 8 include these: Brendan Byrne, SJ, *Romans*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996); Robert Jewett, *Romans*, assisted by Roy D. Kotansky, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007); Nelson Rivera, “Speaking of the Spirit,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 56 (2017): 272–278; Marcin Kowalski, “The Spirit of Resurrection in Romans 8 and Its Jewish Correspondences,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 44 (2021): 254–283; Matthias Wenk, “An Incarnational Pneumatology Based on Romans 8:18–30: The Spirit as God’s Solidarity with a Suffering Creation,” *Religions* 13 (2022), 191. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13030191>. On Christians’ weakness, Byrne offers, “‘Our weakness’ could refer to a more general sense of vulnerability in the conditions of the present age. More likely, however, what Paul has in mind is ‘weakness’ stemming from inability to see or visualize the goal to which we are being led” (266). Jewett says Paul “refuses to accept the premise held by some in the early church that the gift of the Spirit lifts believers above weaknesses”; instead, “the Spirit lends assistance to believers caught between the two ages,” per Paul’s “distinctive view of the Spirit as both apportioned out to believers and as the Spirit of God and/or Christ acting within them and beyond them” (522–523).

³ Jewett: “Paul is insisting not only that God knows and intercedes at the point of the deepest human confusion but also that God communicates with God’s self through the groans that humans share with the rest of the fallen creation” (525). For Paul, “the work of the Spirit with and among believers ... continues despite their weakness and suffering” (527), a point that is at the core of my homiletical exposition, reflecting on how Rom 8:26–39 provides such incandescent consolation to those gathered around it as a sacred text. Precisely as Jewett says, one of Paul’s goals is “to reassure the vulnerable, harried believers in Rome that their lives and work have significance in the grand plan of God for the restoration of creation” (529). Wenk adds this: “Until the eschatological liberation, the Spirit is God’s solidarity with a creation groaning and suffering.... Wherever life is impeded, the Spirit is grieving” (4–5).

⁴ The Gospels tell us a great deal about Christ’s love. Taking the list of challenges Paul identifies in Rom 8:35, we can see Christ’s love in action throughout the Gospels, in far too many examples to cite comprehensively.

Hardship and distress were suffered by numerous persons living with disease or disability who were brought to Jesus; he cured all of them (Matt 4:24; 8:1–17; 9:2–7; 15:29–31; and many other passages in the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles). Jesus also responded with life-changing compassion to those wounded by social stigmatization.

Persecution has been a threat to followers of Jesus in every age—famously, and horrifically, under the Roman empire, but also in other cultures through the centuries. The risen Christ offers a word to sustain his disciples as they move forward into an era in which Christians would be brutally persecuted, first by Saul (later Paul—the author of Romans) and then by several Roman emperors in the first through fourth centuries, including Nero, Marcus Aurelius, Decius, and Diocletian. What did Christ offer his followers as generations of persecution were about to unfold? Among other gifts, he gave them the most loving promise imaginable: “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt 28:20).

Famine: countless people faced food insecurity in the ancient world, and many millions of people today are dying from hunger or subsist near starvation. This grim scenario will only be intensified by the ecological harms of climate change; it is urgent that we respond. All four Gospels relate that Jesus took a small number of loaves and fish, blessed them, and was able to feed many thousands of people, showing extraordinary love that uses the modest resources people offer to create miraculous abundance for all in need (Matt 14:13–21; 15:32–38; Mark 6:30–44; Luke 9:12–17; John 6:1–14).

Nakedness: Jesus offered protection and healing to those stripped of all they had, literally and figuratively. We may think of the Gerasene man possessed by malevolent spirits, shackled and left naked and bruised in an isolated place by the tombs, who was healed by the love of Jesus and emerged “clothed” when he had come into his right mind (Mark 5:1–20; Luke 8:26–39; Matt 8:28–34, with characteristic Matthean doubling to two possessed persons). The point obtains also for those shunned as “lepers” (*sic*) whom Jesus healed, for the woman about to be stoned for choosing a sex partner other than her husband (John 8:3–11), and more.

The Gospels and Acts show the power of Christ's love triumphing over every peril and over the sword. Relevant stories of Jesus' victory over death include the narratives about his own resurrection; his raising Jairus's daughter from death (Matt 9:18–25; Mark 5:21–43; Luke 8:40–56), raising the son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:11–17), and raising Lazarus after Lazarus had been entombed three days (John 11); Peter raising Tabitha from death (Acts 9:36–42); and Paul raising a young man (Acts 20:7–12).

⁵ Our hymn during the retiring procession today is #711, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God," in the Episcopal *Hymnal 1982*.

⁶ Rivera describes the polyphony of views on the nature and roles of the Holy Spirit in the early centuries of Christian theology. His summary (273) helps to sketch an overview that could assuredly be broadened and afforded even more contours than those he offers: "One, the Spirit is God's creative activity, active in creation from the beginning, forming, nourishing, caring, promoting, and sustaining life.... Two, the Spirit gives life and, therefore, it often is called the Spirit of Life.... Three, the Spirit is the Word of God in action, its effectiveness.... By interweaving the work of the Spirit with the hearing of the Word of God, it is the Spirit that makes possible the reception of the proclaimed Word, as well as the written one (Rom 15:18–19)." Rivera says the Spirit "makes us first uneasy in order to bring comfort; shakes us in order to bring peace; and cries with us and in us in order to bring consolation," and further, "The witness of the Spirit in us and from us is the guarantee that we are children of God" (273–274).