

Romans 8:18-25

Birthing a New Creation

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I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were 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.

“For a long time,” says God in Isaiah, “I have held my peace, I have kept still and restrained myself; now I will cry out like a woman in labor, I will gasp and pant.”

And in Romans: “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves.”

There are several stages to labor, but the most painful stage—the stage of gasping and groaning—is called transition. It’s that period when dilation is nearly complete and it’s time for the baby to be pushed out into the world. It’s a frantic time, a frightening time, a time of great uncertainty.

That’s not unlike the time in which we find ourselves now.

This is a frightening and uncertain time not just because of the pandemic, itself, but because it highlights something we've tried to deny—that this entire world is interconnected. That something can't go wrong on the other side of the world without it affecting us, here—and vice versa.

That's not unlike pregnancy. The mother and the fetus are entirely interconnected. What the mother eats, drinks, and breathes in, passes to the fetus. And if something goes wrong with the fetus, it can create a threat to the life of the mother.

“I will cry out like a woman in labor,” God says, “I will gasp and pant.”

The Old Testament scholar Dr. Wilda Gafney points out that “the only reproductive organ ascribed to God in the biblical text is a womb.”¹

A womb. Pretty much any time in the Old Testament that we come across the word “compassion” or “mercy,” the Hebrew word that's being translated is *rachamim*, which is based on *rechem*, the word for “womb.” What does it mean to say that God's mercy, God's compassion, is a womb-love? What does it say about God that God has chosen to become as interconnected with us, as bound to our fate, as a pregnant woman is interconnected with the fetus--sharing nutrients and oxygen through the umbilical cord?

¹ Wilda C. Gafney, *Womanist Midrash* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017) p. 291.

And this rachamim, this womb-love, isn't just reserved for us—it's shared with all peoples, and with the whole of creation.

You've probably seen those charts of how the coronavirus spreads. They show us how easily it passes, person-to-person, to spread around the globe. So our personal choices aren't personal, at all. What we do is never just about us. In choosing to mask or not mask, practice social distancing or not, we can literally hold the lives of countless other people in our hands.

And in the same way, we have quickly seen how our actions have a direct effect on the lives of other species. I've read reports that, as our cities have grown quiet, birds are already beginning to adjust the volume of their songs—and suddenly, I'm *seeing* so many more of them. Are you? Maybe it's just that I'm paying more attention, but I've never seen as many bluebirds as I have this spring.

And urban areas that have been encased in smog for decades suddenly have clear skies. I saw a Facebook post that asked: "Anybody else getting three weeks to the gallon?" It's a joke, but it's also real. If we ever doubted the connection between human actions and the health of the environment, the cause-and-effect is now very visible.

And yet, at this same moment, the possibility of long-term positives from this unintended global experiment is being undermined by a movement to ease and

even eliminate existing environmental protections—sort of like a pregnant woman deciding that now would be a great time to take up smoking and heavy drinking.

“For a long time,” God says, “I have held my peace, I have kept still and restrained myself; now I will cry out like a woman in labor, I will gasp and pant.”

When God spoke those words in Isaiah, what stood in for pregnancy was the Israelite’s long captivity in Babylon. That captivity had been brought on by generations of leaders refusing to heed the warnings of the prophets—refusing to stop exploiting the poor and vulnerable and raping the land. And so, God allowed Israel and Judah to be invaded and the leaders marched off into exile. This created time for them to ponder what they had done. Time for them to repent. Now, God has decided that the time is right for return—and so, what is coming to birth is a second chance for them as a nation.

Will they do better? Not so much.

We, too, are suddenly finding ourselves in a kind of extended timeout. Time for us to reassess how we act in relationship to one another—especially the vulnerable among us who are bearing the brunt of this pandemic—the poor, those who are cut off from the world by lack of access to technology, those without decent health care coverage, and all those workers who, judging by the lack of protection given them-- are considered both essential and expendable.

And then there is the larger environment. This time of shutdown is an opportunity to consider how our actions regarding the climate make us more vulnerable to pandemics, in general. According to the Harvard School of Public Health, deforestation and the warming of our planet are changing migratory patterns so that “animals are coming into contact with other animals they normally wouldn’t, [which] creates an opportunity for pathogens to get into new hosts.” Furthermore, “large livestock farms...also serve as a source for spillover of infections from animals to people.”²

“We know,” says Romans, “that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.”

All creation groans in labor pains. All creation groans, longing for the redemption of our bodies.

This is a frightening time, a frantic time, an uncertain time. But we don’t labor alone. God is laboring with us. God has chosen, from the beginning, to be

²“Coronavirus, Climate Change, and the Environment” (Harvard School of Public Health, March 20, 2020) <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/c-change/news/coronavirus-climate-change-and-the-environment/>

connected to us in a fierce and vulnerable womb-love. And we see this most fully in Jesus Christ, in whom God literally chose to share our flesh and our fate.

And so, through this strange timeout from so much of what is normal; this pregnant pause; something will be born. What's born could be more disaster for us all—we certainly seem to be hell-bent on it. *But*, with God laboring with us, there is another possibility. The possibility of redemption. Of new hope. The possibility of new life.

Because that's the thing about pregnancy and labor—there's so much danger, so much that can go wrong, but when it goes right, there is so much joy.

That's the opportunity we have right now. To do this right. To share the same compassion—the same, fierce womb love—that God shares with the world. To be as invested in the health of another human being in Wuhan or the fate of a butterfly in Mexico as a mother is in the health of her own child. To choose what we eat, where we go, what we do, with the same level of care as we would if lives depended on it—because they do.

God is crying out in labor pains, and all the world groans with her. Something is being born. May it be the redemption of our bodies—the redemption of this world—for which we *all* are longing.

