

## A NEW THING: NEW GROANS

Romans 8:22-27

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WATCH/LISTEN: [www.fbcjc.org/sermon/a-new-thing-new-groans/](http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/a-new-thing-new-groans/)

I.

Do you want to know how to annoy nearly everyone in this room at the same time? Hit it, Alice! (*Alice plays a musical phrase without the last note.*)

It's like nails on a chalkboard. Some of us can hardly stand it. Some of you sang the final note from your seats because you can't take the tension any longer. Dear kind Alice, please put us out of our misery. (*Alice plays the last note.*) All is right in the world yet again. Oh, if only it were that easy.

Theologian and musician Jeremy Begbie has pointed out that all music in the Western world relies on patterns of tension and resolution. Songs begin somewhere, take us on a journey through various notes and melodies, and finally bring us back to where we started. It is a pattern of what Begbie calls "Home—away—home." This pattern is universal.<sup>1</sup>

Play the pattern for us, Alice. (*Thank you, Ms. Alice.*)

When we feel musical tension, we want to return home and have that tension resolved, to hear the final phrase or note. The design and pattern of music create this desire in us, this dissatisfaction until we are home again. The away section wakes us up a bit. It has its own beauty and gifts, things to appreciate. It adds so much. But it also builds a bit of tension so that when the familiarity of the verse reappears, the listener feels a sense of reward and peace at returning home.

Begbie says the same applies to our understanding of and relationship with God. However, in theology, we don't talk about "Home—Away—Home" but rather "promise and fulfillment" or "the already and the not yet." You see, we live between the times.

Living between the times can sometimes feel like nails on a chalkboard. It can make you desperate for the final note to be played. The Apostle Paul says it can lead us to groan like a woman in labor.

I'm not sure what Paul knows about giving birth. It is pretty brave, maybe a bit presumptuous or even ignorant, for anyone to compare labor to something when you haven't given birth. I've not given birth. I've been present for three births, and I heard the groans or whatever you would call those primal sounds coming from the one who literally has skin in the game. The groans are not just groans of pain. They are also groans of expectation and anticipation of something extraordinary and long-awaited, something hoped for. But labor can be painful and take a long

time. Even with all our modern medical advances, there are unknowns and risks. Yet, the mom hopes, and she groans as she labors for what is hoped for.

II.

Rebecca Solnit wrote a book called “Hope in the Dark.” In it, she says that real hope is being willing to live in uncertainty. Hope is an embrace of the unknown and the unknowable. Hope means another world might be possible, not promised, not guaranteed. But just possible.<sup>ii</sup>

We can’t be certain everything will get better here because ... look around. Sometimes, these are terrible days. Some days, it seems like a dumpster fire. We worry about bills and school shootings and what the future will be like for our kids or grandkids. We get a phone call or medical report that pulls the rug out from under us. Wars, fighting, and canceling one another dominate headlines. God’s creation is pushed to extinction, and earth’s resources extracted to depletion. Rigged and unjust systems seem to win again and again and again.

But we also can’t be certain that nothing will get better – because ... look around. Sometimes, these are beautiful days. Your congregation has the finest young people who give you hope for tomorrow. The Northern Lights shine and make a rare appearance here in mid-Missouri. They get your order right in the drive-thru. A precious species is removed from the list of threatened species. A wrong is made right, and justice triumphs, if not everywhere, somewhere; if not for everyone, at least for someone.

This is life in the “not-yet.” There will be terrible days and beautiful days. We can’t be certain everything will get better, but we also can’t be certain nothing will get better. Hope, Solnit says, locates itself on the premise that we don’t know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty, there is room to act. To do something that might impact the unknown future for the better.

III.

That was the hope the disciples held onto after Jesus ascended to heaven. They’d been following Jesus for nearly three years, and when they thought it was all over because of his death on that terrible day we call Good Friday, something miraculous occurred. Their master, teacher, and friend was alive! He appeared to them and ate with them.

But they soon realized he was leaving yet again. That must have been really hard to hear. It was as if they had listened to the song’s final chord, and then the away started again. In one last, desperate plea before Jesus ascends to heaven, the disciples ask Jesus if now is the time he’ll make everything right in the world. Before he leaves, they ask, could he defeat all the bad like he defeated death and fix everything for them?

Instead, Jesus turned toward his friends, seeing their fears, knowing how scary life in the not-yet can feel, and with compassion, said, it’s not going to be easy, but don’t worry, you’ll have some help along the way. You don’t have to figure this out all on your own because when the Holy Spirit comes, you will receive power. You will have what you need. Then, Jesus ascends to heaven and is gone from their sight.

For the next ten days, they and many other close followers of Jesus stayed in the city together, praying, hoping with uncertainty about what help was coming and when it would come. Then, a loud rushing wind filled the place, and tongues like fire hovered over them. They began to speak in different languages and tongues. Finally, the groans of anticipation for something long-awaited, something hoped for, something promised changed to praise. The Spirit had arrived. It was a beautiful day. On that first Pentecost, I doubt that's what the disciples imagined their promised help would look like. Welcome to Pentecost, a day when nothing is predictable, nothing is certain, which makes it a day full of hope.

There were still terrible days ahead—and beautiful days, too. This is life in the not-yet. There are days when we hear ourselves like the disciples, asking Jesus, “When will you make everything right in a world where so much is wrong?” Perhaps the message for us is the same as for them: It wouldn't be easy, but you won't be alone. You have an advocate, the Holy Spirit, who will help you along the way.

#### IV.

A pastor told about a video his sister-in-law had sent in which his baby nephew was crying. The pastor heard his brother saying to his son in the background, “It's okay to be sad. Being a human being is hard.” We groan because being a human being can be hard. We groan because the Spirit of God dwells within us, creating a dissatisfaction with the ways our world falls short of thy kingdom come, thy will be done. But we do not groan alone or in vain. The Spirit groans with us, interceding for us when we don't even have the words, when what is happening is so disorienting, discouraging, and gut-wrenching that we don't know what to say or ask for, and God promises God is listening. And if the Spirit groans, it means we can groan, too.

It is not only the groans of an individual but the groans of communities, cultures, nations, and the whole created world. The creation groans for the same reason we groan: we carry in our hearts a sense of incompleteness. Scott Hoezee says it is not a sign of doubt to feel incomplete. It is not shallow faith that longs to hear the final note, but rather, it is deep faith that feels this desire for the fulfillment of what is promised. Faith like this shouldn't lead us to despair or delusion. It should make us determined, even desperate, to keep moving forward, work for justice, be stewards of creation, and do whatever we can that gives life in the not-yet the shape of things to come.<sup>iii</sup>

#### V.

Congressman John Lewis lived through the worst days of the civil rights struggle of the 1960s, and, in a 2016 interview, he described how he made it through those terrible days when they despaired they might never see the day they were working for, the day when Black Americans would be guaranteed equal rights and freedom after years of oppression in our country. And he said this, “You have to have this sense of faith that what you are moving toward is already done... you live as if you are already there.”<sup>iv</sup> And in the living “as if,” we create the world we long to see.

The Spirit empowers us to stand amid all creation's groaning and our own and live as if the world we long for is already here – in the beautiful and terrible days. Hope doesn't mean we know how it will all work out. It isn't about outcomes. Groaning is the very language of hope. Because the alternatives to groaning when we are honest about reality are either bubbly sounds of false hope that deny suffering or the silent sounds of hopelessness that say there is no point in groaning because nothing can change. To groan is to hope – to join our voices together, with all of the creation, and with the Spirit who groans with us as we create the world we long to see and live as if we are already there.

V.

I've never understood this more fully than in the past two years since my sister died. Those of you who have lost someone you deeply love understand this. We carry in our hearts a sense of incompleteness always. There is someone missing, a feeling of less than. We long for the time when all will be made right, and there is no more separation from what our hearts long for. We look forward to what is to come with eager expectations. We are not just excited, but we are certain that something extraordinary is coming.

But until then, we live in the tension of the not-yet. There are terrible days, and even though you wondered if there ever could be, there are beautiful days, too. The Spirit helps us through both so that we don't choose false hope that denies our suffering, nor do we choose hopelessness that says there can be no more beautiful, no more good. If anything, I've found, as Brian McLaren says that, "a tender sweetness that comes from grief is appreciation."

Our new groans, arising from grief, and oh how we groan some days, have led us to a new appreciation for relationships, love, beauty, and laughter. We appreciate the fragility and brevity of this life. We appreciate kindness and generosity, forgiveness and grace. We cherish music and stories that move us and creations that take our breath away. If anything, we long more than ever for the reign of God in the here and now. We live with one foot and part of our hearts in both heaven and earth, holding them together, bringing them together as best we can with the Spirit's help, while we wait for that final chord to play in the musical score of life, and we are home.

VI.

Rebecca Solnit, whom I quoted earlier, also said, "Hope is not a door, but a sense that there might be a door at some point, some way out of the problems of the present moment even before that way is found or followed."

Those gathered at Pentecost had that kind of hope. John Lewis had that kind of hope. Those of us who grieve have that kind of hope. Maybe we all can have that kind of hope, too. The kind of hope that sends us, the living Temples of the Holy Spirit, out of this place like a rushing wind. Because the Spirit didn't pour herself out so we could twiddle our thumbs or wring our hands until the sweet by and by. The Spirit dwells in and empowers us, so we might seek and bring about that other world that is possible between the times.

Pastor Jonathan Davis describes this world as

- A world where bread is broken and the hungry are fed.
- A world where the sick are prayed over and cared for.
- A world where our students and teachers are safe.
- A world where joy and life can blossom in places overrun with rot and decay.<sup>v</sup>

There will be terrible and beautiful days. We can't be certain everything will get better, but we also can't be certain nothing will get better. Hope says there is room to act in the spaciousness of uncertainty. And while that means there might be suffering, it also means there is the possibility for good. God is always doing new things and inviting us to partner together to do new things, too. The Holy Spirit is alive, active, and unpredictable, which means that another world might just be possible, a world lived for the glory of God and the good of that world.

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All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

### **BENEDICTION:**

“Blessed are we, the anxious,  
 With eyes wide open to the lovely and the awful.  
 Blessed are we, the aware,  
 Knowing that the only sane thing to do in such a world  
 Is to admit the fear that sits in our peripheral vision.  
 Blessed are we, the hopeful,  
 Eyes searching for the horizon,  
 Ready to meet the next miracle, the next surprise.  
 Yes, blessed are we, the grateful,  
 Awake to this beautiful, terrible day.”

Kate Bowler

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<sup>i</sup> <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2018-05-14/romans-822-27-2/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://jdshankles.wordpress.com/2018/05/21/sunday-may-20th-2018-i-dont-know-a-sermon-on-pentecost-acts-2-and-romans-8/>

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> <https://onbeing.org/programs/beloved-community-john-lewis-2/>

<sup>v</sup> <https://jdshankles.wordpress.com/2018/05/21/sunday-may-20th-2018-i-dont-know-a-sermon-on-pentecost-acts-2-and-romans-8/>