

***Order of Service –May 8, 2016
All Creation Groans***

Musical Prelude

Greeting -- “A Fusion of Will, Submission and Inspiration”

1st Hymn: Praise Be to God, the Almighty, Green 19, 4 verses

Readings --Romans 8:22-28; John 1:1 and 14

2nd Hymn Spirit of God, Green 12

Joys and Concerns

Musical interlude

Prayer -- We, too, groan inwardly.

3rd Hymn: Let It Be, Blue 27

Pastoral reflection or message

Silent worship

4th Hymn: God Who Stretched the Spangled Heavens, Green 309

Closing -- Praise Be, for it is Good.

Introductions/Announcements/Afterthoughts

Postlude

Greeting

Good Morning Friends. Happy Mother’s Day.

C.K. Williams, an American poet, said once in an interview that the writing process is "*a ... fusion of **will and submission and inspiration** ... where*

sometimes something will -- at its best -- seem to be happening through you and to you..."

That sounded to me like labor, like the work of giving birth. It sounded like a description of any creative process, any act of creation, whether of art, or a child, or a self, a vocation, a life. It sounded like what prayer is. ***“A fusion of will and submission and inspiration where sometimes something seems to be happening through us and to us.”***

Today we celebrate that Something -- the holy and hard work of Creation. We'll start with a song of praise. ***Praise Be to God, the Almighty, Green 19, 4 verses.***

Prayer

Oh God who groans with the whole of your creation, Oh God who labors with us, We strain now to hear the sound of the Word, your Word made flesh. Some days it is a song we can only distantly hear, a mystery we can only dimly understand. But we know what it is to groan. We know what it is to struggle. We know what it is to be flesh, amazingly resilient and terribly fragile. We know what it is to want to hear, to want to understand, to want to add our own word, our own song to the faint chords that hum within us, around us, beneath us, through us. Oh God, Fount of All Creation, You whose work is our work, whose heart is our heart, whose hands are our hands, today our word is a prayer and a plea for peace. Bring us peace. Let us hear the echoes of the Word that was there in the beginning, that dwells now here, with us, among us. Our Spirit is willing, and our flesh is weak. Bring us peace, God, for our labor is long and we are weary. Bring us peace, Oh God Who labors with us.

Third Hymn: Let It Be, Blue 27

Benediction

In the Beginning was the Word And the Word was made Flesh, and Dwelt Among us.

And From the Beginning until now, all of Creation has been groaning in one great act of giving birth.

Praise Be to the God Who Groans With us.

Praise Be to Creation, for it is Good.

Praise this birthing that happens through us and to us.

Let it Be, Let it Be, Let it Be.

Readings

A reading from the Gospel according to John, Chapter 1, verses 1 and 14.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.

A reading from Paul's letter to the Romans, Chapter 8, verses 22-28

²²*From the beginning until now, the entire creation as we know it has been groaning in one great act of giving birth; ²³and 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. ²⁴For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with endurance.*

²⁶*Likewise 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. ²⁷And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit reconciles the holy ones according to the will of God. We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.*

Second Hymn: Spirit of God, Green 12

Message

There was a moment, during labor leading up to the birth of my son, Cyrus, who is now 8 years old, when I believed in my bones, in the deepest part of my breaking body, that I could not possibly go on. I had never worked so hard in my life. I was absolutely exhausted, totally depleted. I didn't know then that you can be even more depleted than totally depleted and keep going, but it turns out, you can. I had already endured for one whole day and one whole night. I remember crying. I remember feeling that I would die, that this birthing would kill me.

I would go on to labor for another 24 hours, and in the end I had an emergency cesarean section. The midwife later told me that she was very afraid I would begin to have seizures and die before the doctors could get Cyrus out, and that he would go into cardiac arrest. But my baby and I lived.

Absolutely reliable records and statistics are not available now of course, but research seems to indicate that at the time when Paul wrote this letter to the Christians living in imperial Rome, fully 33% of babies routinely died in the process of being born. That's more than 300 out of every 1000 babies. What is known is that bringing a baby to birth was particularly dangerous work in the first century. Positive outcomes were by no means guaranteed. The continuation of life demanded sacrifice, and regularly got it.

Then and now, Paul's use of birth imagery to describe the action, the work and the life of Creation, the way of God's movement in God's Incarnate world, evokes danger -- pain, and blood, and crying and hope. Hope that these cycles of pain are going somewhere, and mean that something good is happening. When

all of Creation groans together in one great act of giving birth, *I* see tectonic shifts and feel seismic contractions. In that one sentence, Paul gives us a theology of evolution, the constant birthing of a self-creating universe. Stars explode into being, waves crash, the earth erupts and quakes, mountains form, glaciers grind over the land, God's breath moves over the surface of the deep. Empires rise and fall, great works of art are created and burned centuries later, sands of time bury cities, civilizations flourish and are swallowed by oceans, species thrive; species go extinct. There are wars and marauding hordes and famines and feasts and the faces of all the world's children in the light of a thousand afternoons. the book of life is written in tiny letters, fills billions of volumes, an epic poem as long as all of time. Today science agrees that yes, this universe is actually expanding, and this passage from Romans suggests that St. Paul would not be surprised to have *his* faith confirmed. He says that for millennia, God's been performing an act of ongoing Creation. God's Creation is Always being born, and always giving birth. And we, miraculously, amazingly, are part of it.

What a generous, open-hearted God that is. To create something with its own creative potential, something as yet unfinished. To begin something, and then trust it to unfold. As a mother, I feel for this God, still, after all this time, birthing her Creation. That's hard work. And: over and over again bringing to life *something that will have its own generative capacity? That's trust.*

And I feel for us whose bodies are one way Creation continues to birth and be born here on the body of our Earth. That's also hard work. Because the epic birth pangs of Creation are a force so much larger than us, and because labor, once begun, must run its

course. We can't stop what's started, and there's no going back. As C.K. Williams said, it's happening *to us and through us* and there is nowhere to be but with it, in hope that all will be well. That we will make it through. That what is laboring to be born will be born safely. That in the end there will be new life, new hope, all that hard work and pain after all, so WORTH it.

But it's not a sure thing, is it? There's no guarantee that this will turn out ok. That's, Paul says, what faith is for. That's what our dearest, deepest, most fervent hopes are for. We wait, and we endure, and we hope for something we can't see yet. Oh, we can picture it, we can dream, the Spirit paints the most beautiful pictures, we can see them there on the ultrasound screens of God's heart, we can smell that new baby smell, there is nothing, nothing like it, but. The danger, in this time before, this time of labor, of waiting to be delivered, waiting for the redemption of our broken, depleted bodies -- the danger is very real.

Because the potential for loss is great. Because babies do die, and mamas, too. Because peril is part of the birth process. Because our own destructive capacity sometimes seems as boundless as our creative capacity. Because someday, all that seems true is that we are making an inutterable waste of God's good Creation, we are failing at the one great commandment, we know not at all what we do, and we do so very much of it.

And it's all been going on now for what feels like such a long time. So long that we have been groaning with the whole of Creation, praying though we don't know how, though every prayer is one we must be taught by the Spirit whose own sighs are too deep for words. We know the Word, the Word made Flesh, and it's one

long, keening syllable, a song of raveling sorrow, a psalm of hope beyond hope for the joyful thing we can imagine, the joyful thing we can just barely glimpse in the shadows, just out beyond the sight of these small and breakable bodies...

So, we labor. We are, together with all of Creation, balanced on this scalpel edge of unknowing. This thread of danger runs like the stitches of a surgical wound through the mystery of the Christian witness. We see that the body that is broken is our own. It's the bodies of black boys, of drowned refugee children, the body of the very Earth, the body of Jesus. Contractions bear down, then ebb away; we wonder if we can go on. We surrender to it, we fight it; we cry, we pray, we act on faith.

And that faith pushed Paul's feverish hand, bore down on him to write. Paul was a man who *admitted* his *weakness*. He wrote for men, mostly, none of whom would feel, literally, in *their* earthly bodies the birth pangs he described, but even so he gave to them and to us this incredibly feminine, incredibly incarnational, messy, earthy notion of God and of God's Creation birthing -- together. From the beginning until now, he wrote, and now, 2000 years later, the whole of creation *still* strains, and so do we. This is not the instantaneous proclamatory Creation of Genesis -- "Let there be Light" -- God the Father declared, and it was so, and it was good. No, this is God as Mother, in an ongoing, constant, continuous and cooperative act of Giving birth *with* her Creation. We, God's people, are here Co-creators with God. We, too, groan, inwardly.

It asks something of us, to be part of God's process of giving birth in Creation. It asks, first, for our bodies, small, mortal, flesh. It asks for our prayers, the ones we are unsure of, the ones we offer

with trembling hands up to the Spirit, the God who searches our hearts. It asks us to see God at work in *this* world, straining, moaning, sighing, working, in the mess and the mud and the mucous and the blood. It asks us, finally, to align our own labor, this Word that is a song of strain that may break our bodies, to align this offering of love and blood, with God's Word. With God's own labor. With God's own love. With God's own blood. It asks, at last, for our hope and faith and faithfulness to the enduring task at hand. It asks us to believe that it is good.

And in some moments, over these long millennia, we do believe. In some moments we *do* understand that all things work together for the good for those who love. Love this God drenched, shaking, shuddering Creation. And *those* are the moments when we behold the burning bush, we feel the grass and the glass and the concrete and the clay beneath our feet and we know that this *is* holy ground -- yes, everywhere -- this *is* Christ's Body and the wounds *are what make us real* to the ones who doubt and we raise our voices in the resurrection shout, My Lord and My God -- the stone IS rolled away, the unseen deepest hope *is* revealed before our unveiled eyes, by hope and faith we *are* saved, the Word *is* made Flesh and it is at long, long last a high note of praise for the God Who was, is and ever shall be being born and giving birth.