

A day that is typical for me, I assume, is pretty typical for most of us. I fret about the following things, in no particular order: the fecklessness of certain teenagers and whether there's something I should be doing that's more effective than what I am doing; a text from my teacher-daughter that says, "I'm just broken-hearted for my students and their futures and for me and for my school;" whether it's worth calling my congressperson about the latest outrage; another text from the same daughter asking, "When you were deciding to have children, were you worried about climate change then?" what either of my parents will do when the other one dies; and whether, if we fixed everything in our house that's broken, would we have any money left. It's a full agenda, but I manage to revisit these topics several times a day. And this is when there's nothing really wrong, no local flooding, no nuclear attacks from North Korea, nobody stealing my identity and my savings. Worry, sorrow, awareness of problems is just sort of the normal backdrop of life, I'm guessing for lots of us.

That's what Paul is acknowledging in today's section of the letter to the Romans. It's a long reading, but all the way through it he assumes that life for these people is not easy. First he says that the Spirit of God that we have received makes us not slaves but family members in God's family. Then he says that the sufferings of this present time don't compare with the glory about to be revealed to us, and we hope for it because we can't see it yet. The Spirit is there for us, even when we don't really have a grip on what we need. The arc of the universe is bending toward good because God is in charge. And finally and powerfully, if God is for us, who is against us? Should we be afraid of hardship, distress, persecution, peril, sword? "No, in all

these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” That whole long reading is predicated on the fact that life is hard and the world doesn’t work the way it should, and we really don’t know how to fix it or what the schedule is. But Paul’s answer is, you are totally on the winning team, you are in God’s family, and nothing can change that.

This is the longest explication that Paul gives about the work and nature of the Holy Spirit, the gift of which we celebrate on Pentecost. The day of Pentecost described in Acts tells us that the Spirit descended dramatically on a dispirited, fearful group of apostles, manifesting as wind and fire, and they were suddenly empowered—unafraid, articulate, able to *do* what they had never even imagined. Paul’s telling us how the Spirit functions long-term, with you and me, in the context of indefinite screwed-upness. It didn’t just flit away after filling the apostles with power; it has already made us children of God, it translates our weakness into language deeper than words; it is the divine presence with us that can’t be shaken off by death, life, angels, rulers, or anything else in all creation.

The Holy Spirit is notoriously unpredictable. A rule-breaker. I have an illustration, though it’s somewhat delicate because I don’t want to spoil the story for myself or others—several years ago on Mairi’s suggestion I read a delightful book called “Good Omens,” about an angel and a demon who are both aware that the antichrist has been born and the world will end when he turns 14. It’s been long

enough since I read it that I've forgotten parts, and I didn't want to check my facts because *now* it's on Amazon Prime as a series, and I'm watching it, and I don't want to spoil it. So let's all pretend that I only know the premise and the first episode. Here's the thing. The premise should be ironclad: the antichrist is born, at some point he reaches maturity and the world ends and there's a thousand-year battle with Christ for which you and I would prefer not to be around. Christ will win, and all will be sweetness and light, but this world will be no more. That's the deal; it's been set up since before the dawn of time, there you go.

What's funny and relevant is that both the angel and the demon have, over the eons, gotten to be friends. They sub out for each other when they have schedule conflicts. AND they both really like the current world. The angel likes sushi and classical music. The demon likes fast cars and Queen. They really don't want the world to end, but they know the decision has been made, and it was way above their pay grades.

What they do not take into account, but you and I do, is the Holy Spirit. I can see the Holy Spirit breaking rules as fast as they can recite them, although it's not mentioned in the narration. But I can tell. The antichrist, masquerading as a normal child, is supposed to get a dog, the Hound of Hell. This will start the whole apocalyptic ball rolling. Well, at the end of the first episode of the show, he gets the dog of his dreams. The Hound of Hell, waiting and snarling in the wings, is forced by the boy's own yearnings to become a small and endearing puppy. It was all set up to be a nightmare monster dog, because nobody anticipated that the boy born to become the antichrist but placed with the wrong family would actually want a little

furball. Who saw that coming? Not the angel or the demon. Nope, this has the marks of the Holy Spirit all over it. What you know by the end of the first episode is that there is way more grace in the universe than well-informed supernatural beings realize. More surprises, I am confident, await.

The poet Callid Keefe-Perry met a challenge to write 100 words on “How the Holy Spirit Moves Today” with this poem:

Bird Shadows/Holy Spirit

My God is in the next room,
cooking unseen feasts
and humming;
moments of ache before rain
when the whole June cloud
is ready to burst through
though no drop has yet fallen;
dandelion blades that insist
adamantly they must reside directly
in the middle of your neighbor's
blacktopped suburban driveway;
sights of the shadow of a bird flitting
by the sill near the bed of an aging Grace,
who can no longer move but counts herself
lucky because at least she can still see.
This is my God:
expectant and grinning
wild and near.

Do we see the fulfillment of God’s intentions? We do not, for hope that is seen is not hope. But the stillness before rain and the uncanny ability of weeds to manifest in the least hospitable places are hints to us of the reality that is to come.

Years ago the author Antoine de Saint-Exupery, who had been a fighter pilot in north Africa, made friends with some Bedouins and took them to France for a visit. They politely admired the Eiffel Tower and the rest of the sights, but what really took their breath away was a waterfall in the French Alps.

The thing about the waterfall that filled them with wonder was that it never stopped. These were men who had measured their lives by water: by how much water their canteens could hold, how many hours' ride it was to the next oasis, how long they or their camels could hold out without taking a drink. Yet here, gushing from the side of a mountain, was an endless cascade of God's abundance. In the author's own words:

They stood in silence. Mute, solemn...gazing at the unfolding of a ceremonial mystery. That which came roaring out of the belly of the mountain was life itself...The flow of a single second would have resuscitated whole caravans that, mad with thirst, had pressed on into the eternity of salt lakes and mirages. Here God was manifesting Himself: It would not do to turn one's back on Him.

[Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Wind, Sand and Stars* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1940), 143, quoted by Beiden Lane in *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 203- 204]

These men's backdrop, their "normal," was a constant struggle for sufficient water. Their "normal", however, was not worth comparing to the extravagant abundance of this alpine waterfall, gushing out without stint or limit. Their "normal" was real, for sure. Thirsting, fretting about getting places safely, worrying about their livestock's needs, all those were real problems. But those problems did not compare with the glory that was revealed to them in the waterfall . . . which was also real. That's what Paul is telling us. We know the rules; we know how things work and the scope of our own power. But we make a mistake if we fail to take into account that we are also heirs in the family of God and constantly in the company of the Holy Spirit, which blows where it will and breaks all the rules. This is what we all should get tattooed on our foreheads or embroidered on our shirts, so that we take it everywhere we go:

"No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Christ who loved us. Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

In the silence of abandonment and solitude of sickness and death, pour out the riches of your blessing, that we may be ever more faithful to serve you in our sisters and brothers, and that our joy to do your will be ever greater. Amen.