

Theme: Certain in Christ

We all crave certainty.

We want certainty that our health will last. That our children will be safe. That our marriage will endure. That our retirement account will be enough. That the doctor's message won't disrupt everything. That our plans for tomorrow will still be possible next month.

But if the last few years have taught us anything, it is this: life is uncertain.

When uncertainty comes, an old voice comes with it. It's the same voice that hissed through the Garden of Eden: "*Did God really say?*" Did God really say he loves you? Did God really say he is working for your good? Did God really say he will never leave you? That question hasn't gone anywhere since Eden. It just changes clothes. Sometimes it wears a diagnosis, sometimes a bank statement, sometimes a locked-up back on the busiest week of the year. We'll meet it again before we're done today, because it doesn't leave quietly.

That question lies behind every doubt. It also lies behind our worship theme today, and behind this whole series, because this is what makes Christians different. Not that we have fewer doubts than anyone else. We don't. It's that we know where to take them.

The answer to doubt is not louder emotions. It is not dramatic signs from heaven. It is not waiting until life finally makes sense. The answer to doubt is God's unshakeable Word. The Word from God that the Holy Spirit provides today is one of the greatest promises in all of Scripture. Romans chapter eight is the mountaintop of Paul's letter. After explaining humanity's sin, Christ's sacrifice to save us, and the Spirit's work to bring us to saving faith, Paul arrives at the breathtaking conclusion we're focusing on today.

In light of that, I'm inviting you today to give special focus to this word: Certain. Trinity, let's say that word together: **Certain**. Because when everything around us seems uncertain, God gives us certainty in Christ.

So let me ask you: when life gives you every reason to doubt, what gives you absolute certainty that God still loves you? That is precisely the question Paul answers.

The central truth in this section of the Bible is this: God's saving love in Christ gives believers absolute certainty that he is working every circumstance for their eternal good.

Paul begins with confident certainty: "***And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.***" Notice what Paul does, and does not, say. He does not say

all things are good. Cancer isn't good. War isn't good. Death isn't good. Paul never minimizes suffering. Just a few verses earlier he describes creation groaning, Christians groaning, even the Holy Spirit groaning as he intercedes for us. Everything around this verse is groaning.

But God is working. He alone is never panicking. The Greek verb behind "works" carries the sense of continual, active labor. Not a single fix, but ongoing effort that never lets up. Even when we cannot see him working, he is working. Like a master weaver whose hands remain hidden behind the tapestry, God is weaving every thread, even the dark ones, into his beautiful design.

Notice also that Paul doesn't leave "good" undefined. He tells us exactly what he means in the very next breath: to be conformed to the image of God's Son. Our definition of good usually means comfort. God's good is bigger than that. His highest good for you is bringing you safely to glory. As he's working to bring you safely there, he is shaping you into the likeness of Christ along the way. Sometimes what we expect that to mean and how it actually looks on the inside is very different. That gap is exactly where the serpent's question, "**Did God really say?**" finds room to work.

That's why Paul immediately provides one of the most comforting chains of promise in all of Scripture. Those whom God foreknew, he predestined. Those he predestined, he called. Those he called, he justified. Those he justified, he glorified. Paul isn't giving us theology for theology's sake. He's answering the question we've been asking from the beginning.

Every verb belongs to God. Every action belongs to God. And notice the tense: every one of those verbs is past tense, even "glorified." You haven't been glorified yet. Not one of us has stood in that final glory. But Paul writes as though it's already finished, because God's saving purpose is so certain that the ending is as good as done. From eternity past to eternity future, your salvation rests on God's work, not yours.

That is profoundly comforting. If salvation depended on how consistently I firmly believed, I would constantly wonder. If it depended on how strong my faith felt on a given day, I would have no certainty at all. But salvation rests on Christ.

He is so certain of this, that Paul presses it home with a series of courtroom questions: "**If God is for us, who can be against us? Who will bring any charge? Who is he that condemns?**" This is the language of a courtroom, and not just any courtroom. Paul is picturing the last day, the final judgment, the moment every one of us will stand before God to give an account. Paul says the verdict is already in. No one can bring a successful

charge against God's people, not because we are innocent, but because Christ has already sat as the accused in our place and taken the verdict for us.

Then Paul asks one more question: ***who shall separate us from the love of Christ?***

Trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, danger, the sword? These weren't hypotheticals for Paul. He had lived through most of them. His conclusion isn't that we barely survive. He says in all these things we are more than conquerors. Not because we fought hardest, but because the victory was already Christ's before the fight ever began. We're not clawing our way to a win. We're walking out onto a field where the outcome has already been settled.

That's where Paul lets loose with his crescendo: ***neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither present nor future, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation — nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.***

Now that is certainty. Not the absence of the serpent's question, but an answer strong enough to overcome it.

But if that's true, why do I struggle to always fully and firmly believe it?

I got back from vacation a month ago and my back locked up. Really locked up ... the kind where bending to tie your shoes feels like the impossible dream, where getting out of a chair takes a plan. Of course it happened exactly when the calendar was really filling up: school year preparation, faculty Inservice, parent orientation, sermon prep stacking up, WELS Waukesha, a stretch where Trinity needs me at full strength. My body picked about the worst possible few weeks to tell me no.

For the first week, lying there, unable to do much more than rest and wait, I had a thought I suspect some of you have had too: God, is this you keeping me from what you've called me to do? Is this how you love me? Flat on my back when everyone needs me on my feet?

Maybe you see that question for what it is: the serpent's question, dressed in a back brace. Did God really say he's working this for good? Because it sure doesn't look like it from down here.

Here's what I think is going on underneath that question, for me and maybe for you. Sin has taught us to reverse the order. Instead of interpreting our lives through God's promises, we interpret God's promises through our lives. When life is going well, we see that as proof God loves us. When a body gives out, or a diagnosis hits hard, or a relationship breaks, those hard situations leave us wondering if God really does care. Our

circumstances become the lens through which we judge God, which means the serpent doesn't even need to show up in person anymore. Our own bad weeks do the tempting for him.

That is exactly what Satan wants. He is called the Accuser. He points to your failures, your limitations, your bad timing, and then he whispers, "See? God couldn't possibly be working good through this." Sometimes he doesn't even have to accuse us. We do it ourselves, replaying old failures and old guilt until our hearts become little courtrooms, putting ourselves on trial every day: Have I done enough? Am I faithful enough?

Notice how easily we let feelings become our authority. When I feel close to God, he must love me. When I don't, maybe he doesn't. But feelings make terrible saviors. They rise and fall with sleep, stress, a bad back, and a full calendar.

Too often we trust our circumstances more readily than we trust Scripture. That produces frightened hearts, hearts still standing in the Garden asking the same old question because this life can never provide certainty. Only Christ can.

That's where Paul turns our eyes. Not inward. Upward.

"If God did not spare his own Son..." That is the cross. The cross is where the serpent's question finally gets answered for good. Did God really say he loves you? Look at Calvary and stop asking. God does not only tell you he loves you. He has demonstrated it. Jesus willingly entered our uncertainty, our suffering, our weakness, our death, and our condemnation.

He did what no one else could. Jesus takes our guilt; he gives us his righteousness. Jesus takes our condemnation; he gives us God's verdict of "not guilty." Jesus takes our death; he gives us eternal life. Jesus takes our abandonment; he gives us his Father's embrace.

Just think on Jesus' haunting words from the cross: **"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"** There it is, the last, truest echo of Eden's question, asked by the only person who ever had the right to ask it, and asked so that you would never have to. Jesus was separated so that you never would be.

Nothing can separate you! Why not? Not because you hold tightly to Jesus, but because Jesus holds tightly to you. Since God has already given the greatest gift, the gift of his Son, why would he now withhold the lesser gifts necessary to bring us safely home?

Paul reminds us that Christ was raised. He is seated at God's right hand. He intercedes for us even now, while you struggle, while you grieve, while you doubt, while your back is

locked up and your calendar is full and you don't understand the timing. Jesus is praying for you. Your salvation does not rest on the strength of your grip. It rests on his. His grip never weakens.

Remember our focus word. Certain. Say it with me, Trinity: **Certain**. Not because your faith always feels so certain. Mine isn't, some weeks. But because Christ certainly is.

I still don't know exactly why God let my back pain persist over the last several weeks, of all months. Maybe it was simply press home this point: **Do not begin with your circumstances. Begin with Christ.** That's true for a bad back, and it's true for whatever hardship you're facing right now.

I say that for your comfort. But I also share it as something that comes with a cost. Let me tell you where this is actually costing me something right now. Part of ministry means fielding questions from people who are upset, or disappointed, or frustrated, and the way they ask can come across as aggressive, even accusing. Some of you know exactly what that's like in your own homes and workplaces and neighborhoods. My instinct in those moments, like anyone's, is fight or flight: put up a wall, or come back swinging. It's fast, and it's automatic.

But I'm learning, slowly, and not without falling back into old habits, but I'm slowly learning that if I'm certain of Christ's love, I don't have to defend myself in those situations. Jesus is there. He's taking care of me. That means I can stay in the conversation instead of leaving it or winning it. That costs something real. It costs pride. It costs the ego's satisfaction of feeling right. But I'd rather someone walk away from a hard conversation with me having heard more of Jesus than they heard of Jay.

That is what certainty in Christ frees us to do. Not certainty that we'll be spared hard diagnoses or hard weeks, but certainty that none of it can separate us from God's love. So we're free to stop protecting ourselves and start showing up for the people in front of us. You see, I have a sneaking suspicion that someone in your life, in your sphere of influence today is carrying that same old question, wondering whether God still loves them, maybe over something every bit as ordinary as a bad back at a busy time. Perhaps God means for your voice to be the one that answers it this week: "***Nothing can separate you from the love of Christ.***"

Where do you look when doubt asks, "Did God really say?"

Not at your circumstances. At Christ. At his cross, where the question was finally answered. At his empty tomb, where the answer became permanent.

Paul leaves us no room for uncertainty. God is for you. Christ died for you. Christ rose for you. Christ intercedes for you. The Holy Spirit preserves you. Nothing in all creation can separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Not suffering. Not failure. Not Satan. Not death. Not your weakest day.

This is what makes Christians different. Not that we escape the question, but that we finally know the answer.

Certain. Say it with me, Trinity: **CERTAIN**. Because Christ is certain. And because Christ is certain, you have a Savior who knows how to overcome your doubts. When you face uncertainty, when you're afflicted by suffering, when you're up against circumstances bigger than your resources, lean on him. He is there, especially there, for you. Amen.