

“LABOR PAINS”

PSALM 139, ROMANS 8:12-25

MATTHEW 13:24-30, 36-43

MARKET SQUARE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN
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THE REVEREND KELLY WIA NT

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When the Indian Ocean Tsunami pounded 11 countries from Africa to Thailand killing between 230,000 and 280,000 people in 2004, there were no words, no easy theological explanations, no platitudes that made sense. It was the first time in my life that creation seemed completely out of control. People were killed in the ocean, on beaches, in their homes, and property was decimated. Coastal lands that once hosted thriving communities were wiped clean, entire families and neighborhoods claimed by the sea, many never seen again. In moments, everything was gone. It felt as if the earth was ripped apart and left exposed, wounded, groaning. Survivors were in shock and wailed when the magnitude of the destruction was evident. Those of us that watched from far away, were horrified and found no words, only inarticulate groans to express our dismay, our fear, our anguish on behalf of others.

Romans 8 was my only solace, my only way of making any sense of the suffering. It is where I turn when trying to understand or wrestle with the suffering of those I love or the suffering of those far away.

Paul contends that we live in a time between the redemption accomplished in Christ and redemption still awaited. “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 for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.” As we ourselves know suffering, so all of creation - not only other human beings, but the animals, and the planet itself.

Our world, created good by God is not yet fully redeemed. Here, sin and evil still exist. We live in a world where beauty and decay sit side-by-side, where children are born and others starve, where the gray wolf makes a comeback as the polar bears face

extinction in their melting habitat, where diseases are cured and drug resistant strains emerge, where national boundaries fall away through the internet and North Korea continues to arm itself, and where women make headway towards equality as the most powerful man in the world brags of sexual assault. Here, life and death are intertwined.

So how do we live in such a world? How do we find meaning in a world where “mountains shake in the heart of the sea...waters roar and foam...and mountains tremble with its tumult?” How do we live where those we love and we are ourselves suffer death, loss, pain, and sometimes unspeakable grief?

Psalm 139 says that it was God that formed our inward parts. It was God that knit us together in our mother’s womb. The psalmist asserts that we are intimately known and loved by God. Paul takes this a step further claiming that we are not only created and beloved of God but the Spirit makes us children of God. “When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirits that we are children of God.” And not only children but heirs. “Heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.” This means that in Paul’s words, “we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.” This means that we share in the suffering of Christ. Our suffering is part of Christ’s suffering meaning we experience Christ’s suffering as Christ experienced ours. This may not sound particularly comforting. In fact, I did not like the idea at first. None of us want to suffer. None of us want to see those we love suffer. If we are compassionate human beings, we do not want to see anyone or any creature suffer. Yet, suffering exists. It is a part of this world. Within our faith and within Christ, our suffering takes on meaning. It is in fact, sharing the experience of suffering with Christ.

We as Christians stand in the gap between the redemption accomplished in Christ and redemption awaited. Our suffering bears witness to Christ’s suffering on our behalf. Our recognition of the suffering of creation bears witness to the love of God as we chose to stand in that place and offer hope. We are called to stand in the gap and speak and work as those aware of God’s redeeming work in the world.

We believe that God is working out the redemption of the world in ways that we do not and cannot fully comprehend. This does not give us license to sit back and wait for God to work it all out. We are not to sit idly by as the world groans in travail. Instead we are to be witnesses to and ambassadors of God’s redeeming love and work. We do this through works for justice and acts of mercy. We do this through personal interactions, acts of forgiveness, and the dedication of our time, talents, and resources to God.

And we do so because we have hope. Our hope is not in what we see for we do not expect that our words or our work will end suffering. We hope not because we expect no tsunamis, no cancer, no car accidents, no more melting ice caps, no famine, but

because we stand with Christ and we hope in Christ that God is at work and God's purposes and glory are being worked out in God's time. We hope that finally we will know full redemption of not only our bodies but all of creation. We are in the midst of the labor pains, where death and life hang in the balance, where the old and the new meet, where letting go brings possibilities we cannot fully know or imagine, where cries reflect pain as well as the emergence of new life.

In October 2015, Asma Jama was out to dinner with her family. She is Somali-American and Muslim. She wears a hijab and was speaking Swahili.

Jodie Bruchard-Risch, sitting at a near by table became enraged. She demanded Asma speak English and then smashed her in the face with a glass beer mug. Asma suffered lacerations across her chest, face, and her hands requiring 17 stitches.

Jodie, plead guilty to felony assault charges and spent 113 days in jail for her crime.

This story is so compelling to me not only because the crime is horrendous and inexcusable and the psychological damage all too common, but because Jodie's sister, Dawn Sahr, reached out to Asma. Their first meeting was recorded by NPR's Story Corp.

Dawn said she had wanted to contact Asma because she wanted to know that she was ok. Dawn no longer speaks to her sister because in her words, "then it's telling Jodie that it's OK; and it's not OK."

Asma admitted to Dawn that the damage done was much more than physical. She said,

"I used to be carefree,"..."I used to go everywhere by myself. I would say hi to strangers, but after what happened to me, I felt like I had to look over my shoulder every time I go outside." She doesn't feel like she can speak Swahili in public anymore. "I realized I don't belong," Asma said. "I have to prove myself every single day and it makes me feel like I had to give up a lot of who I was."

As I listened, I wondered what compelled Dawn to contact Asma. I had a feeling I knew the reason so I was listening for something very specific. And then I heard it: "I'm going to pray that you can eventually become the person you used to be," Dawn said.

Dawn is a person of faith. She is going to pray for and on behalf of Asma. Dawn is and was willing to step into the place of suffering to bear witness to God. She was willing to offer mercy and to speak for justice. She could not take away Asma's fear or her physical pain, but she could place herself in the place between redemption accomplished and redemption awaited and speak of hope and love.

To which Asma, responded, "For you to stand up for somebody you don't know, and to say that what she did was unacceptable, that meant the world to me."

As Christians, we are called to stand between the pain of the world and the love of God. This means we cannot turn away from the suffering of the world or God's people. Dawn chose to contact Asma in order to stand between her pain and the love of God. She chose to listen to the damage her sister's actions had caused and in so doing offered love, hope, and healing to Asma.

To say that we share in Christ's suffering is no small claim. It is not the easy road or feel-good faith. It also does not suggest that suffering is acceptable or that we view it as deserved. Instead suffering is an inevitable part of this life until we, with all of creation are glorified and fully redeemed by God.

And we trust as Paul states that "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us." This is not to say that our suffering is insignificant but that it has meaning in Christ. It is known by God and our cries, our prayers, even our inarticulate groans are heard and held by God.

For ours are the cries of labor pains and through them and in them, new life emerges. We may catch glimpses of God's glory and healing in this life as Asma did in Dawn's compassion. We might see ourselves remade and even freed through our suffering. We might have our lives reordered and our faith deepened. Or we might not see the healing and the glory we long for in this life. But we hope for what we do not see. We hope that our suffering, that other's suffering, that the world's travail will finally be redeemed and held in Christ.

Until then, we will stand in the gap and work for justice, offer mercy, and meet Christ, even in our suffering.

So we believe, so let us live.