In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My sermon text this morning is from our Epistle Lesson, from Romans Chapter 8. St. Paul says this:

18I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. (Romans 8:18, NRSV)

In this text, St. Paul is happy about heaven. He is not dismissive of suffering – of course he is not! But he is thrilled by heaven. He is uplifted by other thoughts. In comparison to those other thoughts, Saint Paul says that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing. That does not mean that the sufferings are easy. In fact the depth of the sufferings can be understood to be a kind of measure of how great the glory is that St. Paul says is about to be revealed to us.

So that is my subject for this morning – what St. Paul calls “the sufferings of this time.” Before we go too far down the road in discussing this topic, let’s first review St. Paul’s line of reasoning in this morning’s Epistle Lesson. The apostle is discussing the sanctified life, the holy life, the kind of life that is appropriate for you and for me. He begins by talking of our habits, the set of our soul, the pilot of our life, the everyday principles by which we live. He makes his point by speaking of that to which we are in debt, that to which we are beholden. He says that we are not the debtors to what he calls “the flesh”:

12So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh... (Romans 8:12, NRSV)

So, we are not to be servants of bad habits and vice. No greed for us, no wrath, no lust, no ingratitude, no impatience, no laziness, and so on. Such things are not right for us. We are not to be debtors to the flesh.

Then the apostle rises to a new level. He speaks of a new indebtedness. We are to be indebted to the Spirit of God. We are to be beholden to the Spirit of God. St. Paul says that we are to be led by the Spirit of God.

Then the apostle rises higher still and he places us close to Christ. Indeed, he says of those led by the Spirit of God that they are “heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.” He speaks of our adoption into the divine family. He speaks of our right to address God, Almighty God, as Abba. It is a term of endearment,
like Papa. For anyone who is placed so close to Christ, we are new beings. The sanctified life is the proper life for us.

And then the tone of the apostle’s reasoning changes. He begins to speak of suffering. He adds a qualification to what he had said about being joint heirs with Christ. He adds in the factor of suffering. Verse 17, then, goes like this:

17 and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ— if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. (Romans 8:17, NRSV)

Now we arrive at our text – the one that speaks of present suffering:

18 I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. (Romans 8:18, NRSV)

Why, do you suppose, that the apostle moves from the heights of dignity, even coheirs with Christ, to speak of suffering? Why such a turn in the discussion? Why such a plunge downwards into the sadness and suffering of ordinary life? For an answer, I believe we should turn to our Gospel Lesson. There Jesus is explaining why this world and even the church is such a mixed phenomenon. We are a mixture of both wheat and weeds. Both as a community and within ourselves individually, one by one, we are a mixture of good and bad. We are conglomeration of wheat and weeds. Why? Jesus does not hesitate to give the explanation. He speaks of the devil. The devil is not a quaint idea for Jesus, nor should the devil be a quaint idea for us. The devil is a reality for Jesus. He is the one responsible for the tares, for the weeds. Notice how simply and unhesitatingly Jesus speaks of the devil:

39 and the enemy who sowed them [the weeds] is the devil; (Matthew 13:39, NRSV)

Faith is contested on earth. It is contested by the devil. Faith is hard for humanity. Faith might be hard for you and me. The devil fights against faith. The devil causes all kinds of misery on earth. This is so even for Christians, and so St. Paul does not hesitate to speak of suffering. He moves right on from our dignity as coheirs with Christ to speak of our suffering.

He says of the suffering of this age that it is not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. This is a mighty claim. This is the claim I want to explore a bit in this sermon.

The first thing to say, I believe, is that St. Paul is not naïve about suffering. He has not lived a charmed life, sheltered from the kind of suffering that you and I might know. I have read his testimony before, I have read it aloud for
you in years gone by, but let me read it again. There is something about my own recent injuries, and my own reminder of how frail and vulnerable we are, that makes me especially appreciate St. Paul’s words. Indeed I rather tremble as I hear the list of sorrows and sufferings that he has known in his life. Listen to what he says:

24Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. 25Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; 26on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; 27in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. 28And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches. (2 Cor 11:24-28, RSV)

This is not what Paul’s parents could have expected for him. Mother and father of young Saul would have expected for him that he would live the life of an honored scholar and leader of Israel. Instead the man lives a buffeted life, a life buffeted by storm and rejection and continual worry for the young church. And what lies ahead of him is martyrdom. Each of the troubles Paul has experienced cause me to flinch, calls me to wonder how I would have done if I had known such suffering. He has been shipwrecked, for example. Indeed he has been shipwrecked three times! Imagine what it would be like to be shipwrecked. You clinging to some debris. The waves and the wind and the sun beat on you and you do not know whether you will be rescued. You might be exhausted. So it was for St. Paul three times. He was beaten. That means he was whipped. Indeed he was whipped 39 times, which was the maximum number permitted by law. It was a beating that killed some people. He says he was stoned. Thud, thud, thud! All of this sounds awful to me! And so when St. Paul speaks of the suffering of this present age, he knows that of which he speaks. And yet amazingly, he says that it is unworthy of being compared with that which is ahead of us. What is ahead of us then, must be pretty wonderful.

And that is not all. St. Paul knows of his own suffering by experience, but he also knows that he is not The Man of Suffering. That One is Jesus Christ, the one St. Paul serves. Jesus is the afflicted one, the bruised one, the one whose cup of suffering was so intimidating that Jesus prayed that he could be spared it. But he was not spared it, and St. Paul makes the suffering of Jesus a center of his theology. He says that he preaches Christ crucified. St. Paul is not about
to forget that our Lord suffered. Jesus suffered dreadfully, St. Paul suffers after him, and yet now he says to all Christians that our sufferings are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed to us.

In some measure, you and I have some understanding of what St. Paul is saying. You and I are capable of comparing suffering to other thoughts, to other realities, and in comparison to those other realities, the suffering is bearable, even acceptable.

Let me give you an example from my family. I mean my father and my mother. My father died young. He died at age forty-five, of cancer. Forty-five is a pretty young age to die, and in the case of my father, it was made worse by the fact that the last ten years of his life involved a terrible struggle with cancer. At age thirty-five he had a major operation to remove cancer from his chest. He had a huge diagonal incision, as if he had been sliced open like a fish. Five years later that operation was repeated because the cancer had returned. Three years later it returned again, but this time the doctor said they could not operate. This, in turn, meant that Dad dealt with increasing pain for two years as his death approached.

So Dad had suffering in this present age. But what I want to lift up now is that my mother also suffered as Dad was dying. She suffered exhaustion as she ministered to him. Toward the end, she never got more than two hours of sleep, because she would need to get up in order to minister to Dad, to give him morphine shots in a body that was increasingly wasting away. It was terrible suffering for my dad, but also suffering for my mother. Would she have rejected it if she could? No. She accepted her exhaustion, the laying aside of any hopes and dreams that she had for herself at that time. It was as if she counted her suffering of that present age to be unworthy of comparing with her love for her husband.

Such love, love that can even moderate suffering... you too might know such love. You too might be accepting suffering in your life because you count the suffering to be acceptable compared to the love you have for others.

Something like this seems to be so for St. Paul. He has suffered in his past, deeply, and he is destined to suffer martyrdom in the end. But in our passage he gives his testimony that he counts all such suffering to be unworthy of comparing with other thoughts, with other realities. Paul cares more about his love for Christ, and Paul cares more about his love for humanity than he cares about his own suffering. This is the stuff of saints. This is the stuff of the sanctified life. A holy life includes willingness to suffer for the sake of other good things in life.

Especially St. Paul is thinking of heaven. Err long he will be off for heaven. Before long, he will be coming into the presence of Jesus Christ, his Savior, our

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1 Spurgeon makes this point much more simply in his sermon "Our Light Affliction" by speaking of a mother’s willingness to stay up all night tending to her sick child.
Savior, the one he serves, the one he has devoted his life to, the one he has devoted his considerable talents to. Before long St. Paul will see Jesus, and he does not want any present suffering to tempt him away from serving the Jesus he hopes soon to see.

No preacher wants to be lighthearted when speaking of suffering. We are too mindful of the sorrows and sadness and pain in the life of the people of our parish. Some of you know unrelenting pain. There are even pain specialists these days who can help with pain, but there’s no guarantee that that will work. Some people know pain day by day.

And there are other kinds of sufferings in this present age. Think of the poor man or woman whose income is so low. He lives from paycheck to paycheck, she lives a week at a time or a month at a time. They might worry about their families, about college educations, about retirement, they can hardly afford a nice vacation, the future looks to be the same year after year. They are being ground down by poverty. It is not easy for a preacher to speak lightly of such suffering.

There is also emotional suffering. There are people who are lonely. The years go by and they are still lonely. There are people who suffer with depression and all kinds of turmoil in their souls. This is true suffering in this present age. Neither St. Paul nor any preacher wants to discount such suffering.

But it is the intention of the apostle, and it is my intention too, to speak some word of hope to you. There is more to life than suffering. Suffering is part of that chaotic reality that God did not intend for us, which the devil does intend for us, and which will be booted out of the universe someday.

Pain pretends. Pain pretends to govern your future and to ruin your present. But it overreaches. In fact pain and suffering are part of a collapsing reality. They are on the way out. Recall the beautiful prophecy of Isaiah. He speaks of the banishment of tears. Hallelujah! What a world that will be:

He will swallow up death for ever, and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth; for the LORD has spoken. (RSV Isaiah 25:8)

And think of that blessed prophecy in the book of Revelation:

And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. (KJV Revelation 21:4)
Tears of whatever sort – tears of pain, tears of loneliness, tears of grief – whatever sort of tears they are - they shall be gone! Jesus shall see to it! Life shall not be an endless stream of sorrows and setbacks and suffering and tears. St. Paul is willing to count his suffering, which is considerable, as, what he elsewhere refers to as “a slight momentary affliction.” He says this:

For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison... (2 Corinthians 4:17, RSV)

St. Paul serves a Savior who is well acquainted with grief and with suffering. Indeed, the one person on earth who can most truly say, “I consider the sufferings of this present age to be unworthy of comparing...” is Jesus Christ himself — the One St. Paul loves and serves. As for the apostle himself, he follows the example of Jesus in accepting his cup of suffering, counting worth it compared to his love for humanity. St. Paul is not ashamed of suffering he might bear along the way of his ministry. He is not perplexed by it. He accepts his present suffering for the sake of a higher goal, for the sake of being true to the one he loves, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen