

Nathan Brown  
"The Groan of Pentecost"  
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West Side Christian Church

Romans 8:22-27

Babies make all kinds of different noises, don't they? In just eight weeks, a whole variety of sounds have already emerged from Harrison. He has a whimper when he wants to be held, a cry when he is hungry, and a snivel when he is tired. There is a sort of muttering when he dreams, a slight giggle now when he is happy, and, of course, all the sneezes, coughs and other (not so cute) bodily noises that need no elaboration here this morning.

There is one noise he makes that I have yet to figure out. Just in between his being awake and being asleep, there begins a kind of groan. It does not last long. It's more intermittent and not very loud. Nevertheless, the sound is mesmerizing. It seems to come from a different place within him....a place I have yet to understand. It is that place right in the middle of being alert and being in slumber; in that tension that exists just between his reality and his dreams.

Of course, we are all familiar with groaning. I don't have to tell any of you about groaning. There is the groaning when we are pushing a lawn mower up a hill through thick grass, or when we approach a full sink of dirty dishes, or when the alarm goes off too early in the morning, or when the teacher says the exam is going to be essay instead of multiple choice.

Then there is a deeper groan; that groan we involuntarily utter when we find ourselves inarticulate before the inexplicably beautiful or terrible. There is the groan that comes when we want to shout but do not have the emotional energy, the groan that comes when we try to whisper, but cannot get out the words, the groan that comes when we draw our breath but cannot think of what to say.

In the early 1960's, the Kingfisher Oklahoma Free Press was a tiny weekly newspaper filled with odds and ends of local town life. In the paper, every week, there appeared a column by a woman named Molly Shepherd. Molly was an Arapaho Cheyenne Indian, well along in years, who wrote in broken English.

However, her articles were deep and poignant, beautiful and moving. She told stories about giveaways, about funerals, about weddings, about blanket parties--all kinds of things. These were brief stories--unusual and delightful.

Her article on November 27, 1963--written right after the assassination of President Kennedy--was her briefest ever. She wrote:

“Molly has no article today.  
Molly has no words today.  
Molly cannot speak today.  
Molly goes through the house saying ‘ooh, ooh, ooh.’”<sup>1</sup>

You know, Jesus groaned too. Mark says Jesus was in the town square and they brought him a man who was a deaf mute and they said, “Rabbi, can you help him?” And Jesus touched his tongue and put his fingers in his ears, then Mark says: “...and Jesus looked up to heaven, and groaned”

We all know plenty about what it means to groan.

Yet, the groan that I hear come from Harrison seems to rise up from an even deeper place...too complex for a whimper or a cry, too deep for even a snivel or mutter. I think this groan fascinates me because while I am familiar with groaning, there is a deeper groan within me too.

It is one that I am not sure I fully understand, one that I am not even always conscious of. It is that groan that is at the center of my life, just in-between my being awake and falling asleep, just in-between my reality and my dreams, just in-between who I am and who God is calling me to be. I think this is the groan Paul describes in Romans.

Paul writes, “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.....”

This Sunday is Pentecost – the day on our church calendar that celebrates the coming of God’s spirit into our lives. In our first reading this morning, we heard the story of the first Pentecost, in the book of Acts, about all those who were gathered together when that Spirit first came among the people. The scene is described as the Spirit coming like violent wind and fiery tongues. The Spirit comes in the form of Mother Nature’s most powerful forces—wind and fire.

If you have ever been near Mother Nature when she kicks up a tornado or a forest fire or a hurricane, you notice a sound that comes from within those forces. When I lived in Indiana, right in the middle of tornado alley, folks said it sounded like a train. It is a low grumbling noise that gets louder and louder the closer you get. If you listen close enough, the noise sounds like a groan.

While that groan may sound a bit different whether it’s a tornado, or a fire, or a sand storm, I think the groan is one in the same. It is the groan of the Spirit as God

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<sup>1</sup> Ramsey, Mark. “A Season for Groaning.” Sermon Preached at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church. Asheville, NC. November 30, 2008.

does something new in creation and in us. Once you recognize that groan as God's Spirit, you begin to hear it in a different way.

Fred Craddock puts it more eloquently. He writes, "There is at the center of reality a groan. And the closer to the center you live, the more you will hear it and the more you will share in it: The center of creation, the center of the church, the center of ministry, the center of those things that belong to the people of God, and the center of the human race. "

"The closer you move there, the more you will hear the Spirit groan -- the more you will share the groan. And you will recognize it. . . . Paul says that the groan in creation, in us, in God, is a groan not of death, not the death throes; but a groan of childbirth. God is giving birth to something new. God is doing something fresh. God is creating new heaven, and a new earth."<sup>2</sup>

Paul says in this passage from Romans that all of creation groans, we groan, while we wait in that place of the already/not yet, that in-between place of being awake and dreaming, that center of all things where we have witnessed a glimpse of God's kingdom and have yet to see that Kingdom fully realized, that middle space between the way things are and the way things are supposed to be.

Paul describes this groan as one like that of childbirth. It is a creative groan, a groan of new life, a groan of expectation, a groan of hope, a groan that yearns for God's kingdom here on earth.

As we move closer to that groan both in creation and within ourselves, like Craddock says, we begin to recognize it as God's Spirit and want to share in that groan. We begin to want to respond to that groan.

When we hear the groan of pollution, overpopulation, and inequitable distribution of food and resources, we are compelled to be agents of responsibility, compassion, and love. As we hear the groan of global terrorism, wars raging around the world, and sexual exploitation of women and children, we share in the pain of those who suffer and those who are abused. When we hear the groan of modern day slavery, oppressive regimes, and gang crime, we participate in ministries of justice, reconciliation and healing.

The Spirit that comes at Pentecost is not some mysterious, invisible being that hovers out there some place, unrecognizable and unimaginable. God's Spirit is within all things, within all of creation, is moving within you and me, groaning for a new world order—groaning for us to share in changing this world, changing our lives from the way things are to the way things God intends them to be.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

I choose to believe that the groan, which comes from Harrison, is a groan of growth and change, as the spirit moves my son from the person he is to the person God is calling him to be. After studying Paul's words this week, whenever I hear that groan, I recognize it as such, and I want to share in it with him, guiding him toward where that groan might be leading him to go.

I no longer fear that groan. In fact, I find myself searching within, trying to get closer to the groan of my life. That groan is a reminder that God's Spirit is continuously at work in Harrison, in me, and in you. For what is the Spirit groaning in your life?

Amen.