

December 10, 2017 – Journey Worship

TEXT: Romans 8:18–25

TITLE: Birth Pains & Advent Hope

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Romans 8, verse 22: *We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now.* Childbirth is a pretty common analogy in scripture and in literature. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus compared childbirth to the season of spring, saying how after the winter's cold “the groaning earth gives birth in travail to what has been formed within her.” And in John 16:21 it says, *When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world.*

So here's my problem: I'm a man about to speak about childbirth. If I stand here and claim that no woman remembers the pain of labor and childbirth, I will not get out of this Social Hall alive. Carol Burnett once described childbirth pains in this way: she said men should take hold of their lower lip firmly with both hands and then pull it up over our heads. Then we'll know what birth pains feel like!

Groaning in childbirth is the central image used here in Paul's discussion of the present sufferings and the promised time of future redemption and glory. As you heard, Paul wrote *All creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God, the Lord's redemption of all things.* So the first step in discussing this topic is to expand the metaphor to include the world. All creation groans. Human relations with God and with one another are broken by sin and pride and violence. This brokenness leads to destruction and abuse of the gifts of creation around us—the water, soil, air, plants and animals. That is why scientists now call this geological era “Anthropocene” because human beings (anthropos) are literally changing life on earth—and not for the better. Climate change is not so much a matter of global warming as it is “global weirding.” We are living through “once in a lifetime” floods, fires, and hurricanes that now happen every other year. Coupled with oil spills from pipelines, groundwater pollution and earthquakes from fracking, and destruction of natural habitats for both salt and freshwater fish—Paul isn't exaggerating: *All of creation groans in labor pains right now.*

But by definition, labor pains mean something is about to be born. Something else is going to happen. Paul talks about groaning while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies—and the truth is we wait expectantly for this because we already have the first fruits of the Spirit. What does that phrase mean? Originally, first fruits referred to the Jewish practice of bringing sacrifices and offerings to the temple from the “first fruits” of the harvest or the animal birthing season. It was a conscious choice: Do I hold onto the first lambs or calves or corn or wheat, seeing it as my reward for my labor—or do I bring a portion of these first fruits to God, to acknowledge the Lord of Creation and the One who knows my needs and ultimately provides for us all?

But look what Paul does in this passage. Where before first fruits were things that people used to bring to God, now Paul talks about them as things God has given to us!

Paul said “We have the first fruits of the Spirit.” The fruits of the Spirit are things given to us through Christ—to us personally and especially to us as the church. In Galatians 5:22-23 Paul lists them off and there are nine of them: *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control*. That changes everything! If you list off the good things in your life—joy, peace, love, patience, generosity, so on—and consider them all to be part of your own ability, you may end up wondering why you need God at all. Because all of us can be loving, patient, peaceful on all our own at least some of the time. But if these qualities are not readily inherent in you – not simply part of what it means to be human—but are only truly present and fully lived out as a gift from God, then these fruits take on a totally different character. Now acts of kindness are God working through you. Times of love, gentleness, self-control are being a vessel of God’s spirit and God’s grace in a broken and hurting world.

That is a liberating idea because now the living out of those virtues isn’t dependent on you—isn’t dependent on the depth of your patience or the strength of your self-control—because our resources will always fall short. Our virtue fuel tank regularly shows the needle on “E.” However, God’s capacity in all these areas is deeper and wider and richer than we can imagine. Trusting in the heaven-sent gifts from a loving God is critical, especially as we groan and await the full redemption of our world. It is by trusting in the One who gives these first fruits that the next sentence Paul wrote becomes truly possible: *vs. 24—In hope we are saved*. Yes, at times we groan—yet we have the first fruits, the gifts of God, which is why we know the good news that in hope we are saved.

Let’s look at this another way. In the middle of Wisconsin there’s a river called Waupaca, which in English means “tomorrow.” The “Tomorrow” river takes just over a day to travel down, so any canoeists or travelers can only reach their destination the day after they start—hence the name “tomorrow.” Years ago I read a description of a woman who loved watching the river tumble and eddy between its banks, and how she would pluck stones from the shallow waters and store them in water in glass jars at home. When she admired them later, they took her back to the river named Tomorrow and brought her real peace.

We talk about how time is like a flowing river, ever moving forward, going around bends and stretching as far as we can see. Naming a river “Tomorrow” is an act of hope. The waters remind us that this river will exist tomorrow, that it will continue to flow toward tomorrow, and when we reach the end of all our tomorrows, even if we die, it will flow and inspire others with hope for many tomorrows yet to be. There’s a humorous quote that says: *If you run in the rat race, even if you win the race, at the end of the day, you’re still a rat*. In place of running in the rat race, think of yourself as God’s child flowing on the river named “tomorrow,” trusting that where we are going, God is already there—just as God is with us always, providing the virtues and first fruits we need. That’s why whether it is yesterday, today, tomorrow: in hope we are saved.

Going back to Paul’s original metaphor, to conceive a child—to go through the process of childbirth—is an act of hope. It is to believe in a world both now and for the future that

is a place suitable for children to enter, grow, live and enjoy. It is to trust that beyond the horizon we can see today is still a world tomorrow in which children can grow up safely and eventually become adults themselves, making the same decisions, facing the same responsibilities, and receiving the same gifts of the Spirit that God has given us. Childbirth isn't just a one woman + one child act. Childbirth is "one woman + all the children that will follow" act. Childbirth is also all women and all men groaning and worrying yet working and believing for the sake of the collective future about to be revealed. It is all of us caring about all the children around us—caring about things like the brokenness inflicted on creation, soil, air, water—the brokenness inflicted in how we live together—caring about fixing unequal education opportunities, unjust social services, stopping unholy racism, sexism, prejudice and violence. It is about all of us wanting to make things right—as we groan about bondage, addiction, war, spiritual decay.

Now every woman knows there is no shortcut in childbirth. Nine women working together can't make a baby in one month. Some things take time—endurance—struggle. That may not be a popular message. In today's world, what sells is what promises easy answers. And many of those answers don't require God, church or faith. Atheism is now a viable option for many people. Christianity in many ways has become the risky, difficult option for sincere people of intellect. We have always been a distinctive people (which is a polite way of saying that we've always been a bit unusual and counter-cultural.) Our Jewish predecessors taught about a God who gives commandments, sets rules for Sabbath, guides people in ways of circumcision and kosher dietary law. Our early Christian predecessors lifted up a Savior who was crucified, literally gathering beneath the symbol of his cross, sharing ritual meals of bread and wine, holding their possessions in common, seeking out a community made up of slaves and nobles, women and men, old faith and new faith.

Now outside the church there are many other places of "worship"—temples to consumerism, capitalism, partisan politics, nationalistic xenophobia. Our task is to subvert these false religions with one that points to the God who rescued the Hebrews from slavery, who gathered the Christians from the margins, and who holds our hand, wipes away our tears, and loves us unceasingly as we groan to give birth to what must be born. The fruits of the Spirit have shown us what it looks like. The incarnation of Christ has embodied it already—just as the resurrection of Christ has proven its true power. The baptism waters taken from the river named Tomorrow have been poured over our heads and will be poured over our children and children's children as well.

So during this season of Advent—this season of waiting, let Paul's final words ease our souls and encourage us for what lies ahead: *In hope we are 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.*