

SERMON TITLE: “Everything Will Be All Right”

TEXT: Romans 8:18-25

PREACHED AT: Neighbourhood Church

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We have arrived at the First Sunday of Advent. This morning, I had to put a new calendar up because the Season of Advent is the beginning of the Christian year!

Sometimes people in the office poke fun at me because of my Christian calendar, but there is something kind of neat about our year beginning with anticipating the coming of Jesus.

We have also arrived at the last Sunday of our sermon series on our MB Confession of Faith.

We have covered a lot of ground over the last 11 weeks or so—we’ve talked about who God is (Father, Son, Spirit), what the church is, and what our response as human beings ought to be based on what God has done (mission, peacemaking, discipleship).

Last week Alastair kind of summed up what our entire COF is about: loving God, and loving neighbour.

Whatever else can be said about Mennonites throughout history, one thing we have always emphasized is that what you say you believe has to be lived out in everyday life. And Alastair gave us a good reminder of this last week.

Lots of really smart people from across Canada and around the world have put a lot of effort into putting together the words for our COF, but at the end of the day the words in a COF are not the goal. The goal is people like you and me following Jesus by loving our neighbours in the cities and towns God has placed us.

So thank you Alastair. And incidentally, it’s going to be tough to come up with anything even remotely as humorous or horrifying as your story about the bats!

EVERYTHING WILL BE ALL RIGHT?

So, today we end our series on our MB COF—very appropriately given that Advent is upon us—with hope.

Start with a scenario familiar with parents (those who are not currently parents of young children will have to use either your memory or your imaginations!):

It’s 3 am. It’s the middle of a busy week, and you got to bed late. The kids took forever to settle down and you had lots of unfinished work to take care of in the evening. An early morning looms large on an ever-shrinking horizon.

And then you hear a sound from the other room. It starts as a little whimper, and before long it is a full-throated sobbing. You stumble groggily out of bed to comfort your child.

“What’s wrong?” you ask, rubbing the sleep out of your eyes. “I had a bad dream,” is the response.

Of course, parents will know that bad dreams come in all different kinds of shapes and sizes—monsters, bullies, spiders, you name it. In the middle of the night, in the dark, all kinds of things can seem scary!

So what do we do? Well, we rub their backs, we pray with them, we try to get them back to sleep.

There’s something else we almost always do—or at least I almost always do. We recite a very specific phrase:

It’s OK. Everything’s going to be all right.

Have you ever stopped to think about why, exactly, we do this? What do we mean when we say these words to our kids in the middle of the night?

Well, you may be surprised to know that this little phrase—“everything will be all right” has been subjected to scholarly analysis.

Peter Berger is a sociologist and in one of his books (*A Rumor of Angels*) he talks about how a crucial part of a parent’s job is that of “world-maintenance.” Kids need to believe that the world is well-ordered, stable, good and safe in order to grow and realize their potential. Unless they can trust that they are safe and that the world is predictable, their social development will be hindered.

Parents have an obligation to provide such a conception of the world. I think we would find it problematic if a parent were to tell his frightened child “You have good reasons to be fearful and afraid! The world is a terrifying place! Your existence is fragile and tenuous, and ultimately all that you will love and hold dear will be swallowed up and negated by death.”

So kids need to believe that everything will be all right. But it’s one thing for a belief about the world to be *useful*. It’s another for it to be *true*. Is it true that everything will be all right?

Well, when we look out at the world, it seems like the obvious answer is “no!” So many things do not, in fact, turn out all right!

For our kids, this realization came when they were around five years old and we were living in Vancouver. One of their kindergarten classmates was a little boy named Peter. Peter’s family had just moved to Vancouver from China and they attended our church.

One day, Peter's dad came home from getting groceries and Peter was excited to see him and he ran across the road to meet him and was struck by a car. Peter died shortly thereafter.

Our kids came to realize that Peter wasn't coming back. Everything was *not* all right.

This probably wasn't their first lesson that the world can be a sad and scary place, but it was certainly one of the more vivid ones.

As we get older, we see even more clearly that everything is *not* all right.

Many of us are familiar with the story from couple of weeks ago: a man from Nanaimo was visiting Mexico (not far from where Naomi and I were enjoying a holiday, in fact) when there was an explosion in the hotel lobby due to some kind of a natural gas leak. He, along with four other Canadians and two Mexicans were killed. He had a brand new wife and a young daughter.

Right when I was beginning this sermon, I got a phone call from someone in the church indicating that there had been a very unexpected and tragic death in their family.

There are no shortage of examples. Each of us could add our own list.

Everything isn't all right.

BIG HOPE. PATIENT HOPE

So. We have these two realities:

1. We live in a world where we need to *believe* that things will be all right in order to develop in healthy ways, where we are freed to give of ourselves, and to trust and love.
2. The world we live in gives all of us plenty of evidence that everything is *not* all right.

What do we do with this?

The text I've chosen this morning is Romans 8:18-25:

⁸ I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ²³ Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

Many of Paul's letters are written for very specific reasons regarding very specific challenges faced by this or that church. In Galatians, for example, he's angry about a group of Jews who are teaching that to be a good Christian you have to follow the Jewish law.

The letter to the Romans (and it *is* a letter, albeit a very long one!) is a "big picture" letter.

Paul did not found the church in Rome, but he is writing to them anyway to teach them about many of the important things about the faith: how Jews and Gentiles have been brought together; how salvation is by grace alone, the inadequacy of the law to save, the role the Holy Spirit plays in the church, the need for followers of Jesus to be transformed to live effectively in the present. It's a letter that is massive in its scope!

Many commentators locate this passage as a part of the climax of the whole letter. In this one short passage, Paul sums up the whole drama of God's story.

1. He acknowledges that everything is not all right.

Paul's language in this passage is very vivid—it is the language of *groaning*.

Last week during a hockey game I collided with another player and bruised my ribs. For the rest of the week, every snuffle, every cough, every movement was a little bit painful. My kids would jump up to give me a hug or something and they would hear their dad groaning 😊.

We groan when things aren't right. It is an expression of dissatisfaction with the present and longing for improved circumstances.

Paul uses this language with the image of childbirth and applies it to *all of creation*. It is painful for new life to come into being, isn't it? This is true of biological life as well as character formation and spiritual life. Often there is a lot of pain before good things come!

And here Paul teaches us that it is not just human beings who groan, but all of creation.

In some mysterious way, creation itself is longing for everything to be all right.

God made the world with very specific intentions—for human beings to have a very specific role as grateful stewards of a good creation. We have not done this, and our world suffers because of this. Paul describes this as creation being “subjected to frustration” not by its own choice but by the will of the one who subjected it.

To put it bluntly, God created a world where it was possible for things to get messed up. And we have done so.

So, just like us, Paul knows, the church in Rome knows that everything is not all right.

2. He assures us that liberation, freedom and hope are coming.

But Paul also knows that the story isn't over yet. Paul is convinced that everything *will be* all right.

And so creation waits. For what? For “the sons of God to be revealed.”

In other words, for the proper relationship between God, human beings, and the world to be restored.

This is a *big picture* of hope here. This is a long ways from souls floating up to heaven and playing harps on clouds for eternity.

At times, I think, MBs and, perhaps, Christians in general have had too *small* a view of hope. At times, we have thought that “hope” meant simply going to heaven as individuals when we die.

There have been times in MB history where we have thought of our job as to be a kind of “holy huddle” whose only job was to survive this evil world without being contaminated too much by it so that we could escape it into heaven one day.

But this is not the hope of Scripture. It is certainly not the hope of our passage this morning.

In Romans 8, we get a vision of God redeeming and restoring *all* things. He made it all, he wants it all back, and one day he will get it all back. This is the hope that Paul is talking about in Romans 8.

Romans 8:21:

[T]he creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

Somehow, the redemption of human beings and the restoration of our proper role in God's world, leads to the liberation of the whole world.

Everything put back together again as it was intended to be.

All that is good and pure and true and beautiful and praiseworthy and excellent will find its place in God's new world, while everything that is false and ugly and deceitful and impure will fall away.

This is a big and beautiful hope.

3. **He encourages us to be patient.**

As we already heard (from Caleb?) in the reading this morning, waiting can be hard!

Kids have a hard time waiting for good things, and so do grown-ups.

But Paul reminds us that patience is an important part of the Christian life.

I was reading a book by a writer named Tomáš Halík this week who spent many years ministering in an underground church in the Czech Republic during the officially atheist years of communism.

After the darkness of that time, he concluded that the main difference between Christians and atheists is not primarily a difference in intelligence or morality or even spiritual openness. The main difference was patience. Christians were more patient.

Both look at a world where everything is not all right, but Christians haven't given up yet. Patient hope, according to this author, is one of the best witnesses we can give and show in a world that gives up on God too easily.

It won't always look like everything will be all right. Paul knows this. But Paul reminds us that "hope that is seen is no hope at all (8:24)."

In a sense, he is saying we shouldn't expect it to look like everything is all right, because it's *not*.

Christianity is not about pretending the world is better than it is or that we are better than we are!

The world is messed up and we are sinful and broken people.

But each year, the Advent season reminds us that God has entered our mess and has begun the cleaning up process. One day, the mess will be gone. Until then, as Paul says in verse 25, "we wait for it patiently."

And we should remember that there is a reason why we wait, even if it doesn't always make perfect sense to us:

2 Peter 3:8-9:

With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.⁹
The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness.
Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

This time of groaning is also an expression of God's mercy—God wants as few people to perish as possible.

God is patient too, it seems.

GROANING ISN'T FOREVER

Our sermon series on our MB Confession of Faith ends where Advent begins. Hope.

Here's what our COF says:

The Church belongs to the in-breaking Kingdom of God. The citizens of the Kingdom model an alternative community, challenging godless values of this world's cultures. The people of God join in the struggle for justice, yet are prepared to suffer persecution knowing that sin, guilt and death will not prevail. Confident in this hope the church engages in mission until the Lord returns, empowered by the certainty that God will create a new heaven and a new earth.

Advent is the season where we celebrate God coming into our groaning world and giving us hope.

This week I read an article on the difference between optimism and hope.

Optimism is based on what the author called "cause and effect" thinking. "We draw conclusions about the future on the basis of the experience with the past and the present, guided by the belief that events can be explained as the effects of previous causes. Since 'this' has happened, we conclude that 'that' is likely to happen."

We are optimistic about the economy if the government does this or that. We are optimistic about our kids' prospects if they show evidence of studying hard and making good choices. We are optimistic about our romantic prospects if so and so calls us back or asks us out. We are optimistic about a job opportunity if the position looks like a good fit for us and we know the person doing the hiring. Etc, etc. The list could go on.

In each case, optimism is the result of specific things in the past and the present.

What about hope? Here's what the article says:

Hope, unlike optimism, is independent of people's circumstances. Hope is not based on the possibilities of the situation and on correct extrapolation about the future. Hope is grounded in the faithfulness of God and therefore on the effectiveness of God's promise....

Optimism is based on the possibilities of things *as they have come to be*; hope is based on the **possibilities of God** *irrespective of how things are*. Hope can spring up in the valley of the shadow of death; indeed, it is there that it becomes truly manifest... Hope thrives even in situations which, for... cause-and-effect thinking, can elicit only utter hopelessness. Why? Because hope is based on God's coming into the darkness to dispel it with divine light.

And hope is not passive. As our COF states, hope is what motivates our engagement in the world. Hope is what drives our mission.

Hope is what leads us to be the kind of neighbours Alastair was talking about last Sunday. The last line of our COF says:

Confident in this hope the church engages in mission until the Lord returns, empowered by the certainty that God will create a new heaven and a new earth

Hope is *empowering*. Hope gives us strength. Hope helps us persevere in faith and love.

I don't know the details of every person here's life, but I do know that all of our lives are characterized by groaning. We might groan differently, and in response to different things at different parts along our journey. But none of us are given a life free of groaning.

Here, at the beginning of Advent, we need to hear that our groaning, and the groaning of all creation is temporary. It will not last forever. God's story is not over yet.

Advent is about the God who comes near to bring his people hope!

There is a big hope that we are a part of! All of creation being renewed and restored. And we get to participate in this, as followers of Jesus.

May God help us in this Advent season, and throughout the year, to be a people who do not give up easily.

May God give us confidence, patience, and joy to live into the hope to which we have been called.

Amen

