Homily for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Our sermon text this morning is the lectionary reading from St. Paul’s epistle to the church in Rome.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Dear brothers and sisters in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, we have an extraordinarily rich tradition of hymnody in the history of our Evangelical Lutheran church. The best, in fact. And I think that bold claim can be easily, skillfully borne out. One need only peruse our present hymnal for proof of its veracity. I mean, the Lutheran chorales, right – c’mon. It doesn’t get any better than that. They are without equal. But I tell you what, my favorite hymn of all, my most beloved hymn, it wasn’t even written by a Lutheran, I have to confess. Not even. And actually, for whatever reason, it did not make the cut for the Lutheran Service Book currently in our pews. You won’t find it in there. Which is a pity. But it was in the old Lutheran hymnal some of you may have grown up with, the affectionately so-called TLH, that glorious hymn book – and we actually sang it together just now. Hymn 533 – Nearer My God to Thee. Now this isn’t a theologically dense hymn, to say the least. No, it doesn’t share the same conceptual depth as the unparalleled hymnody of Martin Luther, Phillip Nicolai, Paul Gerhardt, and so many others. And to tell you the truth, it wasn’t even written by an orthodox Christian either, but by, of all people, a nineteenth century Unitarian by the name of Sarah Fuller Flower Adams.

Yet none of that really matters, if you ask me. It is nevertheless a Christian hymn that truly moves those who really hear it. Particularly when set to that of old tune Bethany we know so well. It is so simple. It is so unambiguous. It is almost childlike. It is childlike, in fact. It expresses in very plain terms that blessed hope that only a child could ever rightly articulate without all the pretensions of the supposed maturity of adulthood. There is a reason, dear friends, why the string ensemble on the Titanic reportedly played this very hymn as that poor vessel sank along with over fifteen hundred souls in the North Atlantic in the spring of 1912.

At first the ship’s ensemble played lighter, less serious melodies, so the story goes, that they wouldn’t cause any more of panic than the iceberg itself already had. But when reality finally sat in, when their collective fate became clear to most, this unadorned little hymn on violin and cello is what they turned to for comfort – right before the end, as they met their Maker.

Our faith, friends, as mysterious as it may be, and as profound as its theology no doubt is, our faith is not really all that complicated though. Brothers and sisters, unless our dear Lord returns first, every one of us is going to die someday. I know we don’t really like to think about that overly often or bring it up in polite conversation. Not in the twenty-first century, anyhow – not in America. Even us Christians, we don’t wish to dwell on it *too* much – because that would just be morbid and morose. I get it. But that doesn’t change anything though. Denial doesn’t do away with the consequences of the fall. That’s not how it works. Until the arrival of the Last Day and the resurrection of the body promised us, we come from dust and earth and to dust and earth we’re gonna return. We will all keep growing older and frailer. And one of these days, hopefully far off when we are all of a ripe old age, a day will come though when we will each close our eyes and go to sleep, in the eyes of this world, forever, yet in reality but for a little while. We will pass from this vale of tears for good. That is our fate. That is our future. Six of our closest friends and family will lower us into a bed below six feet of God’s green earth, our bodies will be buried beneath common dirt, and we will be, for a time, elsewhere. That is where our lives are headed. That’s the reality. It is. And we have to be honest about it.

You know, I used to sing this hymn to my eldest daughter, Freyja Lynn, every night when she was in the womb. And then after that too, for quite a long time. I don’t know that she really recognizes the words even now, but she certainly knows the tune. She clings to it in some sense. And the other day, as I was gathering hymns for this Sunday, I sang this one to her on the couch for a moment. And lured by its familiarity, she hopped up on my lap and she listened closely, and began to sing along in her understanding of how it’s supposed to sound.

And as we sat there together, tears started welling up in my tired-for-a-thirty-three-year-old eyes. You know, I don’t cry very often, unfortunately. I bemoan that fact. I do. I don’t weep as much as I wish I could – or as much as a good Christian man really should. But that genuinely brought tears to my eyes. Because as we sang together, I was reminded that no matter what I do, I cannot protect my daughter nor save her from the same fate we all face. It is the same heart-wrenching realization I had the very moment she was born and opened her big blue eyes – a realization about the finale of her worldly destiny. Unless Jesus comes back first—and I pray, come soon, Lord—unless He comes back first, my daughters, too, will someday fall asleep, they will die to this world. That is the hardest thing for a father to ever have to come to terms with. But that’s life – that is a part of our story, as sinners, as much as hurts to admit.

But for those of us who have faith, there is more to the story, thank heavens. This life is not all there is and this death is not the end, as we know. Our hope lies beyond, in what we do not yet see, as St. Paul poetically puts it in our reading this morning. “For I consider,” he says, “that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us… for now, though, we do groan inwardly as we await the redemption of our bodies.” And as the apostle goes on to declare, it is in that very hope and waiting and anticipation and expectation that we were once saved and are saved still. In that otherworldly hope. “E’en though it be a cross that raiseth me; still all my song shall be: nearer, my God, to Thee.”

Our hope, the answer to our inward groaning, is in the shape of an instrument of Roman execution. Our hope was birthed from the womb of a man’s painful and bloody death, the death of a man who more so than any other man ought never to have tasted death at all. But by His cross, by His unjust yet wholly sacrificial death for us, He overcame the world, and the devil, and all sin everywhere and for all time – and death itself, He conquered it just the same. His death put the very power of death to death. So that now we may boast with the apostle and even mock death’s defeat: “O piteous death where is thy sting? O sad grave, where is thy victory?” And creation itself groans, too, Paul tells us.

Everything groans to escape its suffering and decay, its shame, misery, and anguish. But by the death of God on the indignity of a cross, the world also was redeemed. The world is being redeemed. Now this creation will pass away, that’s true, a burning conflagration will occur – but a new a creation will arrive in its place. A new world. “Behold, I make all things new,” so announces the enthroned King in the revelation to St. John. “Wherever there is death, wherever there is loss, wherever there is pain and heartbreak, wheresoever there is a carcass or a corpse of what once woefully groaned a sincere groan for relief and hope, there am I, making all things new.” This our Lord promises.

What is more, this same Lord and King by Whose death we are liberated from death shared with us a glimpse of the glory to come during His earthly ministry. Didn’t He? He did so with His best friend, Lazarus. He dried pitiful Martha’s tears and raised His own confidant from a death-ridden sepulcher. And He did so as well with a little girl once, the daughter of Jairus, who was probably not too much older than my own little Freyja. Remember the story, friends? It made it into all three synoptic gospels, after all – you should. Jairus, a leader of the synagogue, he rushed to our Lord, the evangelists write, and he begged Him for help, as his daughter was near dying. But Jesus, calm and collected, consoled him immediately and enjoined him: “Be not afraid, Jairus. But only believe. Take courage and believe,” Our Lord said. And in the narrative, Jesus followed them back to the synagogue leader’s home where they were met with great weeping and wailing – for the girl was already gone, you see, she’d passed away while they were on their way, or so it seemed. And yet our Lord comforted the crowd upon entrance: “Why do you weep? This child is not dead, but merely asleep.” He then went over to the bed where the dead girl’s body was at rest and spoke to her confident words: “Talitha koum! Little girl, I say to you, get up!” And He took her by the hand, roused her from the casket of her childhood bed, and she was awakened to life again. She was asleep, sleeping the sleep of death, and our God beckoned her awake and alive. And that is precisely how it will be on the Last Day for us all, friends. My God will take my daughters by the hand and will say to them with a love only He could love: “Little girls, arise – get up.”

A kindly, kingly voice will lift them from their deepest slumber. And I’ll get to see them once again, after what will only seem like a short while. That is our hope. That’s my hope. And thank You for it, Lord Jesus.

Whatever suffering we now face, whatever opposition and oppression, whatever heartache, hunger, and haunt burdens our souls, none of it compares to the uplifting glory which awaits us. At present, Paul writes, our bodies groan for redemption. Our hearts, our minds, our members, we groan and sigh for that coming day when, as our Lord proclaims in the Parable of the Tares this morning, “the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.” Some of us here are younger, some of us older. Some of us have more physical pains and ailments than others, some more emotional, mental, and spiritual trauma. We’ve all lost loved ones. We’ve all been forced to speak bittersweet goodbyes. We know what joy is reserved for the saints when they pass from this life. We recognize and even confess that indeed precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints. But it still hurts us so much in this valley below, to have to say goodbye, to have to be apart, even for a short while, to have to let go. It is the same sadness and aching I feel in my inner being as a father when I cherish my daughters with hugs and kisses, knowing full well their earthly fate as sinners. It does grieve us terribly to have to lose those nearest to us someday. Yet we mustn’t ever forget what all those murmurs, groans, wails, and sighs of sorrow point toward – they point toward heaven, and ultimately, they point further forward to the resurrection of the dead, that most anticipated hope. Your loved ones in the faith are now merely sleeping, dear faithful. Be not afraid, but only believe. Take courage and believe.

And beloved, our God is so gracious, He gives us a taste of the glory to come even right here, right now. In this meal soon to be prepared just for you, for your forgiveness, your bodies and souls are not solely strengthened by it, but they are slowly being readied for eternity through it. This food, this bread and wine, body and blood of a Savior, makes ready your flesh for life incorruptible, a never-ending communion. It is, as St. Ignatius of Antioch used to say, the very medicine of immortality, what protects our souls from death, what prepares our bodies for the physical resurrection.

This is only a foretaste of the feast to come, but even here we savor life without end for a brief period of time, however much a mystery that is. And all those loved ones who’ve gone before us in the faith, your parents and partners, your friends and family and fellow Christians, they, too, commune with you in this place. What happens in this sanctuary may not look like much to the eyes of the world. But when you kneel here, you commune with the whole Body of Christ, the church on earth and in heaven, the Church Militant and the Church Triumphant. We are not alone. Here you are at one with them all – with all the saints from time immemorial. This side of heaven and the resurrection, nothing at all brings you closer to God and the faithful departed than this blessed supper. No nearer my God could I possibly be than in this foretaste of eternity.

So whatever stony grief we now meet, just know that it only lasts for a little bit of time. That’s the message this morning. It is here now but soon gone. As that chief psalmist, king David, once sang: “weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.” The glory to come, which we catch a fleeting glimpse of within the walls of the holy Christian church, it surpasses all trial and tribulation here below. Our hardship, however hard it may be, is nothing in comparison to the jubilation at dawn, to that exultation on the horizon. All the little Freyja’s of the world, baptized into the name of the only God, one and yet three persons, will be raised at the end of the age. And mine with them. And all the little ones of the faithful who fell asleep still in the womb, they’ll be wakened, too. All your tears will be wiped away, all things made new. Each day we inch nearer to God. And one of these days, there will be no more distance at all, no separation, no more pain – only rejoicing and intimacy. In the late nineteenth century, the good bishop of Exeter, Church of England, Edward Henry Bickersteth, dared to add a sixth and final stanza to Sarah Adam’s famous hymn. And honestly, I think she would have approved. It reads: “There in my Father's home, safe and at rest, There in my Saviour’s love, perfectly blest; Age after age to be, nearer my God to Thee, Nearer, my God, to Thee, nearer to Thee!” All thanks and praise for our simple faith, our childlike hope, and our truest consolation as pilgrims here in a land of bitter disappointment, all thanks and praise be unto God forever and always. In the Name of Jesus. Amen.