

## **"Enlarged in the Waiting"** **Romans 8:18-28, 37-38**

Most of us know what a gargoyle is, but if you had asked me as a kid, I would have said it has something to do with a gargle of mouthwash. But the gargoyle spelled g-a-r-g-o-y-l-e refers to an ugly, grotesque figure, part human, part animal, a figure used as a water spout on buildings in medieval times. Gargoyles served as the end of rain gutters, with water shooting out grotesque, gaping mouths. This is where the name comes from, an old French word "gargoule" (ga-gou-ee), meaning throat, a word from which we do get the familiar word "gargle." Many of the great cathedrals of the world have gargoyles, like Notre Dame that I once visited years ago. The gargoyles are carved into the architecture, clustered around steeples and towers. We may wonder why these fascinating creatures are placed alongside steeples on the cathedrals.

British journalist Malcolm Muggeridge, who converted to the Christian faith late in life, once gave an interview on BBC, reflecting on the relationship between steeple and gargoyle. He concluded that steeples symbolize God, or at least the human quest for God, whereas gargoyles symbolize humankind's baseness, its petty, puny quest for the holy, that often ends up in ugliness.

Whatever the relationship, life is often like a cathedral, with both steeples and gargoyles, with blessings but also ugly struggles. Some tell us to deny the struggles by thinking positively, optimistically advocating an ever-smiling Jesus as the face of God.

Others of us try to deny the struggles by distracting ourselves with busyness, material things, and pleasure. But sooner or later we come face to face with life's spouting, gargoyle-like struggles.

We are like Charlie Brown in the Peanuts cartoon strip, standing with Linus as they look over a fence, weary faces resting in their hands. They are consumed with sorrow and depression, as they

struggle with life. Linus says, "Sometimes, I feel life has just passed me by. Do you ever feel like that Charlie Brown?" Charlie Brown in his normal melancholy mood replies, "No, I feel like it has knocked me down and walked all over me."

Many times life indeed is steeples of enjoyable experiences like family, friendships, work, eating, sports, travel, reading, hobbies, quality times, with few shadows. But there are also times of suffering, pain, illness, accidents, insecurity, financial setbacks, anxiety, rejection, broken relationships, anger, bitterness, times when the gargoyles swirl about us with a certain bleakness.

In the midst of a life that is like a cathedral, with both steeples and gargoyles, the apostle Paul in Romans 8 affirms a faith that realistically faces these gargoyles, trying to let steeples emerge. Paul tells us that gargoyle-like struggle is a part of creation itself. Verse 20 of chapter 8 says, "For creation itself was condemned to lose its purpose, not of its own will, but because God willed it to be so."

Professor of Practical Theology and former chaplain at Duke University's Divinity School, Will Willimon, expresses the frustration of creation in a book *Sighing for Eden*. He writes, "We humans are, first of all, animals. We may achieve many things in life, but we never escape this primal fact. We exist in a world where life continues only because of a constant bone-crushing, blood-drinking, devouring drama. Human life, for all its occasional grandeur, builds its home upon the carnage of millions of slain chickens, herds of cattle, sties of pigs, rivers of fish. Humanity raises its head over a field of corpses, smacks its lips, smiles into the sun, and declares, 'Life is good.' Because we are animals, the instinct for survival is strong. Like any other creature, we are driven by the will to consume, survive, and propagate. And yet, unlike the other animals, so far as we know, we humans are cursed with a unique characteristic - - we are conscious that we shall die. We fear death, yes, but the thing we fear about death is annihilation, insignificance. We want to know that our lives count, that something of us will endure even in the face of years which come

'to an end like a sigh,' in Shakespearean terms. This is a major promise of any religion, false or true religion - - we shall transcend death."

Paul uses the image of pregnancy and childbirth to describe the struggle with the gargoyles of cosmic and human existence, our struggle with death, our struggle to construct steeples of faith in God's presence. Like a pregnant woman, something wonderfully, mysteriously; grows within us. First there is little discomfort. Then comes increasing discomfort, and ultimately the pains of labor in order for something to be birthed.

Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of this passage in his translation called *The Message* is poignant. He writes, "All around us we observe a pregnant creation. The difficult times of pain throughout the world are simply birth pangs. But it's not only around us; it's within us. The Spirit of God is arousing us within. We're also feeling the birth pangs. These sterile and barren bodies of ours are yearning for full deliverance. That is why waiting does not diminish us, any more than waiting diminishes a pregnant mother. We are enlarged in the waiting. We, of course, don't see what is enlarging us. But the longer we wait, the larger we become, and the more joyful the expectancy."

These paraphrased words, "enlarged in the waiting," are echoed in the beliefs of an 80 year old Georgetown University professor named John F. Haught, whose writings on science and religion I recently came across. Haught believes that many of our ideas and experiences with God have focused on the past, with a literalism fixated on ancient peoples, scriptures, traditions, and some supposed paradisaic world of long ago. Other ideas and experiences with God have focused on an enduring present, a present that is eternal and timeless, to which we can supposedly tap into in this life, and also in any afterlife. But Haught thinks our ideas and experiences with God have failed to take into consideration, a crucial thing, the larger universe, time, and the need to have a focus on the future, on hope, on an unfolding universe that is expanding outward at an increasingly speed, beyond all our

human imaginations. In faith, God can be seen behind this expansion, luring the entire universe into the love we have glimpsed and experienced in Jesus. We humans are God's way of having the universe awaken unto itself.

But we don't yet know where we and the universe are completely going. The world is unfolding, and God and us are unfolding with it. We can only wait in this unfolding, hoping to be enlarged in the waiting.

This past fall, Janet and I traveled from Richmond to New York City to see the Yankees play. Forgive me, Ann, and all you other Red Sox fans, but Aaron Judge was chasing 63 homers, and the tickets and a stay at a condo overlooking Central Park were free from in-laws. We went by train on a 6 hour trip.

There's a feeling of security and simplicity about traveling by train, the sound of rails, whistles, and intercom instructions, the no hassle from airline security lines or turbulence or weather delays, the avoidance of highway congestion. But the trip also brought to mind the words of one wise observer, "We like life to be like a train, but it turns out to be like a sailboat."

This incisive thought suggests not just the way things are, but a way we can deal with reality, steeped with goodness and gargoyled with frustration. Many times we need more of a sailboat mentality. I have always been attracted to the lure of sailboats, though I never been on one, and never had the means or wherewithal to operate one. With a sailboat, we have to leave the dock, the harbor, the shore, the bay, and launch out into unknown winds and currents. There will most probably be storms and rough times, some groaning from the pains of dealing with unknown weather, high waves, stressed sails, challenged rudders, and where the winds will take us. We have to, in sense, wait to see where we will end up, whether in some far away land of paradise or in some endless water under an unrelenting sun. The winds cannot be fully seen or predicted. But still we launch, in hope,

knowing the wisdom an old sailor once gave a young boy. The boy asked, "Can you explain the wind?" "No," the old sailor said, "but I can hoist a sail."

This goes to the heart of Romans 8. We are to be enlarged in the waiting. We can't explain the Spirit, or a world filled with gargoyles, but we can hoist a sail. Though we often groan from the pain of existence, we know those groans hide the steeple-like hope that something good is somehow being birthed in the universe as a whole, and in our hearts as humans, even in our hearts as people of faith. Gargoyles will always adorn our lives, but we are called to place them under the steeples of hope. If we have hope, we can be enlarged in the waiting. We can blow struggles out like gargoyle spouts, facing any desperation and despair in our souls. We can face darkness, suffering, and evil in our world, with eyes on the Jesus who gives hope. We can know that in all things God works for good, as Paul puts it.

Back in 1958, a 19 year old Chinese pianist placed second at the First International Tchaikovsky Competition. He returned to his homeland and became an established concert artist in China. But in the mid 1960's, he was imprisoned by Mao Tse-tung's wife for playing Western music. He was locked away, and beaten so severely that his forearm was fractured. For 6 long years he lived in a tiny prison cell with nothing except a book of Mao's teachings. When US president Richard Nixon visited China, the young man was released and requested to perform with the Philadelphia Orchestra for Chinese propaganda purposes. He did well, only to be put back in jail for another 18 months. Finally, he was released but was still able to play brilliantly. China began to change, and he emerged into the international limelight as a brilliant pianist. How he and his hands survived 7 1/2 years has baffled knowledgeable musicians. In prison he was denied everything, except one thing the guards could not take away.

For 7 1/2 years, in a tiny prison cell, Liu Shih-kum practiced his beloved music in his vivid, disciplined imagination, on a piano only he

could see in his mind. Despite his gargoyle-like existence, despite the frustrations and the groanings, he kept hope alive. He was enlarged in the waiting, and things worked out for the good.

Like this Chinese musician, Tommy Dorsey, the black jazzman and gospel song writer, was also a man who discovered what it meant to be enlarged in the waiting. At a religious gathering in St. Louis, he got the terrible, gargoyle-like news by telegram that his wife was dead. The place was packed, and people were having a good time, asking for another song from the entertainer. He had left his wife sound asleep at home in the last month of her pregnancy. Hastily, he clamored back to Chicago to learn that she had died giving birth to a son, who also died a day later. Both were buried in the same casket.

Tommy Dorsey fell apart in sorrow, without any peace, wondering where God was in all this pain. The next Saturday, he meandered close to a piano and began to fiddle with the keys. Fresh words came, as a melody suddenly appeared from his burdened, questioning heart. "Precious Lord, take my hand; Lead me on, let me stand; I am tired, I am weak, I am worn; Through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light; Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home." His sorrow began to turn to joy, and resurrection became reality, leading him to say, "So I go on living for God willingly and joyfully, until that day when he will take my hand and gently lead me home." He was enlarged in the waiting. So may we.