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Pentecost VIII & Proper 11
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Text: Romans 8:18 – 27
Title: Holy Spirit, Our Intercessor

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. In this sermon series, we have been looking at the big picture with the help of St. Paul's epistle to the Romans. The greater story of the presence and work of the Triune God. We have seen Christ, our Deliverer, rescuing us from our sin. We have seen God, our Father, claiming us as His own children. Today, we see God, the Holy Spirit at work in our lives. In Psalm 139, the psalmist asks, "Where shall I go from your Spirit?" In answer, he meditates on the places he might go. If he goes to the heights of heaven, God's Spirit is there. If he goes to the depths of Sheol, God's Spirit is there. If he goes to the farthest parts of the sea, God's Spirit guides him and holds him fast even there. The Spirit of God overwhelms the psalmist. He sees the Spirit every place he goes. And that has not changed at all for God's people in history.

In our text today, Paul invites us to see how we are caught right now in the middle of God's greater vision and work. Paul begins by saying, "The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rom. 8:18). Suffering and glory held together in this moment. Our present world is filled with suffering, but God had made a perfect, beautiful creation. Wherever you looked, you could see God's fingerprints and it was beautiful and it was Very Good. But Adam and Eve brought sin and suffering into God's creation. They disobeyed God and brought His curse into the world. "The day you eat of it, you shall die," God had said and now God came and subjected the beauty of creation to the bondage of decay. That punishment was set in stone and only God could free His creatures and bring about a New Creation. This is the glory that Paul has seen in Jesus Christ. The beginning of a

New Creation and New Life that is everlasting. Jesus Christ is the promise of a New and Never-ending Life. God has begun His work, and it is only a matter of time before the full glory of God is revealed.

So Paul writes to the Romans to help them stand in this moment, and his words help us stand here today. In Christ, we have been made into the children of God. His death has destroyed the power of sin over you, and His resurrection has brought you the promise of a new creation. Yet what we are is not fully seen and experienced in this world. Take a look at God's people, Paul says, and you will see a people, imprisoned and suffering, desiring to be free. So we stand between the sufferings of this present world and the glory yet to be revealed. And in this place, the apostle Paul asks us to meditate on our situation and to trust in the work of the Holy Spirit.

In this situation, we can see deep suffering among God's people. In America, Christianity used to be a strong cultural force. Prayer was said in public schools. At graduation time, most high schools would hold baccalaureate services led by ministers. In December, one could find a nativity prominently displayed in the public square. That connection between Christianity and American culture is dying. We find ourselves being marginalized. Pushed further and further away from public notice, written into a smaller and smaller corner of the public square. It looks like we are losing strength, like we will not survive. Some might even wonder if God has abandoned us. Unfortunately, some American Christians have confused the power of God with the powers of this world. To them, the strength of God and His church are directly related to the strength of America as a nation. Now, as American culture turns against Christianity, Christians wonder about the love and blessing of God. Has God abandoned his people? How can we be God's people, the church, in a non-Christian nation? St. Paul's words offer hope. Listen to the apostle Paul as he describes God's Love and blessing in this letter.

Paul knew the suffering status of Christians in this world. In Rome, Christianity was not an established and legal religion. It confronted barriers to the expression of its faith. Christians sought to worship one God in a city that had many gods and goddesses. Christians sought to confess "Jesus is Lord" in a city that confessed "Caesar is Lord." Christians worshipped Jesus of Nazareth who had been associated with treason, and who was publicly tried and condemned and crucified. This suffering Jesus ruled over a suffering people. Christians were marginalized. Pushed off to the side. They were meeting in small homes rather than huge and beautiful churches. Soon, they would experience persecution. They would carry their dead into caves and tunnels carved under ground and hold worship services there in the dark, in the place of the dead.

"If I make my bed in Sheol," the psalmist cries, "You are there." When persecution shoves you into the darkness of death, into that place where you open your eyes but you cannot see God, God is still there. That is Paul's message. The Spirit of God is always there, even in the darkest places of death. Open your ears and you will hear Him. You will hear the Spirit of God, crying out in this place with you, and crying out for you.

This is what Paul is revealing to the church in this part of his letter. The Spirit of God cries out for God's people. The world is groaning as it awaits the revelation of the sons of God and the New Creation. God's people are groaning as they are trapped in positions of slavery and rejection by this world. But the apostle Paul opens our ears so we can hear a different groan. The groaning of the Holy Spirit, who is interceding for you. Paul writes, "Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God." In these words, Paul joins groans with a glorious vision.

On the one hand, the Spirit intercedes for us with groans too deep for words. There are times when we are at a loss for words. The suffering we have seen in this world, the longing we have for the New Creation is so strong and so deep that we cannot find words to express it. What do you say when you go to a child's funeral? You stand there, next to her parents, your heart filled with groans that words cannot express. What do you say when your wife tells you the doctor said it was stage 4 cancer? How do you respond when an earthquake strikes in Haiti, a hurricane in New Orleans, or a tornado in Ringle? The broken edges of this fallen world cut deep and our human language is limited. It is too short to reach down and touch our sorrow much less grab a hold of it and put it into words. We have enough trouble speaking to one another, and we have even more trouble speaking to God. At moments like this, Paul asks us to listen and to hear the Spirit's groaning for us. The Spirit takes our suffering and puts it into prayer. The groans of the Spirit, however, are joined to glory. The glorious desires of God for His people.

In a similar way, Paul talks about the glorious vision of God seen by the Holy Spirit. Paul says that "the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God" (Rom. 8:27). The Spirit knows not only the deep mysteries of our suffering. He also knows the deep mysteries of God. God's vision of a New Creation. You have been joined by Holy Baptism to God's New Creation in Christ. God is at work in Him and in you. He is shaping your life, forming your faith, working in small and sometimes painful ways as He continues His promise to bring about the kingdom. We cannot see this plan of God. We cannot see His overall design. Sometimes, we can't even see the smallest works that He does as He leads this world to the day of the New Creation. But the Holy Spirit is our Comforter and Counselor. The Spirit knows the mind of God and the Spirit knows the suffering of God's people. And, as Paul proclaims, the Spirit joins these two into prayer. Groans and glory are held together by the Spirit for us in prayer. When we stand

before God, frozen in time, living in this world and yet sure of another. When we experience suffering and find ourselves not sure how to put all of this into words, the Spirit Himself speaks for us. He brings our petitions to the throne of the Father. Our suffering touches God's Glory in the words of the Spirit and we trust His work because of God's Love made certain for us in the death and resurrection of His Son.

How much greater is that Glory of David's son and David's Lord! Our Lord, Jesus Christ, the Ruler of the New Creation. In Him, God the Father will bring all things to completion. He is the one who stands there, ruling over all at the end of this world and the beginning of the New Creation. Paul can barely see this, but he knows that it is there and so he offers us that same hope. Hope that lives and breathes through the prayers of the Holy Spirit. Although we suffer in this world, we are heirs of the next. The Spirit knows the mind of God, and He hears our cries and prays for us according to God's Will. Christianity may be losing cultural power in America, but it is not losing spiritual force. God is alive, and He rules over all creation. He sees your life, He knows your suffering, and He has sent His Spirit to be here with and for you. The Holy Spirit listens to your groans, He sees God's greater vision, and He puts your life into prayer according to God's Holy Will. So, wherever you go in this world, you are never far from God's Spirit. At home, at work, falling asleep, or rising to go to work, the Holy Spirit sees and intercedes for you according to the Will of God. Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.