

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 42:3-5  
SECOND LESSON: Romans 8:12-25  
July 19, 2020

***“The Challenges of the Present”***  
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

With very few airlines operating large planes right now the smaller airplanes are getting a work-out. After a particularly long and bumpy flight both crew and passengers on one of these smaller planes were a bit frazzled. This was made worse by a very rough landing. The airline had a policy that the pilot must stand by the door as the people exited to thank them for flying. The pilot was dreading this because of the landing, but he stood there just the same. Most people filed off without a word. Finally, the last passenger came up, an elderly lady walking with a cane. As she got up to the captain she said, “Can I ask a question?”

“Sure,” answered the captain.

“Did we land or were we shot down?”

Paul says, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.” While we might feel like the whole world is on that airplane right now, he was being very rational and deliberative, using a term from accounting to weigh assets against liabilities. And upon reflection, Paul decided that all the challenges of life were worth the price. The glory far outweighs the suffering. In a narrow sense he was talking about suffering for the sake of having faith in Christ, a faith that the world despises, a faith that before too long would become life-threatening. But Paul also widens it to include all of life, saying, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.” Creation itself is frustrated and damaged by our sin. We brought brokenness into the world, and we continue to exploit and destroy nature. But when Christ returns the harm will be overturned. We will be made whole, and nature will be healed. Until that happens, however, suffering is inevitable. The word is *pathema* (path'-ay-mah), from which we get words like empathy, pathetic and pathos. There is strong emotion here. The world, says Paul, is like a woman in labor.

Now Paul was never a woman in labor. I, on the other hand, have been, three times. I distinctly remember each time when the labor pains started to get severe saying, “You know Lord, I’ve changed my mind. I think I’ll have this baby TOMORROW.” Of course, that was never an option. Once labor starts it’s not going to stop until the baby is born.

If you are a woman who has ever had a baby you may remember being told by well-meaning people, “You’ll forget all about the pain once the baby is

born!" **It's a lie.** I remember it all. Anna was quick because she was induced, but Mark took 36 hours to enter the world and Paul 24. I had all three naturally. If I had it to do over I would say give me an epidural and let me sleep! The only ones who romanticize childbirth are men. But the miracle of having a new person growing inside is profound. It is an amazing act of creation. God takes two genetic lines and puts them together to create a unique new being. A child is a gift to be discovered. Pain is pain, however, and when we are suffering it does not feel redemptive or positive. I do remember wanting to choke one young mid-wife who clearly had never had a child herself telling me that it was constructive pain. Every time I would have gotten out of the bed to wallop her, however, I was hit by another contraction. Labor did NOT bring out the best in me.

As male dominated as the ancient world was, it is interesting that the image of labor and childbirth appears throughout scripture from Genesis to Revelation. And in the small homes of the day with limited space and no privacy, everyone would know when the woman of the house was giving birth. This was not something that happened in hospitals. This was an event that brought all the experienced woman of the neighborhood together and sent the men outside to sit around the fire and keep the father calm. As positively as we view the experience today, we have to remember the incredibly high death rate for women then, a rate that is still high in many places in the world today. When I did my family genealogy, I found several men on their third wife due to the first two dying in childbirth. And although now rare in America, even today, it still happens.

Comparing being in labor with life itself is apt if we stop and think about it. First of all, pain is inevitable. No one gets through life without it. Secondly, it is cyclical. It comes and goes in waves. We all go through seasons of it. Third, it is intense, and grief, fear, physical pain, and loss are all intense experiences. They change us. They form the dark tones in the tapestry that is our life. Fourth, labor is a common human experience that once started, must run its course. There is no changing our mind. We can't decide to have the baby tomorrow. Finally, however, it is productive. The majority of the time we come out of it with a healthy living child.

Getting through labor is easier if we have hope that we will get to the other side, and it is this type of hope that Paul describes for getting through life itself. Paul says that the hope we have is real because we have experienced the first fruits of the kingdom. We know what God is like through the Holy Spirit. We have experienced the grace of God in our lives. We have known joy. We have had a glimpse of what it will be like to "hold that baby" when the time comes. We may be suffering alongside everyone else in the world now, but we know that the kingdom is coming. This pain we are enduring will not result in death, but in birth. Even as we are dying in this life, we are being born into the next.

The challenges of the present time are great, but there is hope. While our stresses vary depending upon our individual circumstances, this particular time is uniquely challenging. Pandemics change history, and we are living through one. The Athenians were defeated by the Spartans because of Typhoid

Fever. The Roman Empire was weakened by epidemics coming from the northern Europeans which led to the British population seeking help from the Saxons against Rome. The Saxons took over—and the Anglo-Saxon world was created. Welcome to England as we know it and the language that we speak. Bubonic plague killed one third of the western world population. As a result, wars stopped, the feudal system collapsed, and the Vikings gave up conquering everyone and stayed home. A generation later came the Renaissance. And throughout the Americas, entire indigenous populations were wiped out by European diseases to which they had no immunity. The deaths of 56 million native Americans in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries even had an effect on climate. And if all these people had not tragically died but lived to explain to the Europeans who arrived that this land was already occupied, the American story would have been quite different. Since that time, Cholera, Measles, the Russian Flu, the Spanish Flu, the Asian Flu, HIV/AIDS, SARS, Ebola, and now Covid19 have ravaged the world. We are right in the midst of a major sea change. We don't know what the world will be like when this is over, but it will be different.

Global climate change is also impacting the planet right now, and global protests against racial injustice are changing societies. Protests that began with the murder of George Floyd have now spread across the world. Never in a million years would George Floyd have imagined his name being proclaimed in protests in England, Australia, Switzerland, Brazil, Rome, Spain, Scotland, Hong Kong, the Netherlands, Belgium, Portugal, France, Wales, Germany, South Africa, South Korea, Kosovo, Tunisia, Japan, Bulgaria, Mexico and Ireland. There are probably more I don't know about. This is a tsunami cry for racial justice that has resonated around the world.

According to my late Uncle JJ there's an ancient Chinese curse that goes, "May you live in interesting times." Someone must have pronounced it over us. And the political divisions ravaging our nation are just as deep and potentially destructive as everything else. We may conclude that we are in the midst of death pangs. But God says we are in the midst of labor pains.

Each individual life, regardless of anything else, also cycles through times of trial and tribulation. But as much as we might wish for a life of ease and comfort for our children and ourselves, it is not a good wish, because it is the struggle that makes us strong. It is the dark colors that enter our lives that bring out the highlights and make everything rich and vibrant. Just as the dark tones in a picture bring depth and clarity, so does suffering to our lives. But when we feel our most fragile, God is with us. "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out." We will survive because we have hope, a hope that is based on the faithfulness and love of God. We might be in labor, but by the grace of God we can catch our breath and keep going. There is new life at the end of this journey. Amen.

Isaiah 42:3-5

3 A bruised reed he will not break,  
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.  
In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;

**4** he will not falter or be discouraged  
till he establishes justice on earth.

In his teaching the islands will put their hope.”

**5** This is what God the Lord says—  
the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out,  
who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it,  
who gives breath to its people,  
and life to those who walk on it:

Romans 8:12-25

**12** Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation—but it is not to the flesh, to live according to it. **13** For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.

**14** For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. **15** The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, “*Abba, Father.*” **16** The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. **17** Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

**18** I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. **19** For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. **20** For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope **21** that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

**22** We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. **23** Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. **24** For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? **25** But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.