

“Living in Faith”

Romans 8:22-25; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-14 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – November 7, 2021
All Saints Memorial Sunday

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might trust in your faithfulness
and live in hope. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

Have you been doing any groaning lately? I'm not sure we groan nearly enough in our society, especially given our current circumstances. Paul's declaration from Romans that "the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains" has always seemed particularly evocative to me, but it's taken on a whole new level of significance in the light of the pandemic. I wouldn't necessarily say it's labor pains we've been going through, though there are plenty of reasons to expect that many new things will arise out of this moment in history. It's more like the pains of fighting a serious infection. We want to believe we're moving toward healing, but the fever and the exhaustion that are the signs of that struggle are intense. Groaning is an entirely appropriate response.

How are things? Things are not great. We're 20 or so months into a global pandemic, which is awful on so many levels, and all of the other stuff that makes life hard is still happening, with no regard for the fact that a pandemic would have been plenty to deal with by itself. It's exhausting. Even if the pandemic hasn't affected your life that directly, it looms. It's looming, out there beyond your front door,

making everything more complicated and social life more fraught. It wouldn't surprise me if groaning sessions with groaning coaches became the next therapeutic trend. Labor pains, spiritual injury, existential angst? Come get your groan on and find release! (You heard it here first!)

So what does our faith recommend we do in the face of this level of societal turmoil? Somehow I was surprised when I noticed a subtle theme of dissatisfaction in our two readings today. We don't talk about Christianity as being a religion of dissatisfaction, but once you see it, it's hard to deny. Both of these passages compare what currently is in front of us with what we can't see; and they have a clear preference for what we can't see. "We hope for what we do not see," Paul writes. And in Hebrews we read that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Things are not great as they are. Our groaning is justified. But our faith is promising us that something better is out there. We can't see it just yet, but it's just as real as the noses on our faces.

This basic dissatisfaction in, on one level, aimed primarily at mortality. Mortality is the primary problem of humanity and one of the main things most religions focus on. We die, and we're not very happy about that. But mortality is also a stand-in for all the other less imperfections of human life. Death, the most extreme suffering, becomes a symbol for all the other suffering we go through and put each other through. And so this promise we have from our faith is that death is not the last word; that something better lies beyond our mortal existence.

The question then becomes, what do we do with that promise? One option has been to acquiesce to the current situation and simply resolve to wait it out. We aim to meet the requirements to get into heaven, but we don't try too hard to do anything about the fact that there's plenty of suffering that could be stopped with just a little effort. This is what known technically as "pie-in-the-sky" theology. It assumes that life on earth just won't be that great for some, and there's not a lot we can do about it, but heaven will be awesome, so it's okay.

Pie-in-the-sky isn't the only way to interpret the problem of mortality and the promises of heaven though. We can take this basic dissatisfaction embedded in our faith and build upon it to create an ethic of commitment to relieving suffering, mortal and otherwise. The "conviction of things unseen" is what can sustain hope in a movement for justice for those who know they will not see the day when the justice they seek finally arrives. Paul writes of Abraham and his descendants, trusting that the promised land would be theirs, even through the long years when it wasn't; generations came and went and the promise wasn't realized, but the hope of that promised did not die out. A multi-generational promise, given to one who was, as Paul so bluntly puts it, "as good as dead," was enough to keep hope alive through years and years of hardship. If that's possible, why would we worry that our present situation might defeat us?

The flip-side of reminding us of God's vision for how things should be, of assuring us that the status quo is not our native land, is that it can prod us to make

our current situation more reflective of that vision God has given us. “Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,” we pray. And if we pray it, we need to live it. Jesus didn’t come and live and die and live again just so we could spend our lives waiting to die and go to heaven. Jesus came to revive our conviction that the current sufferings in our world are not inevitable. Yes, Jesus assures us that death does not have the last word. But more than that and before that, Jesus also shows us that the power of sacrificial love can alleviate less fatal forms of suffering too. This is how we can live in faith, by working to show the world another way, a way that rejects the forces of hatred and violence, a way that refuses to acquiesce to the way things are.

How do we achieve such faithfulness? Paul offers an interesting suggestion, in his musings on Abraham. Abraham was able to act in faith, Paul says, because “he considered him faithful who had promised.” Our faithfulness does not depend on our own strength of will or heart; rather it leans entirely on the faithfulness of God. We can be faithful because God is faithful. We can trust in the promises of God, even if they don’t come to pass in our lifetimes, because we know that God is so much bigger than us. The work God is doing in our world is so much bigger than any one of our individual life spans. The justice God is working, the mercy God is dispensing, the creative power that is transforming everything around us – it is all bigger than any one of us. We can trust it, even when it remains unseen, because God is trustworthy. If we want to live in faith, we have only to trust in God, to follow Jesus, in the work God is doing.

There will be plenty of groaning. But the groaning is not a sign of resignation or despair. The groaning is a protest song against the forces of death at work in our land. The groaning is an act of resistance to the status quo. When we groan, we remind one another that another world is possible, inevitable even. Groaning can be an act of faith, as it reminds us to call out to God who is faithful. We can groan in anger, in confusion, in horror, indeed in grief. But even as we emit those cries too deep for words, they remind us of God's promises that our suffering is not eternal. If we can see the fruits of God's work across generations, we can dare to believe the promise that even death cannot last. Today, as we mourn those we have lost, as we mourn the pandemic that has taken so much from so many, we lift up our groans of resistance and hope: resistance to despair and acquiescence, hope that a better day will come, that we can lift our hands and hearts to help bring that better day into being. Let us be fully convicted of those unseen things, of that coming redemption, of that homeland that awaits us. For God is faithful and will not disappoint us. Hallelujah and Amen.