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The Soundtrack of God's Creation

Genesis 28:10-19a; Psalm 139:1-11, 22-23; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

You can go into any gym or fitness center, locate the section where people are pumping iron, and you will hear a lot of grunting and groaning. Weightlifters groan as they strain to pull and heave weights off the floor, push weights off of their chests, or lift them over their heads.

Weightlifters are always grunting and groaning. I know this is true - because I always hear them groaning as I suck in my gut, puff out my chest, and walk quickly past them, trying hard to hide my skinny little arms . . .

Straining engines will also groan. If you strap a heavy trailer to a pickup truck and point it up a steep hill, you will hear the engine groan. Gears push against gears, the engine revs, and the truck groans as it strains to move forward.

Groaning, it turns out, is the sound, the song of creation. As St. Paul writes in his letter to the early Christians living in Rome: "We know that the whole

creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not just creation, but we ourselves . . .”

“Groaning in labor pains.” This is a vivid image. Perhaps not such a fantastic metaphor for women who have actually experienced hours of excruciating labor pains, but Paul’s vivid imagery reminds us of the difficult work involved in all sorts of creation. No pain, no gain. That work can be hard. That work can definitely be groan-inducing.

Groaning happens in a gap – a gap between what we are doing or trying to do, and what we hope to accomplish. Groaning occurs in the gap that exists between our present efforts and our longed-for future. Groaning reminds us that the time spent in the gap between what is and what can be is a place of hard work.

Our readings from the New Testament today are about living in this gap. We hear about the gap between Creation as God intends and wills it to become, and where we are now. Paul describes how we are to, somehow, live in optimism and realistic hope in a world that so often doesn’t fulfill what God has promised to us. He refers to this living in the gap, as “life in the Spirit.” And we might say that Paul’s whole ministry was driven to close this gap.

Paul was convinced that he had seen the fulfillment of God’s Creation in Jesus; he knew and wanted others to know that fulfillment was within reach. But Paul is also very much a realist. Even in his enthusiasm and optimism, he knew that the communities he preached to still lived with the realities of injustice, war, poverty, oppression, and suffering. He knows both the glory that is to come, and the very real sufferings of the present time. He acknowledges the gap between what is and what is to be, and the groaning that fills that gap.

Paul exhorts the Christians in Rome to live in the Spirit, because in Jesus we can see the glory that is just beyond the gap. A life in the Spirit is a life characterized by the confidence that, through Christ, a path has been opened to us that frees us from all the things that increase our suffering. A

life in the Spirit is a life lived free of hatred and violence, and instead filled with joy and reconciliation, forgiveness and compassion, mercy, grace, and love. A life in the Spirit is a way to live in the gap between what currently exists and what will someday be; a life lived in joyful exertion and expectation, not in dread and desperation.

The Gospel parable also speaks to our life in the gap. God's Kingdom to come – a Kingdom that Jesus preached was already being established in the here and now, in him and through him – throughout all of Scripture, that promised Kingdom to come is described as full of God's glory. This morning, Jesus compares it to a large field, promising an abundant harvest. A full field of grain is the source of not just one loaf of bread, but an overwhelming abundance of bread. This is an image of an abundance of what was and, for many around the world still is, the staff of life, the basic food, the essential source of life. Yet, even in the midst of this beatific vision of an abundant life, there are weeds. The weeds gum up the works. They complicate things. They cannot be removed easily. Jesus' parable in today's Gospel is about having to wait in the gap – in a world of both abundance and weeds. The parable provides some comfort to those of us who still live in the gap with the assurance that at the end, the weeds will not win the day, weeds will not ruin the abundance of the grain at the harvest.

This is a beautiful vision and promise, but the truth is – and we can all attest to this - it is extremely difficult to live in the gap. It is difficult to catch glimpses of the glory just beyond the horizon, and still have to drop back and live in a place that is not yet fully revealed and realized. The first Christians must have felt this very strongly. Those who had actually known Jesus had understood in their minds, and felt in their hearts, the goodness and love of God in Creation, seen the Kingdom of God being ushered into the here and now. Paul had seen the glory of the risen Christ, and his conviction, faith, and excitement must have filled the minds and nourished the souls of the people in the churches he planted. Surely, they must have believed, the long-awaited, long-prayed-for, long-promised Kingdom had finally arrived. Yet, just outside the door of each church gathering, every time the Communion meal ended and people returned to the larger

community, they were confronted by the realities of a world that did not meet that heavenly vision.

The parables Jesus told about the end of time, the words Paul gave to the early followers of Jesus, were written to help those communities understand the groaning and overcome the very real gap between what is, and what ought to and will one day be.

Paul's words of encouragement to his contemporaries are also words written for today; for as 21st-century Christians we still live in the gap. Many of us know the feeling of God's love and have experienced it in our lives. We have seen it in grand acts of compassion, and small daily acts of kindness. Like our spiritual ancestors, we rejoice when justice triumphs, and celebrate when sickness turns to health. These are signs of the Kingdom of God come near. Yet, people everywhere – Christians included - also wake daily to news of war, civil and social unrest, violence in homes and communities, soul-crushing poverty found in every country – even the most prosperous, injustice and oppression, racism and prejudice, and all the many ways the dignity inherent in every person, every child of God, is neglected and denied.

As Paul reminds the first-century Christians in Rome, we Christians all these centuries later are now reminded – we do not base our hope on what we see and experience around us. Christian hope, the hope of the faithful, is based on the confidence, and assurance, and promise that the risen Christ is present and active in the world, bringing all things to what they are meant to be, advancing the coming of the Kingdom, closing the gap. God's focus is on closing the gap between what is, and what ought to be. All of Scripture reveals that this is the work of God from the very beginning of Creation. To faithfully follow Christ is to accept the invitation to join in this divine work on behalf of the world, for all people are children of God, part of that ongoing fulfillment of Creation that is still coming into being.

The way we join in this heavenly work is to strive for a life lived fully in the Spirit. This isn't a life that ignores the gap, pretends that it doesn't exist. Rather, it is a life that can stride confidently into the gap – angered at

injustice and oppression, grieving at suffering and inequality, striving, and straining, and groaning as we labor alongside our God and our Lord to bring the vision home.

Groaning is the soundtrack of Creation. It is the sound of the gap slowly closing, of the Spirit overcoming resistance. Life in the Spirit strains and groans to close the gap. It is a good, honest groaning, the soundtrack of what will one day be, coming into being in our present.

Life in the Spirit is a life that closes the gap between the crushing weight on the chest, and the weight lifted high and triumphantly overhead. Life in the Spirit closes the gap between the engine straining against the gears and finally reaching full speed, running like a well-oiled machine.

As Christians, we are called to be gap-closers. Christians are to see the distance between what should be, and what is, and strain, and heave, and work, and labor, and do the heavy lifting to close that gap. It may be necessary to groan in the process, but our groans sing the soundtrack of God's ongoing Creation.

May we stay true and faithful in the struggle, groaning when need be, laughing at our groaning when we can. The gap is closing, the promise is being fulfilled, the Kingdom of God is drawing ever nearer, so let us sing the song of Creation as we expectantly raise our voices in work, in strain, and in great joy as God's promise in Christ is being fulfilled! Alleluia! Amen.