

Just in Time

(This message is part of a series on Romans titled "Based on a Promise, Called for a Purpose.")

Romans 5:1-11

On Monday night Ian and I watched the new BBC series called 'Life'. It's the latest from David Attenborough—it took 4 years to shoot all the footage and edit it into 10 episodes. The show was amazing. The focus was on the different ways animals survive in their environments. There were penguins and cheetahs and monkeys—all of the staples of a good nature program.

There was a great sequence where some bottleneck dolphins showed how they catch fish that swim faster than they do. They herd them into shallow water, then one dolphin swims a circle around the fish, kicking up a circle of mud in the water. The fish panic and start to jump out of the circle, only to jump right into the mouths of the hungry dolphins.

We were inspired by the Strawberry Poison Dart Frog of Costa Rica. This tiny little creature, about the size of a thumbnail, produces a litter of 5 or 6 tadpoles. But in their part of the forest, the ponds dry up before the tadpoles grow into frogs, so the mother will put a tadpole on her back and start to climb one of the trees where bromeliad plants store pools of water.

She carries the tadpoles up one at a time—each into their own little pool. It's the equivalent of a human mother carrying a baby to the top of the Empire State Building. She does it six times, then revisits each tadpole to bring it food until it's ready to face the world on its own. For each litter, this tiny frog climbs more than a half of a mile—barely an inch at a time.

But the mother of the year award goes to The Giant Octopus. She lays thousands of eggs, then covers them for protection and to pass on nutrition. She never moves during the entire time the eggs are getting ready to hatch. She doesn't eat or take on anything for herself. By the time the eggs begin to hatch, the Giant Octopus dies—she gives her life to make it possible for her children to live.

It's a truly amazing example of the lengths a loving parent will go to in order to ensure life—to protect and nurture her children.

1Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. 3Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; 4perseverance, character; and character, hope. 5And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

6You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. 7Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. 8But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

9Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! 10For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! 11Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

As we begin it will help to remember the point of Paul's letter to the Romans.

Romans was written to convince one group of people that God could be trusted because of his faithfulness to another group of people.

Let me say that another way:

The letter to the Romans was written to convince the Gentile Christians in Rome that God could be trusted because he kept his promises to his Jewish covenant people.

Over the past few weeks we've talked about the meaning of the Christian life. We've seen in Paul's letter to the Romans that our faith is based on a promise, and that in our discipleship we've been called for a purpose—to live in close relationship to God,

and to share the message of the gospel with the world around us.

The next week we talked about our need for forgiveness, and the way we learn to live the message of the gospel with boldness and passion. We stop being ashamed of the gospel when we accept the fact that the gospel isn't ashamed of us.

On Communion Sunday we learned that God offers signs of his presence and love all around us—that he'll never lose sight of us or stop loving us. There is no shortage of ways we can find ourselves lost, but nothing we've ever said or done or even believed before this moment can separate us from the one who made us and loves us.

And then last week we were reminded that we are people who've been bought with a price, and that learning to live that way changes everything, from our earning and spending to our parenting and the way we live in relationships—from how we value others to how we define what our own lives mean.

Living as people who've been redeemed through Christ's sacrifice changes everything about us.

And so that brings us to our text this morning. I said on our first Sunday in Romans that a lot of people have favorite parts of this letter. Our text is one of the more popular passages—I remember learning it in my youth group about 30 years ago. Paul is still making his argument here that God can be trusted because he's already proven himself to be faithful to his promises.

What he's really describing are the lengths God will go to in order to give us life—how far he'll go to protect and nurture each one of us.

Paul begins with a reminder that our reconciliation to God is based on faith alone, and not on anything we've done to earn it. 'Since we have been justified through faith,' Paul says, 'we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.'

I've said before that I think this is one of the hardest things for us to grasp. We have to earn just about every other thing that matters to us, and when we come to God and he offers us this amazing free gift, it's as if we don't speak the language.

In the Reformation this was one of the key sticking points between Martin Luther and the Roman Church. In Luther's eyes the established church had created a false sense for individual believers—a sense that they had to earn their forgiveness—to earn their salvation. But that didn't mean he thought that people didn't need forgiveness. Luther's views grew out of a pretty clear understanding of human brokenness, something we can see clearly in our passage this morning.

Paul has three words to describe the state of humanity in this part of his letter, and none of them are very pretty. He calls us:

'Powerless': Weak, incapacitated by illness, impotent, paralyzed by the inability to act.

'Ungodly: Guilty of outrage, giving divine honors to the creature instead of the creator, distorting the relationship between God and his people.

'Sinners': Sin in this sense is what we do and also who or what we choose to serve. This is Paul's catch-all term for people who have allowed something to get in the way of their link with God.

But all this 'bad news' of our condition is followed by the 'good news' of Christ's work on the cross—what Paul calls a demonstration of God's own love for us.

Actually, that's not entirely accurate. The good news comes after Paul's description of our need for it, but the point if you read it carefully is that *God accomplished his redeeming work before we even knew we needed it*. God didn't schedule a meeting to talk about the problem of sin—he did something amazing—something sacrificial—to solve the problem.

In the musical 'My Fair Lady', Eliza Doolittle is tired of listening to her young suitor talk about all the things he wants to do. One of the classic songs in the play is called 'Show Me', where Eliza sings:

"Don't talk of stars, burning above; If you're in love, Show me! Tell me not dreams, filled with desire. If you're on fire, Show me!"

Maybe the point of all this is that God isn't just talk. The God we worship is a God of action—the one who has acted decisively to bring all of his creation back to himself.

There's no need for us to look up at God and demand a sign—to say 'show me'—because he's already shown us how far he will go to bring us close again. What Paul's really describing are the lengths God will go to in order to give us life—how far he'll go to protect and nurture each one of us.

While we were still sinners Christ died for us.

Before we even knew we had a problem, God was already working to provide a solution through Jesus Messiah.

God demonstrated his own love for us, just in time.

What does that mean for us? How do we respond to this gift of forgiveness and reconciliation and restoration?

We celebrate our forgiveness together in fellowship. That may be the single most important difference between Christian fellowship and any other gathering of people. We come together knowing we've been forgiven and restored and reconciled.

We worship as a community. As we sing these songs and offer these prayers—even the ones that might not be as familiar to us—we join with people across boundaries and cultures and even across time, as we praise God for the ways he loves us.

We welcome the Holy Spirit into our lives to shape us into the people God made us to be. This is really the key of discipleship—the ways we grow in our personal knowledge and experience of Jesus Christ, and also the ways we grow together here and in Bible studies and in meaningful conversation.

Finally, we reach out in mission to a world that is desperate for this message, whether it knows it or not. We reach out in service to our neighbors not as people who are superior in any way, but as powerless, ungodly sinners who have been forgiven through God's love and Christ's sacrifice.

We reach out because God first reached out to us. What God asks of us is that we let go of anything that holds us back.

John Ortberg, in his book *Faith & Doubt* (which is on your reading list in the bulletin)—Ortberg describes God's call to faith like this:

"What are you to let go of? Anything that will keep you from God.

Let go of relationships if they dishonor God.

Let go of your attachment to money.

Let go of your power; be a servant.

Let go of your addiction. Admit it. Get help.

Let go of that habit.

Let go of that grudge.

Let go of your ego, your pride, your possessions, your reputation, your disobedience.

God comes, and he asks us to let go."

What do you have to let go of today?

What keeps you from experiencing the gift of God's grace and forgiveness this morning?

What prevents you from getting to know the one who was willing to die to get to know you?

What keeps you from accepting the one who was willing to put you on his back and climb a tree and take you to a place where you can thrive?

The good news is that it's never too late. The good news is that the one who made us and redeemed us and loves us in spite of ourselves, even Jesus Christ himself, wants to live in you and through you.

He took the first step, before we even knew we needed him, but the next step is up to us.