

It is plain to anyone with eyes to see that at the present time all created life groans in a sort of universal travail. And it is plain, too, that we who have a foretaste of the Holy Spirit are in a state of painful tension, while we wait for that redemption of our bodies which will mean that at last we have realized our full adoption in the Spirit. We were saved by this hope, but in our moments of impatience let us remember that hope always means waiting for something that we haven't yet got. But if we hope for something we cannot see, then we must settle down to wait for it in patience. The Spirit of God not only maintains this hope within us, but helps us in our present limitations. For example, we do not know how to pray worthily as children of God, but God's Spirit within us is actually praying for us in those agonizing longings which never find words. And God who knows the heart's secrets understands, of course, the Spirit's intention as the Spirit prays for those who love God.

This morning's scripture lesson is from the J.B. Phillips translation. You might remember a few weeks ago when we heard this translation that Mark VandenBerghe read an introduction about J.B. Phillips. He was a vicar in England during the Second World War, and he realized that the young people in his congregation didn't understand, and maybe more importantly weren't engaged by, the authorized translation of the bible, so he decided to translate the New Testament into more modern English. He worked on his translation in bomb shelters during the blitz, and wrote that just as the early church had existed in dangerous and harrowing times his people were living in similar times and needed the strength and courage found in the bible. These are harrowing and frightening times we live in as well. Like the early church, formed in a hostile culture, and the congregation in bombed-out east London J.B. Phillips was translating for, we too need the courage and strength found in the pages of scripture. In our day war, and climate change, and fanaticism are all ravaging the world, and fear and insecurity have gripped us tightly by the throat. We need to hear and be engaged by the good news that the Holy Spirit is with us, and is the bringer and sustainer of our hope. This is the message the Apostle Paul brings to us this morning.

Yesterday morning the Confirmation class met at the parsonage for breakfast. Everyone was given a card to write a question to God, or about God, that we put in a bowl... in part because sometimes we think it's not okay to question God. Some of the questions were profound and universal, because we all have questions about God and for God. One of the most common questions for God is why. Why does tragedy happen? Why are lives ripped apart? Why is life so hard? Why don't You intervene and help Your people? Why does it feel like we're all alone here? There will always be questions, and I want the middle-schoolers to feel comfortable questioning (and dialoging with) God.

I love these letters Paul wrote to the Romans. Chapter eight is one of my go-to scriptures. In this pericope taken from chapter eight - and in chapter eight the Holy Spirit blazes from the pages of Paul's powerful witness - his experience and understanding - of God's unfailing love for us, Paul assures us that in life's most difficult and painful circumstances God is with us. The Holy Spirit is with us, praying in us and for us.

The early church was learning to experience God in the Holy Spirit. Jesus was no longer physically present but He had promised His disciples that God's Holy Spirit would come to them. Last Sunday we celebrated Pentecost and the birthday of the church, when the Holy Spirit

descended upon the disciples as wind and fire and unifier. Today's scripture is also heard on Pentecost because of the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit upon God's people.

Paul likens the church (and the world) to a pregnant woman who experiences both the agony of birth pains and the joyous hope of new life. He says at this time we are in agony over our human frailty and weakness, and the humiliation, sin, suffering, and death our bodies experience... but that as Christians we have hope, and we look forward, to the redemption of our bodies which will be glorious as Christ's resurrected body! Paul reminded the young church in Rome that hope is one of the central characteristics of the Christian experience. Today his words remind us. Hope is one of the hallmarks of the Christian. We hope in the present moment, not just in the life to come. Our hope is that the Holy Spirit is still active in us, and in the world, bringing us closer to God, and working in and with us - using us - to bring about God's kingdom.

The Saturday morning Men's Breakfast group uses a curriculum called "The Wired Word" that connects the news (current events) with Christian response. Yesterday's lesson was from the Pew Research Center [that] "shows that the number of Americans who identify as Christians has declined from 78 to 70 percent since 2007. Over the same period, the number who declare themselves as having no affiliation with religion has increased from 15 to nearly 23 percent." I felt an ironic sadness yesterday morning during Confirmation as Jim Straw and Judy Garvens and I talked with a group of middle-schoolers about what it is to follow Jesus, while the Men's Breakfast group was discussing the decline of Christianity in America. Fortunately the Apostle Paul has been keeping me company this week, reminding me of hope, of our pregnant condition, and of the Holy Spirit present with us.

This is one of my favorite images of God: the Spirit groaning in us in these labor pains of the old world dying as we wait our redemption, or crooning to us as a tearful mother might sing to a dangerously ill child. Paul tells us that in those times the Spirit takes over and prays in us and for us; when we can't find the words or the prayers to convey our agony, when we can't articulate the longing we have for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. The New Revised Standard Version of the bible puts it like this: "The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." A beautiful image of the Spirit present in us... communing with God with sighs too deep for words.

Last night I heard the song "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen" which is a spiritual born out of slavery in the American south. "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen; nobody knows my sorrow. Nobody knows the trouble I've seen; glory! Hallelujah!" I listened to the song and could imagine the Holy Spirit crooning that in heartfelt solidarity with all the groaning and suffering creation. Paul tells us that another name for the Holy Spirit is "heart-searcher." The Holy Spirit searches our hearts and communicates to God our deepest groaning and sighs and longing for redemption. The last two words of the verse, "Glory! Hallelujah!" tell about the hope we have, even in suffering. Hope of redemption, and hope of the Holy Spirit, present with us and powerful in us.

God is present with us. We accept that in the stories of creation: God is present in the beauty and design of the universe. We accept that in the story of Christmas: God is present in human flesh in the baby Jesus. Paul reminds us to accept the presence of God with us in the Holy Spirit: God with us as sustainer of our hope. Twice recently I've had the opportunity in a group to experience the presence of God by holding my hands underneath someone else's hands and then

having someone hold their hands underneath my hands. This is a beautiful image of God-with-us; God holding us in God's hands. Beautiful because being present is one of the most powerful acts we can do for each other, especially in times of suffering. The Holy Spirit is present with us. God's present to us.

I want to go back to the Confirmation class's questions for God: Why is there suffering? Why can't You just make things better? Why is life so hard? I think one of the reasons people turn away from faith is because it logically seems that a loving God would spare God's creatures from suffering, and if God doesn't do that then it follows that a) God doesn't really love us or b) there really isn't a god. I love my children and I'm pretty sure that I would die for them if I needed to. Their hurts, their disappointments and heartbreaks and failures, are like blows to my heart. I'd give anything to spare them from being hurt, and yet that's not within my power. What I've tried to do is be present, and assure them of my love, of God's love, and of the strength they didn't know they had. Hard life lessons suck eggs. Humorist Erma Bombeck said once that she was looking for a blessing that wasn't disguised. I can relate to that. Give me the easy life lessons, Lord! And yet the hard lessons are how we grow and develop resilience and compassion and acceptance... and hope... and faith.

Paul tells us that the Holy Spirit is present in us in these birth pangs as we wait for redemption. The Spirit is praying and singing and sighing in us and with us (for we suffer for the world and not just for ourselves) and is confirming our hope, and reminding us that we are not alone. God is with us in our suffering.

I find it easy to set my sights on the disheartening news from the Pew Research Center and the decline of Christianity and the growing irrelevance of the church. A lovely person told me last night that when I gaze downwards (towards all that seems hopeless) I am denying the Holy Spirit. Wow! I hadn't said anything about preaching about hope and the Holy Spirit, and yet here during intermission at a concert, was confirmation that the Holy Spirit is the sustainer of hope. And to entertain hopelessness is to deny the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit. Thank you, Jeanette Shearer!

Last week we prayed, "Come, Holy Spirit, come!" as our Pentecost prayer. But was it more than that? Was it the Holy Spirit praying in us to be mindful, as Don sang, "In this very moment" of the Spirit leading and guiding us to be the living gospel of God's love and grace? I find myself more and more praying "Come, Holy Spirit, come." I want to be open to the Holy Spirit's life and power so that the Spirit can use me... to pray in and through me, to sing God's dreams for the world in and through me, and to be a witness of hope that God is present in this world, in these harrowing and frightening times we live in.

How might the Holy Spirit work in us if as a church we pray with a sense of urgency for each other, and for the world, "Come, Holy Spirit, come"? What could we experience as a church if we began every committee meeting with the prayer, "Come, Holy Spirit, come"? How might we face these uncertain times with hope and assurance if we prayed together, "Come, Holy Spirit, come"?

... As we enter into a time of silence now, let this be our prayer. "Come, Holy Spirit, come!"