**Future Glory**

**Text: Romans 8:18, 28**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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It happens sometimes in basketball and football. It’s late in the game, one team has a substantial lead, and the outcome is not in doubt. So the starters are pulled from the game and the subs are sent in to bask in the glory of the impending victory. The subs are thrilled to participate, the starters are celebrating on the sidelines, and a spirit of joy and thanksgiving abound.

Who among us would not want to be part of that scenario? We want to participate in an event where there’s that kind of spirit. We want to contribute to that kind of victory.

That winning scenario is something like the life of faith; with some important caveats, of course. When it comes to the victory over the forces that are arrayed against God – sin, evil, injustice, illness and death – when it comes to that ultimate victory, there’s still some tough slogging ahead. So it’s not quite like that game that’s been put on ice. But the biblical testimony says that the end is not in doubt. “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the glory about to be revealed to us,” Paul says (Romans 8:18). He was *sure* that the struggle would soon be over, he was sure that the victory foretold in Jesus Resurrection was at hand, he was sure that it was just a matter of time before the victory of God’s Kingdom would be complete.

2,000 years later, we know that Paul significantly underestimated how much time was left on the clock. Nevertheless, the biblical prophecy remains; the outcome is not in doubt, and we celebrate the promised victory ever Sunday morning. To be sure, it’s not “Game 7” yet; and maybe it’s not even the playoffs. But the future glory of the victory over evil, injustice and death is guaranteed.

“I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the glory about to be revealed to us.” Paul is confident about that. He doesn’t deny the suffering. He doesn’t try to explain it away. Sin and sickness and evil and injustice are very real for Paul. Indeed, the pain experienced by the early Church under Roman persecution was intense. But even in the midst of that pain, Paul could be hopeful. He considered those pangs of persecution to be like labor pains as the whole Creation gives birth to the coming Kingdom. Yes, there’s pain and suffering and significant setbacks, and sometimes it’s impossible to see signs of hope. But even then, Paul says, the birthing process of the Kingdom of God is underway.

“We know that all things work together for good,” Paul says in our New Revised Standard Version translation. The New International Version captures Paul’s Greek more accurately: “In all things God works for the good…” God doesn’t will the pain, but God is at work in the *midst* of the pain; bringing into the light of day another piece of the Kingdom of love and justice and joy.

Paul can be sure of this because he trusts that all of history is being guided by the just and sovereign hand of God. It’s all been worked out in eternity, even as the struggle remains in history. It’s been *predestined*, Paul says, using a term with which we Disciples have never been comfortable. But that’s the biblical testimony: salvation has been assured, victory has been assured, God has it all taken care of. And good things are coming to the Church, to the earth, and to all of Creation. Good things are coming to *this* church. God is preparing for us a future filled with glory! And I don’t know about you all, but I’m excited! It’s exciting to be part of a winning cause. I’m excited about what God has planned for the corner of 15th and K Streets, and the Camp, and the town of Bedford, and the whole Creation!!

It’s a little bit like when I joined my high school track team, more years ago than I care to remember. Coach pushed us mighty hard in those first weeks of practice. The Tuesday work out was especially hard. He called it “PTA Day.” That stood for pain, torture and agony! But when we won our first meet, we knew that something special was happening. And as we won more meets, our excitement continued to grow. More people joined the team. Our roster of talent got deeper still. The workouts still hurt. And it took 3 years for everything to come together. But in my senior year, we won the Chicago City Championship.

The Bible says that something like that is happening with the whole of Creation, even if we can’t see it yet. And it seems to me that something like that is happening right here in our own church, and we *are* beginning to see it. It was there on the Saturday of our All-Church Retreat. I’m sensing it as folks are coming-up with creative ideas about our mission here in town and out at Camp. I’m seeing it as we pull study groups together to further explore how to translate those creative ideas into action. Everyone who attended the All-Church Retreat was invited to join such a group, and I hope this week to complete the process of pulling those groups together; so if you haven’t heard from me yet, you will soon.

It is exciting to be part of a cause. It is especially exciting to be part of a *winning* cause. To be working and praying toward the future glory that God has promised the whole Creation through Jesus Christ our Lord is the *ultimate* in winning causes, and I’m *very* excited about that!

Which is one of the reasons why…I love giving my offering every Sunday. Which may sound like a bit of hyperbole but no, really: I love writing that check every single week. And when I was a little kid I loved putting my dime on the offering plate. My parents gave me a dollar for allowance every Saturday, and a dime – 10% – went on the offering plate every Sunday. So whether you’re able to give a large amount or a small amount, it’s exciting to contribute to the victorious cause of God’s Kingdom.

It’s exciting to be part of a winning cause, and it’s a joy simply to be giving, and there’s comfort in trusting that one way or another, God is working things out. And that process of working things out – that process of working for good in all things – includes working out where life’s necessities are going to come from, now that I’ve just given away 10% of my income right off the top; and working out how the Kingdom will expand in the midst of the ministry of First Christian Church; and working out how the Kingdom will be completed in that ultimate future glory that God has envisioned for all of Creation.

There’s a comfort in putting your weekly gift on the offering plate and trusting that somehow things will work out. It’s not a trust that tries to sugarcoat how difficult life is. It’s not a Pollyanna wish that things will *somehow* work out. It’s a solid trust in the sovereignty of God who has shown, time and time again, that we are not alone, that God is in the midst of our lives, that God is in the midst of the world, that God is working for good, no matter how bad things might be at the moment.

Like the time that a member of Pastor Helen’s church tore-up his knee – playing basketball – and couldn’t work for weeks. Jeff’s wife, Andrea, was a stay at home mom (which meant that she was working hard, but no one was paying her for it), they didn’t have health insurance, and they didn’t know what they were going to do. But inexplicably, this sense of calm came over Andrea, and she knew that things were going to be okay. She didn’t know *how* they were going to be okay, the family was still very much in the midst of a very real crisis, but there was nevertheless this sense of calm.

So, they didn’t have health insurance. But, their application to the Healthy Indiana Plan was processed quickly (3 cheers for state-sponsored health insurance!), they worked out some kind of arrangement with Jeff’s employer so that there was *some* income trickling in, and gifts started pouring in from friends, neighbors, relatives and members of the church. And their weekly gift to the Church continued; significantly reduced, mind you, but nevertheless there it was, on the plate, every Sunday because…

“In all things God works for good.” It’s exciting to be supporting that process. It’s exciting to be part of a winning cause. And it’s important to remember that it’s a cause that is much bigger than ourselves or our congregation. It’s a mission that takes us beyond these walls and out into the community. As Cristie Sharpsteen reminded us on our retreat a few weeks ago, the church doesn’t exist for itself, it exists for others. Its mission is not primarily the care of its own members, although that is of course *part* of our mission. But the first part of our mission is to reach beyond our walls and care for the lost, the least and the lonely souls whom we encounter out there. I mean, we’ve already got this caring community. We’re already being blessed by the love and the nurture that’s found in this place. The folks out there need what we have in here, and it’s our mission to reach out to them and bring that kind of care to them. Jesus said, “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and the sake of the Gospel will save it” (Mark 8:35). It is not for our own sake, but for the sake of the Gospel and the sake of Jesus and the sake of those whom Jesus loves that the Church engages in mission. And if we get too focused on ourselves, we’re going to kill this good thing that we’ve got going.

It’s not about us! It’s about the Kingdom of God. It’s not about saving our congregation, it’s about serving others. This is the cause in which we’re engaged, this is the mission that we support, and the victory of this mission has been sealed, promised and guaranteed through the Resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord.

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. This is the hope that is part and parcel of our salvation. Such hope is not a pious wish, but a certain confidence. And the mission to which we have been called is not a doomed cause, but a victorious quest. It’s not a struggle for survival, but a glorious mission. A mission beyond our walls. We’re no longer trying to survive; that battle’s been won. On the contrary, we’re on the lookout for a *new* mission that’s big enough to channel the deep faith and abundant resources that are present here, in this place. The Bible tells a story of future glory, and *our* Future Story will be a tale of glory as well. It’s exciting to be on such a winning team. It’s exciting to devote ourselves and give whatever we’ve got to that cause. Just ask the players, on the court and celebrating on the sidelines, when the outcome of the game is not in doubt, and victory has been assured. As in that scenario, so in our own: let the spirit of joy and thanksgiving abound! Amen.