

HOPE FOR THE WORLD

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, April 29, 2018
based on Romans 8:18-25; Revelation 21:1-7***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a spring sermon series entitled, "Fulfill Your Destiny." In the previous two installments of this series, we have considered what God's Word says about destiny, as for example when Paul says, "God destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ . . . In Christ we have an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of God who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will." (Ephesians 1:5,11) We have a God-given destiny, which does not mean that God has predetermined the course of our life but rather that there is an intended goal for life. The goal, as Paul expresses it in Ephesians, and elsewhere, is to be children of God, sharing in the love of God, now and forever.

All this has to do very much with our own personal destiny. But is there also a larger destiny, for all of humanity, for the whole of creation? Is there hope for the world? This will be our focus this morning. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

This past week was the usual mix of serious evil and inspiring good. In Toronto, a hate-filled man drove a van into pedestrians and killed ten people. Meanwhile, in Louisiana, on a basketball court outside a middle school, a group of teenage boys took a knee out of respect, not for a player who was injured on their court, but for a funeral procession of someone they did not know, that was passing by. People in the funeral procession were so impressed that kids would stop their game to show respect to strangers that they took and posted a photo that went viral.

The world is a swirl of good and evil, and has been so for eons. So are we getting anywhere? Genuine moral or spiritual progress is hard to see. Certainly there are bright spots and humanity has advanced in some ways, but there is still terrible evil in the world.

Nevertheless, the Biblical message is one of great hope. It is not only the hope that we might each one day through the grace of Christ find victory over sin and evil and death and enter at last into heaven. The full Biblical hope is that the whole of creation is moving toward a positive destiny. Paul gives expression to this in that passage from Romans, where he says, "The creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility . . . in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption." (Romans 8:19-23)

Paul speaks here of all of creation suffering on account of human sinfulness, which we can certainly see, for example, in our human effects on the environment; and he pictures creation longing for humanity to get right with God. But the extraordinary message is that in

fact God has a redemptive plan for humanity that includes all of creation. We have not yet arrived at our destiny—"the whole of creation has been groaning in travail," says Paul, and we also, as we struggle with our imperfection and fallenness. But the overarching message in our passage in Romans 8 is that God has a positive future for the whole earth, and therefore we have hope.

Right here is one of the distinctive aspects of the Biblical message, which sets Christianity apart from many other world religions. It has been common in the history of religion for people to have a cyclical view of the universe—with the idea that everything goes around and around in circles. There's spring, summer, fall, winter, and, finally, one day, spring again. There's war, peace, war, and peace. There's birth, growth, decay, and death, and then a new life is born again. Around and around all things go. The best hope for anyone is to be able to escape this futile cycle and enter somehow into personal immortality. Sometimes Christians look at things this way—the world is a lost cause; we're just looking to get to heaven.

But the Bible actually presents a very different picture. It is that God is taking God's whole project—the world God made with humanity at its pinnacle—toward a positive destiny. In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, which we considered previously in this series, Paul spoke of how "God has a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth." (Ephesians 1:10) The Biblical story is the story of the unfolding of this plan, and the Bible concludes by pointing to where the plan is going. At the end of the book of Revelation, in the passage we heard earlier, there is a vision which says, "I saw a new heaven and a new earth . . . and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling of God is among people. God will dwell with them; they will be his people, God himself will be with them; God will wipe every tear from their eyes, and death will be no more.'" (Revelation 21:1,3,4) Notice how the plan is all-encompassing, including a renewal of the whole earth as well as the promise of heavenly eternity. The details are intentionally left vague, indicated only by symbols in other verses in Revelation, because the fullness of God's plan is beyond our comprehension. But the basic shape of our intended destiny is clear. It may seem at times that the world is a lost cause and that we are all hopelessly in bondage to brokenness and death. But in fact God through Christ has acted for our redemption and is leading us and the world toward a bright and eternal future.

Richard Mouw, professor and president emeritus at Fuller Theological Seminary, told a story once about how he likes to read suspense novels—the sort that you might pick up at an airport book store. He noted that, in the typical course of these novels, about the time you get to the middle of the book, the hero is being pursued by shadowy enemies, he has lost his job, his family has been kidnapped, he can't trust the police, and a half a dozen people are trying to kill him. At that point, Dr. Mouw says, he flips to the last page of the book. I think that would ruin it, but Dr. Mouw says he can't stand the suspense. He flips to the last page, not to read the whole conclusion, but to just scan to be sure that the hero is still there, and his

wife and family are there; and then with that reassurance he can dive back into the harrowing middle of the book. Dr. Mouw went on to note that the Christian life is like this. The world is a mess, we are surrounded by evils, we feel threatened; but we have seen the last page. We have seen the last page in the Risen Christ, revealing to us the sure promise of life beyond death. We have seen the last page in the closing verses of the book of Revelation and the glorious picture of a new heaven and new earth. We know where God is taking us, and with the assurance of a bright future we can persevere through the challenges of the present.

This kind of perspective is particularly important when we are dealing with serious troubles. Paul wrote his letter to the Romans during the latter part of his life, when he was dealing with major obstacles and frustrations in his work as a missionary, and dealing with some serious health ailments. But he was able to say, at the start of our Romans passage, “I consider that the sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” (Romans 8:18) We are able to endure through even very significant trials when we know where God is leading us.

So we are called to take hold of the promised future that we have through Christ. But what then does this mean for how we live now in the present? Sometimes Christians have gotten so focused on what God might do in the future that they have simply neglected the needs of the present. This is one of the themes that I address in the book we recently published entitled, “Hope in a Time of Chaos and Evil,” which is a journey through the visions of Revelation. Often in recent years, people have wanted to treat the book of Revelation as a set of predictions and timetables for the end, with the idea that the clock is ticking, and the end-times are at hand. The implication is that the present age is beyond repair; Christians just need to get ready for the Second Coming of Christ which will soon be upon us.

This kind of thinking is actually a grievous distortion of the message of the book of Revelation. If you want to know the message really is, you can get a copy of the book that will take you through it all! We just got a new shipment this week. Suffice it to say that when Jesus talked about the future, he said, “No one knows the day or the hour.” (Mark 13:32) He thus led his followers away from making predictions or presuming to know anything about God’s timetable. He did not tell his disciples to get ready for the end of the world; in his last instructions to his disciples, he sent them out into the world, to make disciples of all nations, and to share the love of Christ. [*Jesus said, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel (Mark 16:15) and make disciples of all nations. (Matthew 28:19) This is my commandment, that you love one another (John 15:17)*] For Jesus, God’s future is not a place to which we can escape but the goal toward which we now are to be at work to lead the world.

Dr. Peter Storey, a professor emeritus at Duke Divinity School, who spent most of his career as a Methodist minister in South Africa, where he was very involved in the struggle against apartheid, was once asked what he thought about the Second Coming of Christ, when he thought the Second Coming would be. He said he imagined himself going up to

Jesus and asking Jesus about the Second Coming, and he imagined Jesus would reply, "Second coming? Where have you been? I'm still waiting for people to get serious about my first visit."

Taking hold of God's future does not mean that we abandon the present to just look to the future. It means we let the light of God's future shine upon the present. If we know that God is leading us into eternal fellowship with God and loving community with one another, we seek to live today in fellowship with God and loving community with one another. If we know that God's future includes the redemption of all creation, we seek today to care for the earth and be good stewards of all that we have. If we know that God desires to draw all people to Himself, we reach out with God's grace and love to everyone today. We realize that we are a part of the plan by which God is bringing the world toward a positive destiny.

So the Christian hope is not simply the hope that I might one day get my ticket to heaven and escape the sinking ship that is planet earth. The hope is that what God began when God created the world is moving toward a bright destiny. We cannot yet see all the details of that future. As Paul said, "Hope that is seen is not hope." (Romans 8:24) "But," he went on to say, "We wait for it with patience." (Romans 8:25) So we fulfill our destiny as we trust in God and open ourselves to God's redemptive love in Jesus Christ, and as we share in how God's Spirit is at work right now in the world for God's everlasting purposes.