

Groaning Pains

Romans 8:22-27

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

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On Tuesday I did what I usually do on Tuesday morning, which is to have a look at the assigned texts for the upcoming Sunday and choose a direction to go for my sermon.

It was a tough choice this week. There are so many good options for Pentecost Sunday!

I could talk about Ezekiel and his vision of the valley of dry bones. I could talk about how the Spirit breathes life into that which is dead. That's a fun one!

I could focus on the passage from the gospel of John where Jesus promises the Holy Spirit, calling him the Spirit of Truth, the "advocate," the one who pleads another's cause before a judge or an intercessor.

Or how about the most well-known of Pentecost texts from Acts, where we witness the spectacular imagery of tongues of fire resting upon the people and hear of strange and unexpected languages proclaiming God's deeds of power, undoing the confusion that began when God confused human tongues at Babel.

I could focus on the birth to the church, the gift of a Spirit who pours out life to all people, men, women, regardless of age, race, class, social status.

In the end, I decided to go a different route. As you've heard, I chose one of this week's alternate passages from Romans.

I decided to talk about suffering, weakness, and hope. And how the Holy Spirit operates amid all this.

The title of my sermon this morning is “Groaning Pains” (I did not get this to Joani in time for the bulletin to be printed!).

Groaning pains. The title obviously comes from 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 while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

Maybe this seems bleak to you. Pentecost should be a more celebratory Sunday, no? The other themes I just mentioned would surely be more joyful! At the very least, maybe a bit more exciting!

Well, all I can say in my defense is that I see sermons as profoundly contextual in nature.

They are attempts to hear the voice of God *to* a particular group of people with their own sets of experiences and *through* a particular person with his or her own sets of experiences. And all of this at a particular *time*.

How is God speaking to *me* and what might God be trying to say to *us* at this moment? This is the question I try to ask each Sunday.

I’m going to speak personally. I’ve been thinking a lot about weakness lately. Not only have I been thinking about it, but I’ve also been *feeling* it.

For nearly twenty years, I have found writing pretty easy. I write a sermon and one or two blog posts every week, on top of various other articles. Words have always come quite naturally to me. Some of you likely think, “yeah, maybe a little *too* naturally!” ☺

For the last month or so, it has been coming harder. Maybe it’s just writer’s block. Maybe it’s just a tough stretch. But there have been days lately where any time I sit down to write, it feels like I am trying to get water out of a stone.

I’ll start to write, and I’ll think, “I’ve already said that.” Or I won’t like what I’ve come up with. Or I’ll think, that’s just a cliché. Or the words just won’t come.

One day over breakfast I said to Naomi, “What if I’ve used up all my words? What if my brain only has a fixed number of sermons and articles, and there’s nothing left?”

I said it mostly in jest. But deep in the dark recesses of my mind, there was this tiny little fear. *What if...?* Writing is a big part of my identity, how I understand my vocation, where I think I'm gifted. If I can't do that? Then what?

So, I've been groaning a bit. Perhaps we all have moments like this in our lives.

I've also been groaning when I look outward. One of the gifts of being a pastor in one place for a fairly long time is that you get to know people. That probably sounds obvious. And it is. But it's also true.

Each Sunday, I look out and I see not just your bright and beautiful faces. I also see stories.

Some of these are very hard stories. Stories of kids who are struggling. Stories of illness and affliction. Stories of loss and heartache. Stories of anxiety and depression and loneliness. Stories of fractured relationships, even animosity. Stories of doubt and prayers that seem to go unanswered. Stories of traumas endured. Stories of agonized decisions. Stories of regret and failure.

These may sound like kind of generic categories—just the hard things that people go through in life. But I can assure you that behind each one of those categories I have in mind a specific story.

Some of these stories are in the past. Some are going on right now.

I feel these stories deeply. And, yes, I pray for you. And, yes, I try to listen and support as best I can. But I obviously can't fix any of these stories.

And then I think about the hard stories that I encounter each Monday in my chaplaincy work at the jail. And I look out at the opioid crisis in our city. And I think about the coarsening of our public discourse. And the polarization in our culture that seems only to be getting worse. And all the war and suffering and injustices of our world.

And, yeah, “groaning” seems like the right word. Sometimes, all we can do is groan.

Because it's not always obvious what we should do, is it? Or say. Or pray. The problems of our lives and the world seem too big, and we are too small.

We don't know enough. What we do know bumps into all kinds of other variables we can't control or predict. We try to do the right thing and it doesn't always lead to the right outcomes.

We pray for what we think are the right things, but maybe sometimes we've got it all wrong. So many of our prayers are to avoid hardships of all kinds, but perhaps sometimes this is precisely the road God is taking us down to grow us in ways that we wouldn't otherwise.

We just don't know.

The Spirit helps us in our weakness... The Spirit intercedes, with sighs too deep for words.

The gift of the Holy Spirit meant many things for the early church, and it means many things for the world today.

But perhaps one of the most encouraging roles of the Spirit is simply to groan alongside a groaning creation.

When we have no words, the Holy Spirit takes over.

From Romans 8, we learn that when we don't know what to pray, when we feel like we can't pray, when we don't even want to pray... When hope is difficult, and patience is running out...

When we are weary and broken down... when the shadows of the night are all we see and new light seems a long way off... the Holy Spirit is there with us, alongside us, groaning along with us.

This is an enormous comfort. God is present in our groaning world because of Pentecost.

But God is not just present; God is also active, building hope.

Not for the first time, the editors of the lectionary cut the reading off at an interesting place. If we were to keep reading one short verse in Romans 8, we would come across these words:

²⁸ We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

This is the hope that stands over all our weary groaning in this unfinished, fallen world where we don't always know how to pray or what to do or what to say.

If our love is pointed in the right direction, in God's direction, we can be confident that God is working in all things to bring about what is good. Even in our muddled-up confusion and sadness and exhaustion, even in our missteps and failures.

Last month, I quoted a beautiful sermon from the former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams called "Building Up Ruins." I want to quote that sermon again. The context is a reflection on the Israelite exiles return to Jerusalem under Nehemiah:

God will take us back to the place where our... ideals and aspirations, faith and love, were destroyed and defeated. Like Nehemiah's return to old Jerusalem, it begins as a sad nocturnal tour around the relics of defeat; but God belongs to the future, and there is a new city to come down out of heaven. Risen life in and with Christ is now, entirely fresh, full of what we could never have foreseen or planned; yet it is built from the bricks and mortar, messy and unlovely, of our past. God is faithful: it is his hand that will uncover in all our experiences the golden thread of his covenant love, and so point to a future where our memories can be healed and transfigured. *Our* earth, *our* dull and stained lives, these are the living stones of God's new Jerusalem.¹

This is the Christian hope. That God is guiding our individual stories, the story of the church, and the story of all creation to a glorious conclusion.

And as Paul reminds us, "if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience" (Romans 8:25).

There is much that we do not see in the life of faith.

We don't always see the kingdom of God advancing.

¹ Rowan Williams, *Open to Judgment: Sermons and Addresses* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1994), 79-80.

We don't always see love triumphing over fear. We don't always see faith moving mountains. We don't always see our prayers answered in the ways we hope. We don't always see God as an active force in our world or in our lives.

So much of what we believe in and hope for takes place behind the veil.

The Holy Spirit is powerfully present precisely in our weakness.

When we don't know how to articulate what we are feeling, or how to process what is going on, or how to express our hopes and joys and fears, we can trust that the one who lives within us, the one who is always leading and guiding us and conforming us into the image of Christ, is searching our hearts, and understands us better than we understand ourselves.

Most importantly, we can be confident that the Holy Spirit's intercession for us when we are feeling weak is always in accordance with the will of God.

We don't always know how to pray or what to pray. But, as J.I. Packer once put it, "God corrects our prayers on the way up." God translates all our desire and our fear and our anxiety and our longing into a divine key.

On this Pentecost Sunday, I simply want to remind you of these two truths of the Spirit.

First, God is present. The Spirit is indeed our Divine Advocate. As Jesus promised, we are not left as orphans. The good news of Pentecost is that we are never truly alone.

Second, God is active. God still listens. God still speaks. In all things, even hard things, even when we feel like we've come to the end of ourselves (maybe especially then!), God is working to bring about what is good for those who love him and are called according to his purpose.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

