

Romans 8:18-25

“Between the Groaning and the Glory”

The Rev. Dr. Jean Halligan Vandergrift, Interim Minister
Roslindale Congregational Church (UCC), Boston MA
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About once every seven years, I get a kidney stone attack, often in the middle of the night. One of the first times, I remember being in the back seat of our Ford Fiesta, writhing and groaning in severe pain, as Steve drove me to the hospital forty minutes away. In those frightening moments, I didn't know what was happening and couldn't imagine it getting better.

“Groaning.” This is the word the apostle Paul uses today to describe how all of creation, including each one of us, is dealing with “the sufferings of this present time.”

I'm pretty sure that you can readily think of situations that make you groan. Painful personal or family dilemmas? Emotional battles or daily anxieties over work? And of course, the unrelenting trauma of racism. I physically groaned upon the shooting of Rayshard Brooks; first of all, that it occurred at all, but *especially* because it happened after and *on top of* the recent stories of George, Breonna, and Ahmaud, and *even after* there had already been a huge public outcry and a peaceful movement for black lives that should have engendered at least a heightened awareness on the part of the police in that city! No wonder some can't imagine it getting better!

In verse 22, Paul writes that we're all groaning – groaning in labor pains, awaiting the fullness of God's Glory. I can't help but think of my daughter-in-law and our son, Nathan, not that long ago – working in sync with her contractions and being there for each other – until little Emma was born!

Paul has to resort to poetry and superlatives to describe Glory and our eager longing for it. God is laboring to redeem Creation into its full beauty, righteousness, and light! By “Glory” he means the world as *God* wants it to be, not as it is right now. N.T. Wright defines Glory as “the splendid reign over the world for which the human race was designed from the beginning...lost through sin, but regained through the Messiah in his resurrection.”¹ And in verse 23, Paul says that we who walk by the Spirit are

¹N.T. Wright, “The Letter to the Romans,” *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. X (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), p. 595.

groaning inwardly too, as we wait for our own bodily adoption as God's children. **It seems as if the groaning is now and the Glory is not yet.**

Paul has considered this real situation of suffering and potential despair; he's been there himself, and yet has reckoned that the best place to put his hope is in the coming future when "Creation *will* be set free from its bondage to decay" and "*will* obtain the freedom of the Glory of the children of God!" As Dr. King preached: "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."²

Granted, when we human beings are in the throws of our individual and collective suffering, we can't see the evidence of Glory. So this morning, you may not be sure that you can trust Paul; finding this scripture to be too much to believe.

That's why I, for one, need the church. Because in the present, between the groaning and the Glory, I have to look to *others* who are working *with* God and shining with the Spirit in order to believe and keep going! I think this is why Paul often repeats the word "together" in this passage: we are "groaning *together*," he says, working and waiting for God's future, hoping against hope, not alone, but in labor "*together*," trusting in the Eternal!

Just this past week, I got **glimpses of Glory** through others: the Supreme Court decisions on behalf of DACA recipients and the LGBTQ community, and through an interview with a woman named Mia, a bus driver who survived COVID and has now gone back to her job because it is her joyful purpose to serve the community. It was as if she was glowing when she spoke!

Glory is revealed **INSIDE the church** when it is its true self. When we are not preoccupied with celebrities, gimmicks, and stuff, when we allow the *Holy Spirit* to organize us, to make decisions, to extend grace, and to lead us in worship, that's when people can come here and breathe. That's when Glory shines through your faces.

And the other way we see Glory is **when the church goes OUT to people where *they* are groaning** – in the midst of their pain and confusion, one-on-one and through group advocacy. When the church accompanies folks where *they* are with love and care, then we are participating in the sufferings of Christ, and Glory rushes in!

²Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution," Speech given at the National Cathedral, March 31, 1968.

I was interested to learn the origin of the word “Chaplain.” It comes out of the Middle Ages – the Latin word for “cloak.” The story goes that St. Martin, the first chaplain, met a man on the street with no cloak, begging in the rain. He could’ve given *his* coat to him, but that would have simply shifted the groaning. Instead, he tore his ample cape in half and shared it so that together they were both dry. Glory, Glory, Hallelujah!