

Groaning with Creation, Romans 8:18-30

Flashing lights, clapping thunder, roaring of the ocean, the moon turning blood red. Forces of evil and forces of good line up against each other. A warrior, appears, flanked by a crowd of loyal adherents who will conquer the enemy and bring an end to the oppression against their people. Hollywood loves an epic story of good vs. evil where the good side wins. Who doesn't?

In this passage in Romans, Paul taps into Jewish apocalyptic thought where the children of God, often referred to as the children of light in other apocalyptic literature, will overcome the children of darkness at some point in the near yet unknown future. But there is a major twist in the plot line. No longer are just Jewish-born people on the good side, but Gentile converts to Christianity join them, and join this cosmic showdown of epic proportions. I will come back to this twist in the plot line shortly.

The vision that compels them forward is one of final restoration, of all things being made right. The realm of evil will no longer enslave people to sin and the inevitable suffering and decay of mortality. And there will be freedom in the Spirit. Freedom to not live in fear Freedom to not live under oppressive governments and freedom to have whole-person well-being, shalom.

According to this passage, shalom is for more than just humans. It's for the **whole** cosmos. **All** of creation has been impacted by the consequences of humanity's enslavement to sin. Therefore, the redemption that Paul anticipates here is both for humanity and for creation. Both will enjoy the freedom of the glory of the children of God. In apocalyptic literature we see that when the Messiah appears, humanity and creation are glorified with the Messiah.

John 3:16-17 gives us a clear picture of the intertwining of the salvation of humanity and the cosmos. The word cosmos is used 4 times in those two verses. For God so loved the cosmos, I (Jesus) came into the cosmos not to judge the cosmos but to save the cosmos. There are other Greek words available if Jesus was only talk about humans there, but no, it's cosmos. Somehow, in ways that I don't fully comprehend, our radical trust in the faithfulness of Jesus to save us affects the entire cosmos. And Jesus came because God **so loves** the cosmos!

Paul seems pretty convinced in this passage of the same thing. The whole cosmos participates in the quest for redemption. And in the suffering.

Back to the twist in the plot: the Gentiles, the outsiders, those who were the children of darkness. I wonder what kind of radical trust in Jesus it took for Paul and other Jewish followers of Jesus to come to the place of seeing themselves as

partners with Gentile followers of Jesus in this dynamic redemption process?

What did it take?

In Ephesians 2:14 we read that Christ has broken down the dividing wall of hostility. Now, all who claim Jesus can have the Spirit dwell in them and empower them to overcome. All will share in the glory of God.

Not knowing how far off this coming glory might be, Paul encourages believers who are living in the in-between times. The moment between the giving of the spirit and the culmination of all things. In the in-between time, there's a time of groaning. A time of suffering. Humanity groans as we are subject to the futility of our mortality and decay, just as all creation groans as it experiences the same thing. This groaning creates solidarity with creation. And in the groaning there is hope.

As we become more aware of and experience our own mortality and the decay and destruction of the cosmos happening all around us what should we do, how do we pray, how do we hope? As the weight of the groaning at times pulls us under so that we are gasping for air, what will carry us up to the surface again? Many of us feel that we do not know what to do, even though people like Greta Thunberg inspire us with her passion, her ability to organize, advocate, educate

and raise money. But even the most fervent and dedicated of us have moments when we lose steam. We are limited by our inadequate knowledge of God's design. We are limited by our own health and energy and by lack of collaboration of others. How do we pray in these moments?

Just a few verses prior to our passage in verse 15, Paul says that we can pray to Abba, to our daddy God. This name for God signifies an intimate relationship.

Precisely In our own weakness and despair is where the spirit of God does what only God can do, for God is God and we are not. The spirit intercedes with groans too deep for words. And this spirit is available day and night, because the very spirit of God is living in us.

At one wild church gathering some months ago, we tried to practice audibly groaning with creation. It was **Very Quiet**. Perhaps the awkwardness and difficulty, was because this group of stoic people of European descent don't really know how to show emotion, Especially what may be perceived as negative emotion, like crying and groaning. But when we're in real physical pain, we can't help ourselves, even the most stoic among us. Paul uses the analogy of a woman in labor pain. Although he was not a woman, he must have overheard it or heard stories about it. When contractions hit a woman's body, it feels like there's not much you can do

but breathe through it, and hope and pray for that moment to come soon when the suffering is over and new life is birthed.

I gave birth in Germany twice and Sophie also gave birth in Germany twice. I also gave birth one time at Goshen hospital. With the free flow of information in our western world, we have so many resources and interventions and methods available to us to ease the pain of giving birth but in my experience, whether you're in Germany or the US pain is pain and the groaning and the waiting and the hoping are the same.

As a congregation that has gone through significant times of groaning and waiting for something new to be born, we find ourselves again in that place. As we age, we feel the groaning of our bodies and the eager longing to be set free from our bondage to decay. We as a world groan under the weight of climate change, and the many challenges of life. What is our hope in this in-between time? What is your hope?

Paul sums up our hope in vs. 28. We know that **all things** work together for *good* for those who love God and are called according to his purpose. Honestly, this sounds like American optimism and could be used to gloss over the real pain of real people, including each one of us here today. But, let's give Paul the benefit of

the doubt, because he has just talked about the suffering and the groaning long enough to know that he gets it. We are in the in-between time.

In this in-between time of groaning we have to remember that there is a cosmic story going on, a process of redemption. And knowing that somehow, even we cannot imagine how, God is going to work all things together for good. Paul talks about hope being that which we cannot yet see. We cannot yet see where this congregation is going. But we have HOPE that God will guide us and that all things will work together for good for Fellowship of Hope.

Our part is to continue to let God conform us to the image of God's Son. Jesus is at the center of our faith. Not our church, not our theology, not any one person, but Jesus.

Even as we face situations where we don't know what to do, and we can't see how good will come out of it, know that the spirit that lives in you, is interceding for you, for us. The spirit joins us in our groaning, our pondering and our waiting for the next faithful step to be revealed.

May we rest in hope, rest in the assurance of something good to come, even as we groan with all of creation.