

Myers Park Presbyterian Church

October 12, 2014

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Groaning

Psalm 22:1-5, Exodus 2:23-25

Psalm 22:1-5

- 1 My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?
- 2 O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.
- 3 Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel.
- 4 In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them.
- 5 To you they cried, and were saved; In you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

Exodus 2:23-25

23 After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. 24 God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. 25 God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

This year the clergy are preaching each Sunday on a single word from Scripture capturing the sweep of the biblical story and highlighting key concepts. This morning the word is *Groaning*. You heard it in the reading from Psalm 22. Listen now for God's word from Exodus 2:23-25...

Groaning is an unusual word — not upbeat, not uplifting, and not very inspiring. Groaning is one of those biblical words we quickly pass by in the hope that we won't stay too long in its shadow.

Why pick such a depressing word? Aren't faith and religion supposed to lift us out of the shadows of despair into the light of security and safety? Why not focus on a more positive word? The first reason is that this is the word our Sr. Pastor, Steve Eason, picked for this day and I *always* follow his lead.☺

I also noticed my own groans this past week as the local Public Radio station started their fall fund raiser, interrupting the regular programing with appeals for financial support. Dare I say it? There will probably be some groaning as people open mail from the church this week and see the request to financially support the ministries of this church. I hope that groaning will turn soon into rejoicing.

But there is a much more important reason that compels us to notice this word: *groaning* is part of the human condition. It is a part of the biblical story. It is a part of our story. It is a natural reaction to the circumstances of life. The Bible describes the groaning of God's people, a groaning we recognize because we know it all too well.

One of the amazing things about the Bible is that it does not hesitate to portray the messiness of human life. It shows the human condition with a relentless honesty about *who* we are and *how* we are. It holds out hope for human salvation but never glosses over our need for a savior who will hear our groaning and respond.

As much as we want to focus on uplifting things, we know groaning. We groan when we are sick with discomfort that won't go away. Women groan in the pain of childbirth. Men groan at the weight of work that wears them down, mentally and physically. Teenagers groan when parents treat them like children. Parents groan when teenagers act like children. Partners groan when conflict threatens to tear relationships apart. Spouses groan when marriages fall apart. Family members groan when they hear distressing diagnoses. We groan when we lose friends and family. While groaning isn't usually an everyday condition, it is often enough. Every time we groan we share in the groaning of God's people in Scripture.

The passage we read in Exodus happens at a particular point in biblical history. The Hebrew people had made their way to Egypt to escape a severe famine in the Promised Land. Life in Egypt became hard as the Egyptian empire oppressed the Hebrews and used them as slave labor. Moses enters the picture as a Hebrew baby who grows up in the royal palace, raised as a son of the Pharaoh. One day, as a grown man, Moses saw an Egyptian man beating a Hebrew. Moses intervened and ended up killing the Egyptian. The Pharaoh found out and Moses left the country and went on the run. While he was gone, the oppression of the Hebrews by the Egyptians continued.

The king of Egypt, who wanted Moses for the murder, eventually died. The Bible then records: "The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them."

The good news here is that God responds to the groaning of his people. The passage emphasizes God's response by a four-fold repetition. God heard, God remembered his covenant, God looked upon them, and God took notice of them. God actively and aggressively responds to the groaning cries. God is moved by the people's distress and sends Moses to deliver them.

There is no shame in crying out for help. Groaning is what got God's attention. In fact, groaning can be powerful prayer. When life bears down on us and nothing seems to

relieve our distress, groaning may be the only way we can pray. God doesn't need to hear words. God hears our groaning cries and, in the compassion of God, responds.

You may be wondering, as I do, why God would wait for our cries before God becomes involved. The Hebrew people were hurting for a long time. Couldn't God see that? Can't God see our hurting without our having to call God's attention to it? Does God have to be prompted to do something to ease our distress? This passage seems to say so.

I have to say, I find that troubling. I really like the idea of a responsive God—a God who hears, remembers, looks, and takes notice. I don't like a God who seems deaf, forgetful, inattentive, and unobservant. Yet, then and now, that is our experience.

Even when we cry out, even in our groaning, our sorrow and distress is not relieved. It continues. Sometimes for a long time. How many generations suffered under the Egyptian empire before Moses led the exodus from oppression? How many cries and groans have gone unanswered through the centuries? I wish I could tell you they are all answered promptly and completely. But I can't.

The Psalm read earlier captures our frustration and awareness that God doesn't work on our time scale. The psalmist speaks words bursting out of people longing for God's intervention. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest." This is our cry when days and weeks and years and decades go by and God has not intervened. "Why have you forsaken me?" is our cry when our deepest affections are torn apart by illness and death. "Why are you so far from helping me?" is our cry when we've done all we can and hope is beaten down again and again. "I cry, but you do not answer," is our lament as we nurture our wounds and yearn for a deliverer.

If these words of the psalmist seem familiar it's because Jesus quoted these very words as he hung on the cross awaiting death. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus groaned from the cross. Feeling the depths of despair, Jesus drew from tradition using the words of Psalm 22. Heard in isolation, they convey only groaning and lamentation. But Jesus knew the rest of the Psalm.

What was it that sustained the Hebrew people through generations of slavery and oppression? What was it that sustained the people of God when it felt like God had abandoned them? What was it that sustained Jesus through that horrible crucifixion? What is it that can sustain us when our groaning and cries go unanswered?

Glimpses of an answer are found in both scriptures this morning. In the Exodus passage there are the bold, confident claims that

- God *does* hear our cries, *has* heard our cries and *will* hear our cries.
- God remembers God’s promises. Even when we stray from God’s intentions, God’s is faithful. The promises of God are irrevocable.
- God keeps an eye on us and pays attention to us, even if we are not paying attention to God.

We know this because God has done it over and over —perhaps not on our schedule—but consistently over the ages in all times and places.

The psalmist knew this too because in the verses just after “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” come these words, “In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.” For the psalmist, and for Jesus, the groaning cry of distance from God is drowned out by a chorus of trust and faith and hope in God. God’s steadfast love bridges every gap, fills in every separation, collapses empty distance until the God of our yearnings shows up, stands with us, quiets our groaning, shushes our cries, and guides us out of despair into new life.

So, do we set *groaning* aside and focus only on the upbeat dimensions of a life of faith? No. We claim *groaning* as our deep and fervent prayer when we find ourselves at the dark boundaries of life. We offer our groaning to God as the most honest statement of who we are and where we are, trusting in God’s compassionate response. We submit our groaning and cries to God knowing that, as God has acted in the past, God continues to act. God hears our cries, remembers past promises, and pays attention to the circumstances of our life.

Will groaning always be replaced by joy? Sometimes yes. Sometimes not yet. Sometimes no. We groan, not out of despair and hopelessness, but out of confidence and trust that the God who heard the groaning of the Hebrews, who heard the lament of the psalmist, who listened to Jesus crying out in forsaken anguish, that same God will hear us too. The God who loves us too much to turn a deaf ear to our cries will deliver us. Of that we can be sure, even if our hearts, our bodies, or souls cry out and the only thing we have to offer God is our groaning.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.