

PENTECOST | ROMANS 8:22-27

Afire
Together

AFIRE TOGETHER

ACTS 2:1-11 & ROMANS 8:22-27

While I was home with my family, I helped them plant in the garden. I wasn't being entirely selfless in this; I frequently get sent off from my visits with boxes of fresh produce in the summer, squash and root vegetables in the fall, and potatoes all winter long. So I was helping.

Some of the garden goes in as bedding plants, carefully cultivated indoors since March. These plants get a head start, their seeds carefully germinated in controlled conditions of light and heat and water, potting mix and fertilizer used to give them a boost, hardened off in cold frames before planting. I always feel fairly hopeful for these sturdy little plants – tomatoes, peppers, leeks and cabbages – sent out into the garden already with a few leaves and a good set of roots. But it struck me that the seeds directly sown into the soil get far less perfect conditions. Carrots and beets, peas and parsnips – we do our best to weed and water, fertilize and protect – but out in the elements, there's a lot more going on to make growing harder. It can be too hot, too dry, too wet, too cold; there may be a pebble or straw in the soil, we might've maybe covered the seeds over a little too deeply...imagine what it's like to be a seed, trying to sprout and grow through to the light, conditions notwithstanding!

Seeds sprout by absorbing water, which changes starch to sugar inside them and softens the seed coat. Life breaks through, root down, then sprout up. At first, these little sprouts are in the dark; but they press through the soil to go up to the sun, and we see, only a few days after sowing, the birth of new plant life.

There are two births in our texts this morning: the dramatic birth of the church, lit by fire and celebrated by the sound of many voices proclaiming the good news together, and a much more ordinary-sounding birth, driven by labour pains and accompanied by groaning to bring new life to creation.

We might well prefer to stay with Acts' portrait of the Spirit spontaneously and powerfully uniting a diverse crowd of people into an idyllic community that eats, prays, and worships together and holds their property and money in common. Acts chapter 2 describes the halcyon days of the early church. Christ had only just ascended into heaven, the Spirit was poured out upon them as promised, and the future unfolded before them of a life lived in Christ together, fed by the Spirit.

There is tremendous energy at the beginning of things. It must have been easy to hope and believe, when so many of them were eye witnesses to Jesus and had experienced together the Spirit burning over them. That's Acts.

But Paul's letter to the Romans was written perhaps 20 or 25 years later; and while the Spirit is still at work, it's less fire and excitement, and more struggle and suffering by then.

In Romans chapter 8, Paul is in the midst of assuring his readers that Christ has already freed humanity from the power of sin and death. Romans 8 is well-known for its powerful verses: *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. If God is for us, who is against us? I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

These hopeful words bookend the painful lament of the verses we read today; Paul soars in his writing, crafting powerful statements about life in Christ, about life in the Spirit. Pentecost's promise is the promise of a powerful, active Spirit loose in the world. And yet, creation groans, enslaved to decay and subject to abuse; and we groan, waiting for God to fully make us his children and set our whole beings free. The painful part of child birth is an individual experience, but here the labour pains are experienced universally – creation and those alive in Christ groan together – suffering together as we await whatever it is that God is going to do.

In the 21st century, the groaning of creation and of the people who inhabit it is ever-present, sometimes lingering as a mournful murmur, sometimes rising to a suffering crescendo. The pandemic has certainly been a loud and global groan, of grief, of poverty, of illness, of death, and of fear. But can you cast your mind back to over a year ago; do you remember the early days and weeks of the pandemic? What still lingers in my mind from those days are those incredible videos of major urban streets and downtown cores, usually packed with cars and people, completely empty as the world stayed home to stop the spread of the virus. And Andrea Bocelli's Amazing Grace from an empty Duomo Cathedral in Spain on Easter Sunday 2020, sung to give us all hope. We groaned together; we lamented together; we were afraid together. We hoped together, and we acted together.

Although things were uncertain and frightening, there was a sense of hope in our collective shock and suffering, that together we would be able to overcome this terrible threat with as few deaths as possible and return to our daily lives, together.

But we did not wait or hope or suffer patiently; our sense of connectedness waned quickly as the situation worsened. We turned to rumors and suspicion, to politics of blame and criticism, to frustrated anger and to fearfully lamenting alone.

We have divided into camps: along political lines or regional ones, as pro- and anti-vaxxers, those who resented the restrictions and those who trusted in them, those who view mask laws as an affront to their freedom and those who see anti-masking protests as potential super-spreader events. Our shared experience, what brought us together, became the thing that caused our fragmentation, our re-disconnection, after the unity and solidarity we felt at the beginning of the pandemic.

I can't help but think that that loss – of shared hope and shared lament – has made all of this much harder to bear.

Paul paints a very different portrait of suffering and waiting than what we've experienced this past year, a portrait of connection and hope. There is still suffering and waiting, but God's intent for us is that we do not experience these things alone. Instead, what God intends is the recognition of the interconnection of humanity and creation in both the struggles and the groaning lament of the present, and in the hopeful longing for our promised redemption when God's kingdom comes. Though the excitement and energy of the Spirit's first fiery arrival has passed, that flame burns on, the Spirit is still present, groaning with us in our suffering, and for us in our weakness when we cannot articulate our own grief.

As imperfect as it is, this created world is still the realm of the Spirit's activity, the world where God is and where God acts. We are waiting for the peace of God's kingdom fully come, but in the meantime, we – creation and humanity and God's Spirit together – lament as one and are gradually being transformed together into the fulness of life that is God's intention. Like a woman giving birth, it's painful and messy and time-consuming, but it's pain and mess and time with a purpose, because new life emerges from the struggle.

I was telling you all about my seed-sprouting thoughts while gardening, how remarkable it is that seeds sown into the garden grow into new plant life under not-always perfect conditions. I spoke of water, sunlight, soil and time – a Christian philosopher I've been reading adds that the sprouting of seeds also needs space.

As that first green sprout appears, it pushes out against the pressure of the soil, making space for its own new life while experiencing opposition. Hope sprouts within us, in our innermost self, in the same way, this philosopher wrote; and new life in the Spirit grows as hardship makes space within us, by causing us to set aside what didn't matter after all, everything...except hope.

On another Sunday, I might have struggled to find a shared experience of suffering that connects us all...but not this year. The pandemic is our shared struggle, in which collective lament and collective action ought to have run hand in hand, but regrettably did not.

Our Scripture text holds up a mirror, showing us how we humans got it wrong, and what getting it right should look like. Never before, in my lifetime at least, has the connectedness of all creation and all humanity ever been more apparent. COVID does not discriminate among us, though weightier burdens of ill health and the inequities of human societies have left some more vulnerable than others. COVID will not be over for anyone, anywhere, until it is over for us all, and what is good or easy for oneself must be set aside in favour of what is right and best for all.

Life in the Spirit means we are one, one body in Christ; and we understand ourselves to be part of a larger interconnected realm of creation in ways that would be inaccessible to us outside of our new life in the Risen Christ. That kind of interconnection, that bond rooted in Christ's self-giving, redeeming, healing love is what the shared flame of the Spirit at Pentecost teaches us today.

But what Paul, writing a few decades down the road, teaches us about the Spirit's redeeming action is that, though we see and know that suffering is yet present in creation, we do not hope alone or foolishly for something better.

The presence of suffering does not mean that God – God the Spirit – is absent or that we are abandoned. Instead, God's Spirit groans and laments and waits along with us and creation itself, expressing pain and fear, and dreaming of the new life that is coming.

Like pregnancy and childbirth, new life comes when it comes; but it is coming; that is our hope. Our own sin-broken relationships with one another and that we see in society mean that we too often experience grief and suffering alone, or bear its burden more heavily than another, but that is not what God intends.

It is faithful to groan and lament and wait in suffering anticipation, and it is faithful to hope for the new life that we haven't fully seen yet but that we know is coming, like a seed sprouted, but still working its way up through the soil. It is faithful to dream and groan for God's new creation of a world where the Spirit's redemptive action is fully and finally accomplished. God is not yet finished with us, nor with humanity, nor with his world. Thanks be to God! Amen.