

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner  
16<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Romans 8:18-25

### Labor Pains

My friend and I spoke a couple of days ago. He, too, is a Presbyterian minister and needed to just talk for a few minutes about a recent meeting with one of his church members. “She came into my office,” he began, “and she just wept. It was like her heart was broken and when she opened her mouth, all the pieces fell to the floor in front of my desk.

“And I,” my friend continued, “I just felt completely helpless. I knew what I was supposed to say as her pastor. I knew that I was supposed to speak with her about God’s constant presence. I knew I was supposed to speak with her about God’s holding of her pain. I knew I was supposed to speak to her of the hope that would one day return. But her heart was broken and the pieces were strewn on the floor of my study. So I just sat, listened and silently prayed.” And as my friend sat and prayed, watching his parishioner seem to fall apart, he heard the deep groaning of her spirit.

I picked up the Dallas Morning News on Thursday morning and read the following headlines on the front page – “The Economy – More Bad News” and “Cartels targeting top politicians and families with death threats.” So I put the paper down and turned on the television. “On Today,” began Matt Lauer, “we hear from ordinary Americans who are feeling down about the job market, upset over decreasing wages but increasing prices, and an overall sense of discouragement about the way things are going. But first, the weather...” So I turned the television off. I went upstairs to take my shower and to listen to the radio. I turned it on. “Today, on the Diane Rehm show, ongoing gloomy economic reports and a bank failure in California have investors and consumers on edge.” I turned the radio off, frankly relieved I had not yet heard the international news.

My goodness, I thought, what is going on? And as I sat and prayed, noticing the way it looked like things were simply falling apart, I felt the deep groaning from all around.

And then, I looked at some websites of churches in Grace Presbytery. I wanted to gage how the latest General Assembly decisions regarding ordination standards and human sexuality were playing out. I read one website on which the pastor declared that the PCUSA was on a path of self-destruction by choosing to walk a different path than the one that God had given. The word “heresy” was even used. And then I went to another website on which the GA’s actions were applauded and celebrated as finally taking small steps towards justice and faithful living. And I remembered that soon, we will all be at our September Presbytery meeting together for worship, discussion and decision making. And I imagine that the undercurrent of that meeting will be one full of deep groaning as we keep trying to figure out how to be the church together with such major differences in how we interpret Scripture, faithful living, and God’s will for the church.

And so I again sat and prayed, and I soon realized that the loudest groaning I heard was coming up from my own spirit.

Therefore, knowing that one reason we read Scripture is because it reads us<sup>i</sup>, I turned to today's text from the book of Romans: "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us" Paul writes. "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God ... 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 while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies..."

Paul knew something about groaning<sup>ii</sup>. At the end of this letter he writes about an offering that he was busily collecting for the church in Jerusalem, an offering that he would deliver before coming to Rome. He was collecting money for the Jerusalem church not only because they needed the monetary support, but also to visibly demonstrate the unity in Christ that transcended human boundaries. For you see, the Jerusalem church was primarily made up of Jewish Christians. And the churches from whom Paul was collecting the offering were primarily made up of Gentile Christians. Paul knew that this offering could be an amazing symbol of unity. But he was not naïve. He worried that the Jerusalem believers would not accept the offering precisely because it came from Gentile believers. Paul knew it was one thing to preach about their unity in Christ. But it was something else to try and figure out how to live it. Yes, Paul knew something about groaning.

The church in Rome also knew something about groaning. In chapter 14, we discover that this church community was beginning to deal with some pretty harsh church divisions themselves. Now their quarrels, unlike our quarrels, were not about ordination or sexuality. Their quarrels were about belief and diet. They were arguing about whether or not believers of Christ had to follow kosher law and what happened when different people in the church answered that question in different ways. Some said no and others said yes. So the church was full of both omnivores and vegans who were expected to break bread together, to share their meals and their lives living as one body, and to abide by each other's different decisions about kosher law. But, instead of living out their unity and agreeing to respectfully disagree, each group was beginning to deem itself the most faithful one and serving as both judge and jury of the other group's faithfulness. You wonder what they might have written up on their website. You wonder if heresy might have been used then. Yes, the early church in Rome knew something about groaning.

Paul, my preacher friend, the church in Rome, the PCUSA, you and me—we all know something about groaning. We all know something about waking up, looking around and taking stock of our lives, or our church, or the news headlines, and feeling an unyielding tension between the way things are and the way God promises they will be. We all know something about watching friends seem to fall apart, or watching ourselves seem to fall apart, and wondering how long, O Lord, will it go on this way? Yes, we all know something about groaning.

So perhaps it would do us all good to remember what else we all know, as well. Again, let us turn back to Paul's letter to the Romans. In this one letter, Paul wrote as a poet, as a theologian, as a fellow believer who was wrestling with the groaning times in which he lived and ministered. All of creation, Paul wrote, both the natural world and human beings, is marked by futility and decay. All of creation fights against this bondage to sin and to death.

And yet, in the middle of all that groaning, creation also waits with **eager longing** to experience the future God has in store for it. Now, the word we translate as eager longing is much more evocative in the Greek. It is “apokaradokia,” a word that suggests the stretching out of the neck to look for what is coming. In other words, “the whole creation is on tiptoe” waiting for God’s future that is on the way<sup>iii</sup>.

Let us pause for a moment and think about that. Paul testifies that all of creation – human, plant, animal—all of creation groaning in pain and in waiting does not do so standing flatfooted, eyes downcast, head in hands. No, as all of creation groans and waits, it does so while standing on tiptoe, stretching out its neck to catch a glimpse of what is certainly on the way.

This picture of expectant waiting reminds me of what I used to love about going to the airport. Before current security concerns outlawed the practice, I used to love watching reunions at the gate. I could never read while waiting for my own flight, because I would find myself enraptured by the human drama that was playing all around. I would watch people as they waited for the plane to land and for their expected one to come through that doorway. Some of them stood still at the big window facing the tarmac. Others paced a bit, back and forth. All of them knew that their constant looking out the window or their constant pacing would not make the plane arrive any sooner, but they just could not help it. They were too excited. Children carrying homemade welcome home signs. Grandparents holding a balloon. A man carefully cradling a single rose. A young woman in a fancy dress, hands continually fluffing up her hair. I would find myself enthralled by this shared sense of eagerness and expectancy of reunion. It was as if the whole group was standing on tiptoe waiting for what was certainly on its way.

And Paul claims that eager, expectant waiting is exactly what is going on in every moment and on every day. All of creation stands on tiptoe, waiting with eager longing, for the arrival of God’s redemptive future that God is even now bringing about.

But why? Why do we wait on tiptoe? Why do we not simply stand flatfooted in our waiting and in our groaning, eyes downcast, heads in hands? **Because of the Gospel.** Because of what we know of God through Jesus, our brother and our Savior. In Jesus, Paul claims, God took on our human condition, a condition of bondage and decay and groaning.

God became flesh in Jesus, Paul writes, precisely so that God could set creation **free** in Jesus. **Free** from the bondage to futility, to sin and to death. **Free** from the power of pain that can lock us down, leak us of hope, and define us. **Free** from any separation we might feel between creation and Creator.

God became flesh in Jesus, Paul testifies, so that **we might become free** to pray and to groan and to wait, but always as those with hope, always as those on tiptoe, always as those who know with certainty that God is not done yet and God’s redemptive future is certainly on the way, and is indeed even being brought about here and now. God’s incarnation in Jesus is why even the rocks and the trees feel free to stretch out their necks and stand on tiptoe in eager anticipation of what is to be soon and very soon.

Even in our groaning, even in our pain, even when it seems like we are falling apart, or our friend is falling apart, or our world or our church is falling apart and the shards of broken hearts are strewn all over the floor – **even then** creation still waits with eager expectancy, standing on tiptoe, stretching out its neck to catch a glimpse of what is certainly on the way.

And, you know what else Paul knows and claims in this letter? He claims that because of Jesus, all these groans that we both make and hear are not the groans of death. They are not the groans of a suffering without end. They are not the groans of hopelessness. On the contrary, according to Paul's poetry, all of creation groans with **labor pains**—pains, indeed, but pains filled with expectant hope over what new thing is being born, over what new creation is to be.

And I cannot help but wonder what would happen if we heard the groaning through Paul's ears. How might my friend have responded differently to his parishioner if he had heard her groaning not only as immense pain, yes, but also as labor pains? Perhaps he might have been able to talk and pray with her about the newness in her life that will be born after her grief had time to fade.

And what if we read the newspaper, watched the Today show, and listened to the radio and heard the groaning of a world not only in pain, but also the groaning of a world that was in the birthing time of transition. How might that change the way we acted in these groaning days? How might that change the way we prayed in these groaning days?

And, what if at our September Presbytery meeting, we all decided to pray for the stamina to endure a long labor and for the vision to see just what **is** being born in our church? For we all know that things are changing. We cannot claim to be a church Reformed and always being reformed by God and not expect for things to change, for new ways to be born, because God's Spirit is still moving and working in the Labor and Delivery room of our ecclesiastical life! But how might hearing our church's groans as labor pains change the conversation?

I am not sure. We do not know if it changed the conversation in Rome. But I certainly wonder how it could change us. Don't you? I certainly wonder what might happen if we went through our life, hearing our groaning as **both** pain and labor, standing on expectant tiptoe, waiting for the fullness of God's reign that is certainly on its way, eagerly stretching out our necks as far as we could to catch a glimpse of the new creation. How might we live and listen and pray differently than we do now?

I am not sure. But I know that I stand on tiptoe, eagerly longing to find out. Join me.

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<sup>i</sup> Coffin, William Sloane. Something that I remember he said and I am sure it is in one of his books! ☺

<sup>ii</sup> I am indebted to Dr. Beverly Gaventa for helping me ponder this sermon. Her sermon to the Covenant Network in Nov. 2007 had incredible background and commentary for Romans. You can find it at [www.covenantnetwork.org/sermons&papers/gaventa.htm](http://www.covenantnetwork.org/sermons&papers/gaventa.htm)

<sup>iii</sup> Philips, J.B. Commentary on the New Testament.