

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner
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Acts 2:1-12/ Romans 8:18-27

Death Rattles or Labor Pains?

Today is the Festival of Pentecost. The day when we celebrate the birthday of the church. The day when we remember how God's wild Spirit blew into that room in Jerusalem, just as Jesus had promised it would. And that wild Spirit filled all who had gathered with proclamation and with energy. And then it caused all those people to become preachers and they all began to speak in a myriad of languages.

And people outside the house were drawn to that cacophony of Spirit to see what was going on. And through those foreign tongues, those Spirit-infused disciples began to spread the news of God's goodness running loose in the world. And God's living body, the Church, was birthed into this creation on that day. And like when a stone is thrown into a lake, the concentric circles of God's redemptive activity have been getting wider and wider ever since.

And then, and this is the way I have heard the story told to me time and time again, in America, these circles of God's work in and through the Church kept getting wider and wider until the zenith, the height, the pinnacle of church life in the 1950's and early 1960's. Why, in those good old days, you could just throw open the door and the people would just stream in and they would be waiting in lines to join the church.

And they would immediately get active and raise their kids in the Sunday School and in the Youth Group. And they would all tithe what they earned and bring homemade meals to the potluck supper. And all was well in America. The Church was at the center of life. And the clergy had special social standing and respect.

But then, then my parent's generation, the Boomers, began to cause some trouble and it all started tumbling down... Civil Rights and Integration; and Vietnam and Women's Liberation; and two-parent working families; and no more blue laws; and the sexual revolution; and rock n roll; and the insistence of women's ordination; and the removal of "Onward Christian Soliders" from the hymnal; and so many other chaotic social forces started to swirl together in hurricane force winds. And those winds of chaos swept the beloved Church from the center of life and nothing has ever been the same since then.

And now the neighborhoods have changed and young people prefer churches with an electric bass and drums; and unless you are a large, nondenominational Bible church, then clearly your tradition must have nothing to give. So we might as well turn off the lights and lock up the doors because the numbers show the mainline church is dying and there is nothing more to do except to listen to the groaning of the death rattles and wait at the graveside...

Now, I admit that I have used a little dramatic license in that retelling of the Church's story. Some of you who lived it would probably tell it very differently. But you would want to know that the story I've told is the story my generation and the generations that follow me have heard our whole growing up lives. From the moment we came into consciousness in the church, we have been told that the church that has given us life, is on its last leg. Dying. On its way out. A

sinking ship. Groaning in hospice care. Nothing left to give. Nothing left to offer the world. So we are told to batten down the hatches and duck our heads and try to take care of those who are already here because it takes a lot of energy to die. And that means that you don't have any energy to do much else other than maintain status quo.

Again, I realize I am being over-the-top and maybe even irritating to some of you, but this is the story that is being told again and again, and not just in the mainstream media, but by church folks and pastors. A clergy friend in my lectionary sermon group that met a couple of weeks ago in Austin tells a story about a meeting he attended two years ago. It was a meeting of Presbyterian clergy in his cluster of churches in Georgia. The conversation once again worked its way to the "we are dying" litany that is now so prevalent. One pastor made the statement, "In the year 2053, the last Presbyterian will turn out the lights as they leave the church." My friend just looked around and responded, "Over my dead body. I'll be 83 then and I am bound and determined to make sure that the light continues to shine."¹

I wished I had asked my friend if they had any reaction to that statement. I wonder if they said to him, "Umm, have you looked at the numbers lately?" Or, "Don't you realize that General Assembly and Presbyteries are having to radically restructure due to cuts in funding?" Or, "Don't you think you are being just a bit naïve?" Those are some of the reactions I have seen whenever someone proclaims a future of hope for the Church. "Well, bless your heart. You are just not old enough to know better." Wrong. It is not that those of us who feel hope are too naïve or too young or too old or too anything else. It is that many of us, probably many of you, hear the sounds of the groaning, but we hear the groaning as labor pains rather than as death rattles.

Romans 8:22: We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly...

Paul heard the groaning. He heard the groaning of a brand-new church that was being tested and tried every time it turned around. He heard the groaning of the Jewish Christians as they tried to figure out how on earth they were going to co-exist and be church with these new Gentile Christian converts. He heard the groaning of the early church patrons who held the meetings in their homes and supported the ministries with their generous funding. He heard the groaning of the leaders of the church as they argued over authority and who should have it and who should not. He heard the groaning of his own soul as he was repeatedly imprisoned for his actions on behalf of Christ's church.

Paul heard all that groaning, but instead of hearing the moans of death, he heard the moans of new life. Paul heard all of that groaning but he did not traipse out to the graveside; rather, he went straight into the waiting room of Labor and Delivery. Paul heard all of that groaning and he knew, he knew that God was birthing something brand new into the world in and through the fledgling Church. Paul heard all of that groaning as groans full of hope and life and new possibility. Why? Because Paul was an Easter person. Paul was an Easter person who was filled to the brim of Spirit and resurrection hope.

8: 24-25: For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, through patience, we eagerly expect.

That is the actual way the Greek readsⁱⁱ. In our English translation, we often lose the eager expectation that accompanies the patient waiting. But Paul encouraged his churches to not lose sight of that eager expectant hope with which, they, themselves, were called to be pregnant. Pregnant with the hope of redemption, of new life, of new creation, of Easter resurrection. Paul heard all of the groans of the Church and creation but because of his Easter eyes and his Easter soul, he knew that all of those groans were the labor pains of the hope-filled expectation of resurrection new life.

And guess what. Paul was not the only one called to be an Easter person. We are Easter people. The Church is an Easter church. We are called to not just see what we can see, but we are called to see what cannot be seen just yet – the new birth, the new creation, the resurrection new life that is on the way in, and through, and beyond the Church.

Our Easter call is why I grow so weary with all the death talk about the church. I grow so weary hearing over and over again about how we are losing our power and losing our influence and how some feel we are losing our way. Last I heard, we are a resurrection people, an Easter people. At the cross and the empty tomb, Death lost the ultimate power over our lives, over this world. Death no longer has dominion. Death, where is thy sting?

Even if the church were to die, we are resurrection people. Do we not think that the church would also be resurrected as a renewed and changed creationⁱⁱⁱ? We are an Easter people. We are a people who hear the groaning, who feel the groaning, who join in the groaning ourselves, but not as the groans of death rattles; rather, as the groans of labor pains.

We are called to resist joining in the funeral procession on its way to the prematurely marked grave of the mainline Presbyterian church. Rather, we are called to get our good in gear and to fill up the waiting room in Labor and Delivery as we eagerly expect God's new creation to come at any time.

Now, I fully realize that some might say it is easy for me to preach resurrection-filled, hope-pregnant, labor pains of newness here at Woodhaven. Look at us. Just this year we have already received 15 new members into our midst. We are wrapping up a very successful two-month Capital Improvement Campaign. We are ordaining and/or installing six new excellent elders today, including a Youth elder with a very bright future. After worship we are celebrating five full-time years of faithful ministry from our Associate Pastor Julie Riley. We already have more kids registered for VBS than we did at this time last year. Resurrection-filled, hope-pregnant, labor pains of newness are felt all over the place here at Woodhaven.

And sisters and brothers, we need not take that for granted. We need to thank God daily for the gift of being this congregation. Because it is not like this everywhere. From my time sitting on the Committee of Ministry for Grace Presbytery, I know that many churches, especially smaller ones and ones in rural areas, are struggling. And I know they might look at us and say "Hmm.. Yeah. The church is in labor pains and not in death rattles. Easy for you to say." I understand

how it might seem easier to preach resurrection-filled, hope-pregnant, labor pains of newness here at Woodhaven.

But we do not preach it simply because or only when we see it. We are called to preach it even when the numbers are down, or the budget is tight, or the Session is arguing, or the theological diversity in the church is making communal life tougher. We are called to preach the resurrection-filled, hope-pregnant Gospel of Jesus Christ precisely in those times, too. We are called to preach it with one another when jobs cannot be found. When the rent is due and the checkbook is empty. When the kids are in rehab or the marriage is on the rocks.

We are called to preach it with one another, to ourselves, precisely in those moments when the groans are starting to sound more and more like the rattles of death and less and less like the labor pains of new life. We are called to preach this resurrection-filled, hope-pregnant Gospel of Jesus Christ precisely when everybody is starting to make their way to the graveside. It is in those moments when Death is trying one more time to pretend to have power over us. And in response, we are called to let loose with the Spirit-filled news that God's goodness is running loose in this world and challenges us to just try and keep up with it.

For as God's Easter people we hope for what we do not yet see, but through patience, we eagerly expect all that God has promised. And what has our God promised? Nothing less than new creation and full redemption. Nothing less than the time when death is no more and the shroud that has been cast over all the peoples is destroyed and God has wiped away every last tear forever. That is what our God has promised. And that is what we, God's church, have been called to proclaim from the moment the Spirit blew into that room at Jerusalem until that promised day when all shall be well.

And until that day, may we have the faithful, expectant, hope-filled courage to resist joining the premature funeral procession for God's Church. But rather, may we call all people to the Labor and Delivery waiting room of God's promised New Life. For there is only one Head of the Church. And his name is NOT death, but Emmanuel, God-with-us, forever! Amen.

ⁱ Thank you Rev. Dr. Matt Fry! Presented in a paper at *The Well* in May, 2009 – Austin, Texas.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.