

**“Groaning for Hope”**  
**Romans 8:12-25**  
**Leah Reed**  
**First Baptist Church, Raleigh**  
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Living according to the flesh versus living by the spirit. When I hear the term “flesh versus spirit,” I’m taken back to 2001, sitting in Hatch Auditorium at Caswell during Youth Week on a hot July day. This is where I first learned this passage, and its interpretation is quite different back then from how I read and understand it today. As a teenager I remember heavy guilt trips about a lifestyle of living in the flesh. I remember being told that “fleshly living” meant that I needed to probably burn all my secular CDs, consuming only Christian CCM artists, I needed to block MTV from my television so I would not be tempted by the ways of the world, and to never associate myself with people who smoked, or drank, or cussed, etc. The list goes on and on. It was a moralistic, pious checklist for teenagers in the early 2000s, (that I will admit probably kept me out of a lot of trouble.) Living in the spirit meant that I would wear a WWJD bracelet, I would slap a fish on the back of my car, I’d have the latest WOW CD in my Discman, and I would need to memorize the Romans Road on this modified Rubik’s cube called the “Evangicube” so I could lead all of my friends to Christ. I desperately wanted to be good, and so I tried my very hardest to not live in this worldly lifestyle of the flesh. Today I shake my head at that list of rules, while recognizing that the teachers were all well-meaning.

Paul has a way of speaking to different ideological viewpoints on life that help us shape how we imagine ourselves in relation to God, one another, and all of creation. As Paul was writing, these viewpoints were heavily shaped by the Roman empire, and implications of sin with the laws of God. When we talk about living according to the flesh today, I think of a mindset that is framed by idolatry or the prioritizing of one’s own “interests” with no regard for

the “interests” of others. Think power games, self-promotion — anything that ultimately denies human dignity and is only self-serving. When Paul talks about living in the mindset of the Spirit, however, this reflects the worldview where one imagines oneself in relation to others and one’s conditions of existence from the perspective of God. Rev. Dr. Monya Stubbs says that “this worldview depends on “the renewal of our minds,” and leads to “the radical demonstration of believers’ mutual edification and indebted love.” She goes on, “These two mindsets are not parallel opposites. Functioning out of a flesh-centered mindset always promotes the ‘self’ at the expense or disregard of others. A mindset defined by mutual edification/ indebted love, however, does not deny the ‘self’ and only considers others. Rather, a mindset defined by mutual edification/indebted love is one of radical reciprocity. Those who live in this way take into account their own gifts, talents, ideas, concerns, and needs in relation to others.” But what we desperately need from Paul’s work here is the reminder that there are at least two ways to live. One where we center ourselves at the expense of others and practice the worldview we inherit from dominant forces in our life, or one where we remember our interdependence on God and one another. In this worldview, we do not live only by the individual impulses and desires we have in isolation from others or God, but we move through the world compelled by a hope in the love that liberates all groaning creations.

It is interesting that Paul chooses to use this beautiful analogy of a woman groaning in childbirth to describe the pains of creation. He says, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.” The Roman Empire that the Apostle Paul lived in yielded itself to a completely different experience than women have today, to say the least. Labor was the women's work, and while mothers labored, men deliberated; and finally, when the child was born, he or she was handed to the patriarch who had a decision to

make. Whether the baby lived or whether the baby was set outside to die, that was up to the decision of a man in many households in the Roman world. It's a far cry from epidurals, cable TV, pretty decent food, a birth playlist, and several nationally accredited hospitals that we have to choose from. He uses this image to explore the mystery of God at work in the world, more specifically, a deep yearning for justice that has not yet been fulfilled.

I'll never forget the episode on the popular television show, *Breaking Bad*, when the main character, Walter White's wife goes into labor. In the eyes of most, Walter is a high school chemistry teacher. He is mild-mannered, predictable, methodical and responsible. He realizes that his chemistry expertise lends itself to begin a certain side business. While his wife Skylar gives birth to their second child, he is out working that side business in a nearby neighborhood. Even as his wife calls to tell him that the baby is on the way, his mind is on making money for his family. You see, Walter has cancer and his solitary focus is finding a way to pay for his chemotherapy without insurance. He's attempting to make enough money while he has the time so that if he dies from this cancer, they will be provided for. Before you jump to conclusions, I am not framing him as a hero, but the viewer does start to understand his deeply skewed morality in the wake of a disease that he has been told will take his life. In his wife's mind, however, nothing is so real, nothing occupies her thoughts as much as the little girl about to be born. She labors at the hospital whether her husband is present at her side or not. The labor still happens, the groaning and hours of delivery still take place. The baby is still born, and Walter is out making money. I wonder if we are sometimes distracted like a disheveled father not paying attention to his wife who is groaning in the pains of labor.

My mind is immediately brought to the 401 years of groaning from our sisters and brothers of color and the spirituals that have given voice and soul to the years of laboring. I have

recently been learning a lot about abolitionist Harriet Tubman. Born into slavery in Maryland, she escaped to freedom in the North in 1849 to become the most famous "conductor" on the Underground Railroad, risking her life to lead hundreds of slaves from the plantation system to freedom on this elaborate secret network of safe houses. Tubman also helped the Union Army during the war, working as a spy, among other roles. Between 1850 and 1860, Tubman made 19 trips from the South to the North following the network known as the Underground Railroad. She guided more than 300 people, including her parents and several siblings, from slavery to freedom, earning the nickname "Moses" for her leadership. If you have not yet seen it, I would encourage you to watch the 2019 movie about her life entitled "Harriet." Any time Harriet went to rescue someone from slavery, she would sing the spiritual "Let my people go." This was used as a rallying cry in the dead of night to announce her presence to those slaves that were groaning for freedom.

I don't know because I have not been groaning in labor before, but I know by watching that guttural groan that it is all consuming, and I know that it does not pass until the baby is delivered. What we as a country have experienced since the killing of George Floyd, Amad Arubury, and Breonna Taylor have been the deepest, most desperate, agonizing groans that come from these 401 years of labor. In a PBS tribute to James Baldwin called "The Price of the Ticket," Baldwin expresses his desperate groans. He says, "What is it that you wanted me to reconcile myself to? I was born here more than 60 years ago. I'm not going to live another 60 years. You always told me that it's going to take time. It's taken my father's time, my mother's time, my uncle's time, my brothers' and my sisters' time, my nieces' and my nephew's time. How much time do you want for your progress?" Do you hear the groan? We are in the midst of a radical awakening, and if we do not listen and pay attention to the labor of our sisters and

brothers of color and let them lead us in the divine reckoning of America's greatest sin, history will repeat itself. The groaning will continue. Nothing new will be born.

Indeed all of creation is groaning. We have felt the groaning as we work with refugees who are shopping for clothing in our Clothing Ministry, carefully using a translator to help them sort out their needs. We have felt the groaning as we stand at the graveside of a loved one, as we try to fathom a life without them. We have felt the groaning of being physically separated as a family of faith for these past 19 weeks, deeply longing to see and hug each other again. We have felt the groaning as we handed out water at a protest a few weeks ago, seeing hundreds of people with tears in their eyes singing "We Shall Overcome." Our world has been groaning for a long, long time. But it seems so palpable at this moment that you can almost touch it in the air.

Imagining helps us to break free from settling for what is. If you have been around me for any length of time, and we've gotten into a discussion or situation that is a bit precarious, you know that I say the phrase "It is what it is." a lot. Some of you may be rolling your eyes at this. When circumstances are beyond my grasp, I have adopted this Southern mantra to give me some sort of inner peace. It helps me to shrug it off, to not dig my heels in, to conserve my energy and just let go of the outcome. But I've come to realize that this phrase can also be used as a cop-out. It intrinsically abdicates my own responsibility to work for something more. I am not saying that some situations don't require shaking the dust off our feet and moving on down the road, as Jesus instructs. But perhaps we are quick to shrug off our own responsibility in working for more because we lack the holy imagination it requires to dream of a different day. We lack the vision to see beyond our own circumstances, imagining a bigger picture.

We foster imagination in children and encourage them to dream up new possibilities, to have imaginary friends, to play make-believe and dress-up. But, for whatever reason, adults are

not encouraged to use their imagination. So, when does the imagination die? Maybe it happens in your 30s, when you're settling down and into a stable rhythm of life. You get burned by the world a couple times, cynicism sneaks in, and you just start sinking into the reality that the world is always going to be the same. People are going to disappoint you, injustice is going to always exist, children will always go to bed hungry, racism will always be a thread in our nation's future story, so it just "is what it is." But Paul urges us to imagine beyond what we have seen and experienced into a new reality. He asks the question, "For who hopes for what is seen?"<sup>25</sup> But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience." David Greenhaw says it this way: "Christian hope is not pie in the sky; it is hope rooted in what Paul calls 'the first fruits of the Spirit.' This metaphor of the first fruits means that in Christ we already have come to know the power of life over death. We already know freedom. We already know love. We have tasted the first fruits, and they have whetted our appetite for the final banquet. We do have out-of-hand expectations. Because we know the first fruits, we rejoice at the loving, the living, and the freedom. We hunger for more, and we cry out wherever love is absent, life is shortened, and freedom is taken away. The Church of Jesus Christ is the community of sisters and brothers who live in anticipation of a new birth of freedom, a new day of loving, and an inheritance of life abundant."

As you all know, my husband is a mental health counselor, and we are both big proponents of counseling and have benefitted greatly from the guidance of a licensed therapist at different times in our life. I say with no ounce of shame, and with full confidence. We all face circumstances in our life that require the guidance and direction of a professional counselor that can walk with us. A few years ago, I was in therapy, and in my counselor's office there was a beautiful ornate Persian rug. You probably can picture that design in your mind, intricate detail

with these swirls of warm oranges, turquoise, and reds. I was in a season where I could not see the forest for the trees — have you even been in one of those times in your life? Your problem or circumstance is so big and it's all consuming in a way that you feel like you cannot see anything else going on around you. My therapist looked down at that rug and said, "Leah, I want you to imagine that you're a little ant on this rug...if you look down at all these beautiful blocks of color, you're on this big red swirl. All you can see is red. Any way you travel, it's still red, you're so small and that's all you can see. But, if you keep walking, you're going to get to the orange, and then the turquoise, and then the navy. You cannot see what I'm seeing, because I'm above all this, and I'm looking at this beautiful swirly design. But if you keep going, you will experience different colors."

Sometimes we get stuck, distracted, and complicit in our way of thinking about the Kingdom of God and the Church. We think small, we forget to use our imagination to dream of a different possibility of the world. But we must keep walking. We must keep hoping for a world that we do not yet see. We find ourselves in the midst of a moment in time during a global pandemic, where we have no other option but to imagine new possibilities. If you had told me back in January that we would spend 19+ weeks doing online church, I would have laughed and said that's impossible. But in March we did a pivot, we gathered up every single resource that we had, just like every other church, squeezing every ounce of our creativity together, and we imagined doing church in a brand-new way.

This is our work, and God's plan to bring about redemption and community and reconciliation and justice and healing, is our responsibility. Carmelite nun and Spanish mystic Teresa of Avila said, "Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on this world. Yours are the feet

with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body.”

Friends, may we not shrug our shoulders at the collective groaning of this world towards oppression and injustice, replying “it is what is.” May we not be distracted and complicit, not paying attention to the groaning in labor of creation. But may we push up our sleeves, and like the ant travel off of that red square using our imaginations to work for a world where all people are liberated and all people free. May we hope and work for a world that beyond our wildest imagination. This is God’s dream for us, may it be so.