

“Groanings of Earth and Spirit”

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Text: Romans 8:12-27

It is a strange thing, whenever someone gets upset in our family, we have a myriad of comforters. First our cat comes over and crawls into our lap and begins to purr. She is white and fat and she will begin nudging her nose underneath our hand until we pet her. Then our dog will trot on over and sit on our feet. Our dog sits, like she's a part of the queen's royal guard. She makes sure that no one will intrude on our moment or hurt us in any way. And even if we're in tears, it's hard not to start laughing when every creature in the house is trying so hard to comfort us. No one groans alone in our house. Even if we try to hide our emotions from the other humans, our cat and dog always know what's happening.

The magic of what happens in that moment does not end with the mere presence of the animals. Because when we pet our cat and our dog, our body chemistry changes. Having an animal around the house decreases high blood pressure, reduces stress, increases physical activity, combats loneliness, and staves off depression.

It all reminds me of this passage in Romans. Paul talks about all of creation groaning with labor pains. And then he talks about the Spirit comforting us in our groaning, when we do not have the words for the difficulties that we have been through.

“We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves... the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with groanings too deep for words.”

It is the groan of labor without an epidural. It is that guttural release that we make when the pain is so unbearable that we cannot even form syllables. But it is ultimately a pain that we bear before hope and rebirth. There is a strong, spiritual bond between us and creation's groaning.

We are just learning how creation groans. These are ancient words, and they may seem quaint and poetic, but scientists are making discoveries every day about how creation groans. Our forests are networks, and in the last twenty years, we have been learning how much trees talk with one another. They communicate with one another with gases, scents, clicks, and a network of fungi in their root systems. Old trees are mother trees, and they feed their children extra sugar when they need nutrients and they warn their neighbors when there is trouble coming.

When there is a giraffe, eating the leaves of an acacia tree, the tree warns its neighbors with an ethylene gas. The neighboring trees can pick up the scent, and they begin to pump tannins into their leaves. They can pump enough tannins to make the giraffe sick. Now the giraffe has learned this, so they always eat from the trees that are situated into the wind.

Trees are talking with one another. They are groaning and laboring and we are just now figuring out what is happening. We have been working with Darwin's framework of "the survival of the fittest." Some scientists say that we had it all wrong. We are now beginning to understand how much trees actually protect one another. The trees that survive and the ones who have learned to sustain and support one another. They keep each other alive.

I believe that creation also communicates with us. We do not groan alone. Even when we don't have the words to be able to utter our own grief, the Spirit will pray for us. In fact, I believe that all of creation reverberates with our sorrows and our joys.

I began to understand this groaning, when I was living in Rhode Island. I had a miscarriage. It's hard to know exactly what to do about a miscarriage. There's not a lot of places to grieve when a family has one. And sometimes a mother can end up bearing the burden by herself.

I was a pastor and a mother to a toddler, and so I was juggling all of these things, and I couldn't really organize a grocery list in my head, much less sort out how I was feeling about my grief. Then one afternoon, I went on a walk. I didn't follow the regular paved path, but I went exploring through the cattails and tributaries of the Narragansett Bay. I found this big rock, that had water streaming all around it. I sat on the rock. There was something about the sound of running water that causes me to cry. And so, I kept returning to that place, sitting on the rocks, each afternoon, crying with the water streaming around me.

Something fortified me there. Even though I could not verbalize my grief at the time, even though the pain seemed more unbearable than I could handle, it was as if creation itself was my comforter. Something allowed me to get up stronger, even with all of my loss. And each time I was there, Paul's words echoed in my mind:

"the whole creation has been groaning ... the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with groanings too deep for words."

I could feel it. The Spirit was moving through creation, giving me the space to grieve, allowing me to feel the pain, and leading me to renewal and hope.

It's been five months now, since we have been in the midst of a pandemic. One of the most brutal things about this pandemic are the stories of grieving alone. There are so many people who have lost loved ones to Covid, or to another illness, and they have not been able to attend memorial services, because they cannot travel. Or the funeral could not take place.

But there is something else happening as well during this time. People keep telling me that they are paying more attention to their gardens or to the wildlife that have been coming out to greet them. It's like creation is surrounding us, groaning with us in our pain and in our hope.

As you go out, know that you never groan alone. Even when you do not have the words for your grief, the Spirit surrounds you, like a midwife. Helping you to give birth to what is next. Be attentive to all of the ways that the Spirit grieves and rejoices with us, for hope is there.

To the glory of God our Creator, God our Liberator, and God our Comforter. Amen.