

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Day of Pentecost
Sunday, May 23, 2021**

**“In Our Weakness”
Romans 8:22-27**

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

Our Epistle Lesson this morning, from the Letter of Paul to the Romans, is about *groaning* and *hoping* and—in between—*sighing*. In this passage, Paul acknowledges honestly the profound brokenness of our world, yet also offers an almost prophetic vision of hope. And then, as we may wonder where this leaves us, Paul assures us of the continual care of the Holy Spirit.

Paul writes, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves [...] groan inwardly” (vv. 22-23). Notice the repetition, as Paul acknowledges the hurt suffered not only by humanity (“we ourselves [...] groan inwardly”), but also all the world (“creation has been *groaning*”). Our own groaning—the deep groaning of humanity—is gut-wrenchingly evident. One commentator, writing a little over ten years ago, said this of our “groaning”: “Any brief review of the current news will give concrete examples: global terrorism, wars raging around the world, sexual exploitation of women and children, modern-day slavery, oppressive regimes, gang crime, drug and alcohol abuse, marital and family distress, incurable diseases, pandemics” (Schmit).

Ten years later, that list is just as current (especially that final reference to pandemics)...yet, at the same time, trying to offer this type of list seems always inadequate, as we think of more and more causes of our shared groaning: I’d add to that list racism, antisemitism, misogyny, homophobia; I’d add to that list poverty, and hunger, and thirst. Merely to begin such a list is to realize that we cannot complete it: we could never list all the causes and cases of human suffering. Paul, wisely, doesn’t make the attempt in this passage, but instead acknowledges the broader condition of human suffering: “but we ourselves [...] groan inwardly.”

And joining in our own “groaning,” Paul writes, “the whole creation has been groaning.” Paul—writing in the first century—did not witness environmental degradation as we know it; nonetheless, I want to attend to the ways that Paul’s words resonate with us today, living in what has been called the Anthropocene, this age of ecological destruction wrought by us. The breadth of our own destructive actions is such that—as with human suffering—one can hardly begin a list without realizing that any list would be incomplete... So on this, I’d like to highlight one particular facet of ecological destruction—the damage we inflict on waters—by lifting up the voice a young person in our congregation. Listen to this passage from Clara MacNeil’s award-winning essay, “Blue Eulogy” (which was published in the November 2020 congregational newsletter).

She writes: “We must recognize the damage caused by our own selfish actions if we are to stop the ongoing peril in our waters. The destruction is vast. While we all enjoy time on the beach, the impact of real estate developments and oceanfront tourist attractions are taking a massive toll on marine life. The traffic of ships across the vast waterways adds yet more to the

destruction of the oceans and ruins marine habitats. From the dumping of garbage, to oil spills to the damage from massive anchors and equipment, the impact is significant from large ships. Unsustainable fishing destroys not only marine life but threatens the food security and work of many. The oceans are home to rich mineral, oil and gas reserves. Drilling for and collecting these reserves has yet further impact on the fragile habitats deep in our oceans.”

She adds, “Pollutants on land often make their way into the oceans. Chemicals, pesticides and, most significantly plastics, take a massive toll on the ocean. Many marine animals perish by consuming plastic. Once an animal has consumed the plastic the animal is not able to digest it, often creating blockages in the digestive system, leaving the animal to starve to death. Animals also become entangled in the plastic and suffocate. Take for example the sea turtle. Many sea turtles mistake single use plastic bags as jellyfish, leading a turtle to a terrible demise. ‘Ghost’ fishing nets, those damaged nets cut loose and disposed of in the water from fishing boats, account for roughly half of the plastic in the oceans. Five garbage vortices exist, the Great Pacific Garbage Patch being the largest, of around 1.6 million square kilometres. It is composed of 80,000 metric tons of plastic, ghost nets and other debris. Researchers suggest that up to 700 marine species are at risk of becoming extinct.” As we reflect on this ecological devastation, which Clara MacNeil eloquently and powerfully describes, we might find ourselves echoing Paul’s words: “We know that the whole creation has been *groaning*.”

So Paul acknowledges “the present suffering” (Hawkins) through this language of *groaning* (our own groaning and that of creation)... Yet Paul also points beyond present suffering toward a certain hope. As one scholar puts it, “Paul acknowledges the reality of suffering, yet insists on finding hope in its midst. [...] Without ignoring the reality of suffering, hope insists that suffering does not have the final word” (Rindge). And for Paul, hope doesn’t appear separately from suffering; rather, for Paul, hope emerges from and in suffering (Rindge).

You may have noticed that, while addressing Paul’s reflections on *groaning*, I at first passed over some of the hints of hope that Paul expresses amid his reflections on *groaning*. Paul does not say merely “that the whole creation has been groaning” but that “that the whole creation has been groaning *in labour pains until now*” (v. 22). As the severe pain of a mother’s labour points toward new life and new possibility in a child’s birth, Paul tells us, likewise the *groanings* of creation point toward some future life. Similarly, when Paul describes our *groaning*, he describes us in the hopeful position of awaiting a future redeeming: “but we ourselves, *who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies*” (v. 23). The *groanings* we experience are the *groanings* of those who hold tightly to a future promise.

And what is this hope that emerges in the midst of suffering and struggling—in the midst of *groaning*? Paul writes: “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, we wait for it with patience” (vv. 24-25). In these few verses, in this “striking analysis of Christian hope” (Wright), there’s a great deal to take in; but we might notice two aspects of hope here: hope is unseen, and hope involves patience.

For Paul, hope is no less compelling or convincing because it is unseen. That is, the reality of our hope—the reliability of our hope—is not diminished when the object of hope cannot yet

be glimpsed. “Now hope that is seen is not hope,” Paul says, “For who hopes for what is seen?” I don’t hope to gather with you remotely via videoconferencing (that’s not hope, because it’s already the case); I hope to gather with you safely and in person someday (that’s hope, because it’s not yet seen). The unseen-ness of hope is not a deficiency in hope; that’s simply part of hope. And as hope is unseen, the Christian “stance” of hope is—Paul tells us—one of patiently waiting (cf. Wright): “But if we hope for what we do not see,” Paul writes, “we wait for it with patience” (v. 25).

This kind of patience—this hopeful waiting—is vital; yet, lest it appear as though we are left alone in our groaning and in our patient hoping, Paul affirms the presence and help of the Holy Spirit. He writes: “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God” (vv. 26-27).

We live in a kind of “in between”: we live now amid much brokenness in ourselves and in our world, in this time of *groaning*...and yet we wait patiently, *hoping* in this promise of redemption and new life for us and for all creation. But where does that leave us? How do we live “in between”—between groaning and hoping? How could we ever be strong enough to hold it together between the present suffering and the promised redemption? Paul’s answer for us is: we can’t! We’re *not* strong enough—not even close! And yet, in our weakness, in between groaning and hoping, we are not alone, for—as we celebrate on this Pentecost Sunday—the Spirit “helps us in our weakness.”

In between the groaning and the hoping, in between the present suffering and the future promise, we may wait and pray—and, when our own prayers stumble inarticulately, even then God can come near to us by the Spirit to offer the prayers that we can’t manage. Years ago, when I was serving as a minister in North Bay, I visited a man who was dying in a long-term care facility: his adult daughter was there, and she asked me to pray. As he lay dying, I prayed...but my words became somehow jumbled, and I stumbled inarticulately. Afterward, I felt like I’d really failed in that moment as a minister, since—at this sacred time of death—my prayer had been inadequate. Yet some weeks later, an elder called me and told me that he’d bumped into that same adult daughter at the grocery store, and she’d told the elder that—as her father lay dying—I had offered a beautiful prayer which had been a great solace and strength to her... It turns out that a meaningful prayer *had* been offered that afternoon, but it certainly didn’t come from me: “for we do not know how to pray as we ought,” Paul writes, “but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words (v. 26).

It is a great comfort that, in between the groaning and the hoping, the Spirit who is near to us helps us *in deepest sighing*... Yet we should not make the mistake of thinking that the Spirit merely comforts and does not also challenge. As we live amid the groaning today—and stand patiently in our hoping, comforted by the Spirit’s sighing—the Spirit enables us to serve as a people of hope. The Spirit does not anesthetize us to the groaning all around, but empowers us to come alongside those who need hope and comfort today, and to come to the aid of our damaged and hurting natural world. As the theologian Eberhard Busch writes: “The Holy Spirit is indeed the presence of God among us. [...] When the Spirit enters our lives, we do not become despondent and passive. We find ourselves given courage and hope. The Spirit

empowers us so that we do not resign ourselves to what is, but live in hope for God's future. The Spirit gives us 'fresh legs' and lifts us up. [...] We pray that God's Spirit will lift us [...] and empower us." Amen.