



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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Last Sunday of the Church Year

November 22, 2015

“All Creation Groans”

(Romans 8:22-25)

Rev. David K. Groth

“For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” (Rom. 8:22ff).

COLLECT: Lord Jesus Christ, so govern our hearts and minds by Your Holy Spirit that, ever mindful of Your glorious return, we may persevere in both faith and holiness of living; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever **Amen**

There are days in life, days, so dark, so sad that there are no words to express the sadness, and all you can do is groan. December 7, 1941 was one such day for some of you, when Pearl Harbor came under a surprise attack from the aircraft of six Japanese carriers. 2,403 Americans were killed and another 1,200 wounded.

November 22, 1963 was another, the day JFK was assassinated. You remember where you were when you heard. You remember the shock and the sadness. And you groaned.

April 19, 1995 is another, when the Alfred P. Murrah building in Oklahoma City was bombed, killing 168 people including 19 youngsters in the day care center. And you groaned.

September 11, 2001, when just under 3,000 died. And you groaned.

And there have been others, perhaps another just eight/nine days ago, when the city of Paris, so beautiful, so vulnerable, was attacked in the name of Allah, and over 129, most under the age of 30, were senselessly killed. And you groaned.

We groan when a car full of Watertown teenagers careens into a tree, a neighbor commits suicide, a mom is so drunk or high that she can't even manage to feed the children. We groan when our own children make poor decisions. Most of them they can recover from; others not so much.

Sometimes we are the ones who make others groan, because our words cut so deeply, (or our actions), that they are unable to articulate their sadness and hurt. All they can do is groan.

So we groan, and cause others to groan. But it's not just us. The whole creation is also groaning. That's what Paul says in this mysterious text from Romans 8. He writes, "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it." That is, because of Adam's sin, the creation also came under God's judgment. As a result, nothing in creation has been able to fulfill its God-given purposes, not the soil, not the bluejay, not the musky nor the oak tree. All creation is subjected to the effects of the fall and falls short of its God-given purposes even as we fall short of our God-given purposes. So the whole creation groans as it waits in eager expectation. It groans as it waits to be fixed and made right again.

When Adam fell into sin, all the earth and all of God's creatures fell with him. The earth had been God's agent of blessing for Adam and Eve, but now it also becomes God's agent of judgment. The earth will produce delicious raspberries but also poisonous hemlock. It will produce gentle rains that soften the furrows, but also downpours that drown the fields and fill the basements, harmless song birds but also venomous rattle snakes.

All creation is caught up in the fall of man. All creation, both the natural world and human beings, is held in this bondage to sin and death and decay. Our Old Testament lesson says, "The earth will wear out like a garment, and they who dwell in it will die in like manner" (Is. 51:6). The earth is wearing out, and so will we, because that's what sin does to all creation.

But here's the Good News. All creation is also caught up in man's redemption. That is, God's mercy and grace extend not just to man but to the earth and all creatures. Noah's ark didn't just save a remnant of humanity, a family of eight. It also saved a remnant of all creatures (Gen. 9). In Isaiah the Lord says, "Behold I create new heavens and a new earth" and then gives us a beautiful, poetic glimpse of what this will look like. "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat,

and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together” (Is. 11). Here’s another glimpse of the future from Hosea 2, a beautiful passage, “And I will make for them a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the creeping things of the ground. And I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land, and I will make you lie down in safety. And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the LORD” (v. 18-20).

The Lord intends to restore paradise, and in the life and death of Jesus, the lion’s share of the work has already been done. We see Jesus reversing the effects of the Fall in little ways (healing the sick, feeding the hungry, calming the storm), but we also see him reversing the Fall in the big way, dying for the whole world, the earth and everything in it. Paul writes that Jesus “reconciled to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:19). All creation was redeemed by Christ’s blood. Therefore we are not the only ones looking forward to Christ’s return when he will make it all right again. In our text, Paul says the creation also “waits in eager expectation.”

The Greek word for eager expectation (apokaradockia) suggests the stretching out of the neck to look for what is coming. That is, the whole creation is on its tiptoes waiting for the future God has planned for it, the future that is certainly on the way.

Think about that. Paul testifies that all of creation – human, plant, animal, the cosmos –all of creation is groaning in pain and in waiting. But it doesn’t do so standing flat-footed, head down, shoulders slumped. No, as all of creation groans and waits, it does so while standing on tiptoe, stretching out its neck to catch the first glimpse of the One who is certainly on the way.

Have you ever been to Terminal 5 at O'Hare airport? It's where you go to pick up an international traveler, someone who first has to go through customs. After customs they walk down a long hallway leading to a series of glass doors. On the other side of those doors, that's where families wait in Terminal 5. That's where we were last year just days before Christmas to pick up Stephanie who was coming home from Spain.

It's not a particularly big space, or attractive. It's just functional. But there's a lot of human drama unfolding in that space. It's a place where people wait in eager expectation. Some family members stood and just stared at those frosted glass doors and waited. Others paced back and forth. Surely they knew it wouldn't make things go any faster but they couldn't help themselves. A young child carried a handmade welcome-home sign and held it up whenever a new crowd came through. A young woman in a fancy dress fluffed up her hair. A man carefully cradled a bouquet of flowers. When we were there, off to the side there was a wonderful little jazz quintet playing Christmas music (a great American welcome in my opinion), but only a few allowed themselves to be distracted. Most were focused on those doors, and when they opened, people were standing on tiptoe, necks stretched out, waiting for the one they missed.

Paul claims that eager, expectant waiting is exactly what is going on in creation all around us. With us, the whole creation groans, but these are not the groans of death. They are not the groans of a suffering without end. They are not the groans of despair and hopelessness. According to Paul's poetry, all creation groans with labor pains—pains indeed, but pains filled with fervent hope over what new thing is being born, over what new creation is coming. It's the groaning of a world in pain, but also the groaning of a world in the birthing time of transition. So all of creation stands on tiptoe, in eager expectation for Christ's return, for that's when it too will be set free from its bondage to corruption.

Of course, there's mystery here. We're not meant to understand all things, and I'm not sure how this all plays out. Sometimes trees, especially conifers with a little imagination look like they're craning their necks, but normally they just look like trees. I'd be hard pressed to convince a skeptic, but I think I can see a hint of it in my dog Toby. In the early evening hours, he gets a little restless. He's been sleeping all day and is done with that. He's active but sort of aimless, pacing around. Suddenly he'll freeze in his tracks, perk up his ears, stop breathing, and listen so intently. All the sensitive radars are now out and active. And when he hears the garage door opening into the house, then follows an explosion of dancing and barking and singing and welcoming and kissing and he sprints over to me and asks, 'What the heck's wrong with you? Look whose come! Why aren't you dancing and barking and singing and slobbering?'" That's another reason why I love dogs. They make you get up off your bum to welcome a loved one home!

So even in our waiting we don't wait for the Lord standing flat-footed, heads down, shoulders slumped. And while we wait, we don't allow cynicism and pain and apathy and negativity to take over. We wait on our tip toes with eager expectation because we know the One who is coming and what he's already done for us. It's Jesus, our brother and our Savior. In Jesus God took on our human condition, a condition of bondage and decay and groaning. And God did that, Paul writes, so that he could set us and all creation free. Free from bondage to futility, from the bondage to sin, and to death. Free from Satan and all his works and all his ways. Free from the power of pain to drain us of hope and define who we are. Free from the thought that this is all there is, and it's only gets worse. Free from all that!

God became flesh in Jesus, Paul testifies, so that we might become free – free to pray and groan and wait for sure, free to express and not deny our pain and hurt and sadness. But God also became flesh in Jesus so that we can do all that and live as those with hope, always as those on their tiptoes,

always as those who trust that God is not done yet and God's saving work is not fully complete. We and the whole creation have not yet been restored to who and what he intends us to be. So we wait with eager expectation for That Day.

The gospel promises us that even in our groaning, even in our pain, even when it seems like we're unraveling at the seams, or a friend is falling apart or our world or our church is falling apart – even then we can, with all creation, stand on our tiptoes and stretch out our necks and pray, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.” Amen.

