

BIBLE STUDY 3

Third Sunday in Creation: Outback Sunday



CREATION AND THE SPIRIT GROANING

Earth Reading: Romans 8.18-25

Beginning

The theme of our study is groaning—creation groaning, humans groaning and the Spirit groaning. We explore what all this groaning means and where it might lead.

Have you ever been in a location where your own inner spirit could hear or sense creation groaning, crying in pain, longing for liberation? Have you ever heard the silent cries of an animal or some other parts of creation? Has the sight of a devastation torn at your heart? Describe the location and share the faith feeling.

Recently a group of baboons beside a busy highway in eastern Uganda became furious after a speeding lorry killed a female from their troop. They surrounded her body in the middle of the road and held a ‘sit-in’, refusing to move for 30 minutes and blocking the highway completely, even when witnesses threw food. On that occasion, the groaning of creation became a public protest. (*New Internationalist*, June 2003, p.8)

Background

The groaning of creation announced in the Earth reading from Romans 8 is also found in the Old Testament. Several prophets of Israel were not only sensitive to injustice against the poor and the weak but also to the suffering of Earth due to human sin and greed. Jeremiah, for example, cries aloud in one of his confessions, 'How long will the land mourn?' because of the wickedness of God's people (12.4). Jeremiah claims that God too hears the groaning of the land:

They made it a desolation;
Desolate it mourns to me.
The whole land is made desolate
And no one lays it to heart. (12.11)

Earth and the various domains of Earth mourn, groan and cry aloud because of the devastation wrought upon them. The Old Testament reading for this Sunday offers an extended portrayal of the suffering and lamentation of all domains of life—the ground, the grain and the cattle. Even the wild animals cry out to God because their water supply has dried up (Joel 1.17-20). A land that was once like a garden of Eden has become a desolate wilderness (Joel 2.15).

The domains of creation are not insensitive units of the natural world. Trees weep, Earth mourns, animals cry, the wilderness groans.

Discuss: In our worship we invite all creation to join us in praising God as in Psalm 148. Should we also find a way to hear the cries of suffering creatures and recognise them in our worship? If so, how?

Exploring the Text

Read Romans 8.18-20

In these verses Paul contrasts the sufferings of the present with a future time when things will be very different. As the context shows, this suffering includes the pain of all creation, not just the hurt of human beings.

As creation groans and suffers, creation 'waits'! Waits for what? For liberation from what is here called 'subjection to futility'! There is some debate among scholars as to precisely what this 'futility' may mean.

What is clear is that creation is the victim not the cause of the futility that oppresses her. She has been oppressed by a devastating force—divine or human. And creation is longing to be free of this oppressive force.

Discuss: What might this oppressive force be? The curse pronounced on Earth because of Adam's sin that we discussed in the Earth reading for Second Sunday in Creation? An accumulated history of such curses or crimes against creation that amount to bondage and decay? Or something else?

Read Romans 8 verse 21

A striking message of this verse is that the freedom anticipated by creation is not only for human beings but also for the physical world—all creation! Creation is to be set free from its bondage along with the 'children of God'. As children of God we can anticipate the liberation of all children of Earth—the whole family of creation.

The longing of creation is not the release of our 'souls' from creation into some purely spiritual realm. Rather, creation yearns for the restoration of the whole world in all its spiritual and physical dimensions. That means 'decay' as a destructive oppressive power will be ended and life will be renewed as God intends—life in a forest garden called Earth.

Read Romans 8 verse 22

If the previous verse was striking, this verse is stunning! The groaning of creation refers not simply to those domains we might consider appealing, but all of creation—everything from the stars to the sea, from the farm to the Outback, from the spiders to the snakes that were first cursed in Eden. Yes, this liberation would presumably free snakes from their curse!

More importantly, this groaning is more than suffering from oppression, more than cries for help, more than the mourning of the land in the prophets. This groaning is accompanied by labour pains! This is not a groaning that precedes death, but a groaning in labour that precedes new life. This is not the end but a new beginning for creation. Earth is not coming to an end but being reborn.

All of this imagery suggests again the role of Earth as a mother discussed in the study for Forest Sunday. Now creation is like a mother, groaning with labour pains for a new creation to be born.

Discuss: Do you have any images of what a liberated creation might be like? Where and how might we discern these birth pangs of creation as she longs for a new-born creation?

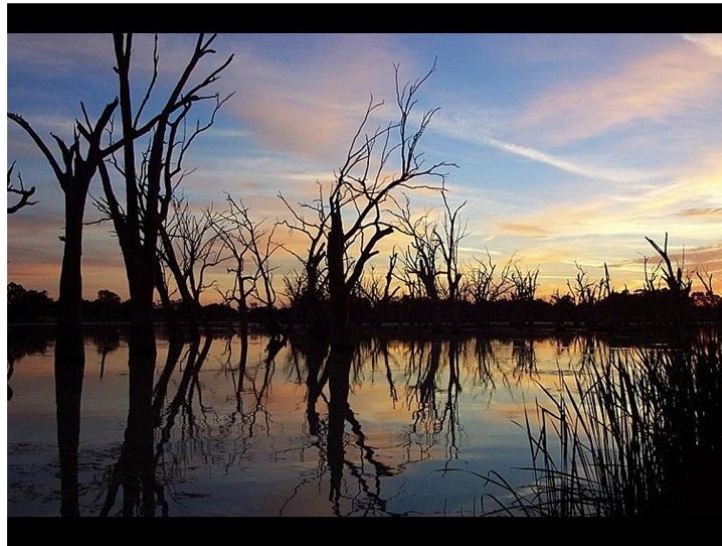
Read Romans 8 verses 23-25

This groaning is not confined to the creation around us. As children of God we too ought to be groaning as we long for our own liberation along with the liberation of creation. What stirs us to groan as human beings? The Spirit!

Because we have the Spirit within us we have the capacity to hear the suffering of creation and join in her groaning. One of the deep gifts of the Spirit is our capacity to empathise with Earth, to groan with creation. And that empathising, that groaning is integral to our hope, the hope of a new creation.

That this liberation is not some kind of spiritual escape into heaven is made clear by St Paul when he emphasises that this involves the 'redemption of our bodies'. The whole physical world, including our bodies, is part of this program of God to liberate creation and restore life in all its fullness.

Discuss: How might we cultivate the Spirit within us to become more empathetic towards the groans and cries of creation as we anticipate a new creation?



Conscious of Crisis

There are many locations in the world where we can hear creatures and parts of creation crying in agony. One very painful example is the coves in Japan where one can hear the penetrating screams from dolphins being murdered. Fishermen pound the water with metal poles to confuse these sound-sensitive creatures and herd them into coves where they are slaughtered and sold in tins at supermarkets.

The dolphins know what is happening to them, they know they are being murdered. Like humans they are self-aware and groan in anticipation. After spikes are driven into their heads, they are held under water until the blood pours out. They take five minutes to die while their companions cry in sympathy as the sea runs red with blood. (*The Advertiser*, Oct. 31, 2003, p. 3)

Discuss: Are the screams from these dolphins a signal to heed the cries of an infinite number of creatures and coves in creation? If we hear them and heed them then their groaning may not have been in vain, but move us to renew rather than ransack creation.

Exploring the Text

Read Romans 8 verses 26-27

The climax to this sequence of groans is the groaning of the Spirit. God too is in pain. The groaning of God's Spirit is described as silent sighs that are too deep for words, or as the original Greek reads, 'unutterable groanings'. Deep in the depths of Earth, God's Spirit is groaning in anticipation of new life.

The groanings in this Earth reading seem to decrease in sound but not intensity. First we hear the labour pains of creation, then the inward groans of humanity and finally the deep and silent sighs of the Spirit. This Spirit intercedes for humans before God because they do not fully realise how to pray for this new creation.

Ultimately this passage is about the continuing passion of God. The passion of God that was revealed in the suffering of Christ on the cross is now revealed to be present deep in all of creation, including the Outback.

Discuss: If indeed the Spirit of God is groaning in creation because of the suffering of creation, do we contribute to the pain of God when we destroy parts of Earth? Does God still suffer for our ecological sins, our crimes against creation?

Read Psalm 18.13-15

In several of the Psalms we meet quite a different portrait of how God works. In Psalm 18 the Psalmist speaks of his liberation as the intervention of God by storm. When God thunders from the skies, Earth rocks to its very foundations. There are spectacular fireworks in the sky with smoke and cloud and lightning. Creation shudders when God demonstrates such frightening power. The very foundations of creation are laid bare before the 'breath of the spirit' of God. Earth is intimidated before a ferocious God, or so it seems.

There are two ways we could read this Psalm. Either we accept that God sometimes uses terrifying means to liberate or we can read in the light of the Gospel, the message of the God we know who suffered on the cross. If we do the latter, we may accept that the portrait of God as a terrifying storm is a limited understanding of God and that the full and true revelation of who our God really is can only be discerned in the suffering of Christ and the groaning of the Spirit in creation.

Discuss: Do you still find people today who want a God who comes with great force and judgement to smite the wicked? Do you find it hard to accept that our God is revealed as a suffering God, both on the cross and in creation?

Connecting with Christ

The first Christ connection in these readings is apparent in Romans 8. The passion of the Spirit in creation is the passion of Christ at work in, with and under the planet where we live. Christ not only suffers with those who are oppressed, but also with an oppressed creation.

The second Christ connection is found in the Gospel reading (Matthew 3.13-4.2) When Jesus is baptised, the skies open and the Spirit descends in the form of a bird. Here heaven and Earth are united in one human being, Jesus Christ. Spirit and flesh unite as they did when the first human was created in the garden. Jesus is the new Adam.

The Spirit leads Jesus away, not into a garden forest like Eden, but into the wilderness, the domain of the wild, the Outback of the ancient world. This is the land that is often viewed as cursed so as to make tilling difficult. In Eden our first parents are tempted and fail; in the wilderness Jesus is tempted and succeeds. In Mark's version of the temptation, the wild animals who once lived in Eden with the first Adam, now join Jesus as his companions.

Discuss: Does the renewal of creation begin with Christ in the wilderness—the Outback? Or is the Outback a symbol for us of unspoiled creation? Is the Outback also groaning with the Spirit?



Closing with Praise

Participants may wish to close by singing two more verses of the following song using the melody of 'Morning Has Broken'.

Hear This Earth Mourning

*Hear the land wailing deep in the darkness,
Hear the land wailing, crying in pain:
"Where are my children, torn from their homelands?
Children, my children, come home again"!*

*Hear that man crying, crucified dying;
Hear that man crying, gasping for breath:
I'll share your suffering! I'll stop your bleeding!
I'll bring you healing, even in death"!*

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Prayer

*Spirit of God, groaning in creation,
attune our spirits to your cries
and the cries of all creation
longing for liberation
and the renewal of planet Earth. Amen.*