Watching and Waiting
(Romans 8:18-25)

Long ago, in a denomination far, far away I once heard a preacher warn us that “we can be so heavenly minded that we’re no earthly good.” What he was referring to is the danger of getting so caught up in “being saved”, and “going to heaven” (like, “Hey, I don’t know about you but my ticket’s punched and I know where I’m going”), that we forget that we’re put here for a purpose, and that purpose has a lot to do with loving God and our neighbor. In other words, there’s a danger of becoming spiritual escapists.

I completely agree with that preacher. But there’s also an opposite danger, and that is: We can become so earthly minded that we lose our heavenly hope. Church can become a social work club (or for that matter just a social club), and we forget that Jesus rose from the dead, and promises us an unimaginably wonderful future in the fullness of his presence. Either mistake is costly, and both are completely unnecessary. In fact they’re both a result of an incomplete way of interpreting just what it is that Jesus accomplished for us.

Today’s reading from Paul’s Letter to the Romans helps to set us straight on some of this in a few very condensed verses. In fact, when I set out to write a homily, I usually grab the yellow highlighter and mark the key words and phrases. In Romans 8:18-25 the whole thing turned yellow. I don’t know what happened. There wasn’t a single unhighlighted gap in the whole passage.

Anyway, the point that Paul makes, both here and elsewhere, is that flesh and spirit are both part of God’s good creation, and are both on the same continuum, or at least they will be in the promised new heavens and new earth, when creation lives fully into what it was always meant to be. When Paul separates flesh and spirit, even earlier in today’s reading, he’s not in any way implying that spirit is superior to flesh, or that our destiny is to get out of these nasty little bodies and fly away forever to a purely spiritual place called heaven. We’ll see this clearly as we go through the text.

Now, here I’d like to make a little segue which, if you’re like me, might help all this to become a little more accessible, because some of Paul’s words are pretty hard to relate to in our own time. He’s talking about things that we’ll one day see, but which, for now, are invisible to us.

It’s tempting to dismiss this kind of thing as superstition, but interestingly, cutting edge science is beginning to help us to actually imagine it, based on some pretty intriguing theories. The details are way too complicated to go into in a homily, but the bottom line is that physicists are entertaining the possibility of (guess what) an unseen realm actually existing in dimensions that for now are undetectable from this material plane. I’m inclined to wonder whether this may be what the scriptures call the spiritual realms, the heavenly realms. Who knows?
Michele and I went to see Wonder Woman earlier this week, and before you snicker, I want to say I thought it was a good movie. It had some refreshing and curiously Christian-looking messages embedded in a decent plot and some very fine acting. And there are a couple of scenes that subtly depict the thin border between our realm and another realm, and it helped me to visualize how “close” these actually are to each other, in a sense. N. T. Wright writes about this, and indeed, several New Testament writers seem to infer this as well.

And what Paul’s writing about here in Romans has to do with the coming together of heaven and earth on the Lord’s day, the day when Jesus returns to this earth. So let’s take a look. We’re going to start with verse 18, where Paul talks about our present realities, as compared with those of our future. He says, “I believe the sufferings of this present time (each and every kind of suffering) aren’t even worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.”

Here Paul is sending a message of encouragement to the hurting, along with an enticing invitation to hear a pretty startling message. There’s a promise here that’s meant to bring a few goose bumps. In effect, he answers the question, “Is this all there is?” with the revelation that a great glory is about to be revealed in us in these last days. This is most decidedly not all there is!

And in verse 19 Paul frames this as something that will be cosmic in scale. The destiny awaiting humanity is intertwined somehow with the destiny of the entire cosmos. This is a mind-blower. He says, “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God.” It’s almost like the creation itself feels something in the air. The Greek word rendered as ‘eager longing’ (I won’t try to pronounce it for you—it has seven syllables and I’d probably injure myself), evokes the image of craning your neck to see something very exciting that’s coming.

It reminds me of an old song by one of my favorite bands, Yes, called “Circus of Heaven”, which is about a father and his son watching the heavenly parade begin to pass by on “the very last day”. It ends up getting tangled up with some weird New Age theology, but the song evokes the excitement of a child hearing the band coming down the street and craning his neck to see the big parade.

So creation itself is stirred from slumber into alert anticipation, because the children of God are about to be revealed. What this is referring to is that glorious time when God’s children fully become what they (what we) were always meant to be. Darkness, sin and self-serving become a thing of the past. Fear and hatred are shed from us like a lifeless husk, revealing a glory radiant with God’s love and beauty. That is our future, and the cosmos itself has taken note.

In verses 20-21 Paul explains the backdrop of this transformation. He says that creation has been subjected to futility, and that one day it will be set free from its bondage to decay. This hints at a great, spiritual conflict back in the dim mists of prehistory that affected all of creation, especially, perhaps, this earth. The story of this cosmic battle is
fleshed out elsewhere in scripture, and it continues to affect our world and the human race. In fact, according to the scriptures it’s the original force behind sin and death, and it’s the very reason Jesus came to this earth and accomplished his work for us on the Cross.

Within this there’s a reference to another strange idea. And that is that, in the long run, creation was never really meant to “wind down.” You may have heard of the law of entropy. What entropy is, is the tendency for all things to deteriorate, and eventually become inert and uniform. Stars burn out and go dark. Mountains erode. Houses eventually fall apart. Office photocopiers break down. (Don’t get me started.) The grass withers and the flowers fade. People age and die.

What Paul seems to be saying here is that, when our redemption is completed, that is, when Jesus returns, it’s all going to change. The new heavens and new earth will no longer be subjected to entropy. It’ll be built to last. No more falling apart. The Second Law of Thermodynamics will be struck down by the real Supreme Court—the court of heaven.

I’m telling you, this one verse is chock full of crucial content. Because right after Paul talks about creation’s coming freedom from decay, he links this to the freedom of the glory of God’s children. Now what in the world does this mean? Well, actually, Paul’s line of thought is impeccable here. It’s not random. Think about what’s different about God’s children.

When we believe, we’re given not only the gifts of forgiveness, and redemption, and eternal life, we’re given something else. We’re given the very indwelling presence of God himself, through the Holy Spirit. God is within us. He’s merged with us and we with him. That’s the new reality. So the glory of the children of God is the glory of God himself.

Paul writes in his second letter to the Corinthians, “While we are still in this tent (our body), we groan under our burden, because we wish not to be unclothed but to be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.” The Greek word for “guarantee” actually means a down payment. The Spirit is a down payment for the glory of the resurrection life, that is, our life in new bodies that aren’t subject to decay. And the same will be true of the new heavens and new earth. Can you imagine anything more wondrous than this? We and the cosmos we inhabit will be free together. This is so big and so comprehensive that only God could do it.

So Paul continues with the theme of this new kind of life in verse 23. He says, “Not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.” What he means here by adoption is the redemption of our bodies. What was begun in our spirit will be completed in our bodies. The down payment will be paid in full. Heaven will infuse us, so that our
material bodies are transformed into what Paul calls incorruptible flesh. We’ll have the best of both worlds, spirit and flesh in the new heavens and the new earth.

I, for one, am very encouraged by this. To be honest, the idea of floating about disembodied in some ethereal realm of vague bliss just doesn’t appeal to me very much. I like the feel of dirt between my toes, and the smell of pine trees in summer, and the sound of house finches singing in the morning, and textured mountains standing against the blue sky. I like this body and all the sensory gifts God has given it.

So the idea of that which God made good, becoming unimaginably better, sends a chill through me, and I know I’m not alone. It’s what inspired J. R. R. Tolkien to write, through Gandalf the wizard, of going into the next life through a grey rain curtain, and seeing white shores, “and beyond, a far green country under a swift sunrise.”

And it’s what inspired C. S. Lewis, in the last book of The Chronicles of Narnia, to write these words when his protagonists enter the new Narnia: “It was the Unicorn who summed up what everyone was feeling. He stamped his right fore-hoof on the ground and neighed, and then he cried: ‘I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now. The reason why we loved the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this. Bree-hee-hee! Come further up, come further in!’”

So, do you see why Paul says we groan in side, awaiting our transformation? And do you see why he says that the cosmos awaits longingly, craning its neck, to see the glory that’s coming? This longing we all have for something we’re almost even afraid to wish for, out of fear of disappointment, was placed in us by God himself, and he fully intends for us not to be disappointed! It’s on its way. He’s on his way. Do you believe that this morning?

But instead of trying to run toward it, Paul says we wait for the parade to come to us in its own time. We can’t see it yet, so we wait with hopeful patience. And hope requires something from us. It’s an investment. Paul says (verse 24), “Hope that’s seen isn’t hope! Who hopes for what we already see?” Hope has everything to do with trusting God’s promises.

When we first reached out to the Lord we didn’t clearly see all the benefits. But our hope was rewarded with salvation and new life. And similarly, our hope in this time, a time that for many is marked by suffering, will one day be rewarded with glory. This is Paul’s message of encouragement to the Romans, and it’s a message that’s never been more relevant than right here, right now.

So, may our hope be tempered with patience, yet may it stir within us an irresistible yearning to serve God and our neighbor; and spread the good news of God’s love, and the good news of a glorious future secured for us by the gift of his Son Jesus. Amen.