

Nevertheless

Texts: **Acts 2: 1-21; Romans 8: 18-27**; Pope Francis ***Encountering Truth: Meeting God in the Everyday***

We live in the midst of a groaning creation. No, I'm not hearing the rocks talking to me, or listening to the trees whisper my name. I'm talking about the way that the whole of God's creation sometimes feels out of harmony with human life. A tornado and extensive flooding hit New Orleans on May 12th, leaving dozens of homes destroyed. Mexico is facing such a huge drought that its second largest lake, Lake Cuitzeo, has dried up. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration is now predicting a 50% increase in major hurricanes this season, and a 100% increase in normal hurricanes. Last night the Nyiragongo volcano erupted in the Congo, blocking a major highway and spewing ash into the outskirts of the city of Goma, population 2 million, causing thousands of people to flee as volcanic rocks dropped into their neighborhoods. The glaciers are melting, the seas are rising, the earth is heating up, and on Thursday, an Antarctic ice shelf 80 times larger than Manhattan Island, on which New York City sits, broke off. It's 105 miles long and 15.5 miles wide. That's 1,600 square miles of iceberg floating away. The creation is restless and out of sorts, "groaning", as St. Paul put it in our reading from Romans today.

And people are groaning, too. We see it every week as our city's food pantries are visited by families wracked by the pangs of hunger and thirst. We read about it in the newspaper, or see it on TV, where the pandemic continues to strike fear in other countries where vaccinations haven't been available. India is in great distress. We watch the groaning of creation in our parents or friends (or in ourselves), as arthritis stiffens our joints, as hips and knees wear out and need to be replaced, as cells start multiplying out of control and we hear the dreaded diagnosis: cancer. Nation goes to war against nation, and the old send the young to die before their time. Children pass on before their parents, and the entire order of life is turned on its head. The creation is groaning, and the people in it are groaning.

This is no surprise to the Bible writers. They know all about it. They are constantly there to remind us that this is a good creation, but still a fallen creation - a creation that isn't all that it is supposed to be, all that it will be in God's time. They know that this world is a world of pain and suffering, and that there is no escape from it, even for the people of God.

Indeed, it's easy to feel alone and abandoned by God in the midst of all this pain and suffering. It's easy to feel that God can't understand, that God is far away from this messy world, living in heaven where all is order and obedient to God's will. It's easy to feel that way, but the Christian faith says that that feeling is, nevertheless, wrong. In Jesus Christ, God has entered into the midst of all this messiness - into this groaning creation, and has hungered and thirsted with it. In Jesus Christ, God has suffered injustice at the hands of the powerful. God has known what it is to die falsely convicted - on the word of lying witnesses - in shame, a victim of "fake news". In Jesus Christ, God has experienced all the tortures of physical pain, the humiliation of public ridicule, and the agonies of rejection. In Jesus Christ, God has shed tears of grief at the death of a friend, Lazarus, has worried about a mother left behind, and known the pain of the loss of an only child, of a beloved Son.

No part of human life is foreign to God in Jesus Christ. God knows it all, and has shouldered all the burden of this earthly life in Christ. But we might still feel abandoned by God. Last week we celebrated

the ascension of Jesus into glory. Up, up, up he went until he was hidden from their sight by a cloud. It's great to think of Jesus reigning as ruler of the world in heaven. But, from another point of view, we also celebrated the departure of Jesus from the world - as if God had had a taste of what it was like to live here, to be with us and be one of us, and had said, "To heck with that. I'm outta here."

Has God come ... and gone? We could be left with that impression. We could feel, once again, that we are on our own to face whatever comes. We could feel that, but then comes Pentecost. Then comes the Holy Spirit. With a mighty rushing wind and tongues of fire, God comes racing back into our world. The coming of the Spirit is God's promise to continue to be with us, to continue to be involved in this messy, messy world of pain, and to see us through it to the very end - to take part in the groaning of creation until everything is made right at last. That's what Paul was talking about when he wrote to the Romans, about the groaning of creation and the Spirit of God. God knows we are weak, and the Spirit is here to help us in our weakness. But what does the Holy Spirit do in our lives?

It is the Spirit who first works in our hearts to draw us to Christ, who first works that feeling that it might just be true that Jesus is alive again, and that we shall live forever with him, even though it sounds too good to be true. It was the Spirit who first makes us realize that Jesus died not just for the sins of the world, but for our sins - for my sins, your sins - and that he is risen not just to show off, but to show us what our own destiny is. It is the Spirit who changes incorrigible people, like the late Chuck Colson of Watergate fame, who found Christ in prison and went on to have a 35 year evangelistic prison ministry, that touched people worldwide. Or like the Apostle Paul of Damascus Road fame, who persecuted and killed Christians until he found faith, and went on to an evangelistic ministry that is still bearing fruit today. It is the Spirit who changes incorrigible people, like us and our neighbors, and summons us to be like Christ.

The Spirit is often on the move. It's the Spirit who drives the apostles out of Jerusalem, who takes Philip to Samaria, who takes Paul to Corinth and Galatia and Rome. And who still moves people from one place to another, like moving me from Canada to Cincinnati and now to Cleveland.

It is the Spirit who helps us to come before God in prayer when we have no words to say, when circumstances are so overwhelming that we can only bow our heads and sigh, or groan. And it is the Spirit who translates our sighs and groans, our mumbles and even our open-mouthed silences, to God. For it is the Spirit who knows our hearts, and who also knows the mind of God. It is the Holy Spirit whose coming into the world we celebrate on this day of Pentecost, and who, significantly, has no festival of ascension or departure, no day of the Spirit's leaving. For the Spirit is still and always with us, working for our redemption and for the redemption of the world. It is the Holy Spirit who gives us and our world hope, even in the midst of this groaning creation, not because we can see clearly how it will all work out - for hope that is seen, as Paul says, is not hope at all - but because we know something of the character of God, through the Spirit.

Martin Luther, the great German reformer, spoke of God's great *dessenungeachtet* - or in English, God's great "nevertheless" in the face of all obstacles. It is of this nevertheless of God, that the Spirit reminds us and teaches us. Yes, Pharaoh and Egypt have the armies, *nevertheless*, Moses and the little people of Israel will triumph. Yes, Babylon has captured and enslaved Israel, *nevertheless*, Israel will long outlast Babylon. Yes, Jesus was betrayed by a friend, rejected by his own people, put to death by the Romans on a cross, dead and buried in a stranger's tomb. *Nevertheless*, God raised him from the dead and seated him at God's right hand in glory. Yes, we are surrounded by the groaning of creation, and we often groan ourselves. We suffer with cancer, with aging, with despair. We suffer in

mind and body, in grief and sorrow, in stress and strain. *Nevertheless*, God will one day triumph completely and set all things right, somehow, though maybe we can't quite see how, right now.

That's our hope, unseen but nevertheless real - because we know that the Holy Spirit keeps on working God's great nevertheless-es in our world, and because we know that when Christ went, the Holy Spirit came. Yes, we are broken people on the way to wholeness, nevertheless, the Spirit can use broken people to speak to a broken world, in a language that every heart can understand. Yes, we have suffered loss. Nevertheless, the Spirit reassures us in our loss, and uses us to speak to others who are suffering loss, too.

Yes the world is a groaning creation, nevertheless, these groans are not futile groans, pain to no purpose. These groans are the labor pains of something new. Just as Paul says for in Jesus Christ, by the power of the Spirit, something new is being born into the world. As women know, labor can go on for some time - and it can be painful indeed - but the end of labor is a new life, a child born into the world, a new soul among us. The labor is hard, painful and long, but it is also worth it. The Spirit assures us in our hearts that, in the end, our own labor in this world will bring forth a new life of its own. That in the end, as Paul writes, "in all things God works for the good of those who love God." That in the end, "our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."

It may seem unlikely at times, but we don't have this hope in a vacuum; no, we have a history with God, who is the champion of the unlikely, the champion of the nevertheless. We may not be able to see how it will all work out, but we have the promise of God. Yes, the creation is groaning and we groan within it, but this is Pentecost, and we have the Spirit with us. That's why we who are God's people in the midst of the groaning of creation, can respond in hope. And that's why, in the midst of all of our own groaning, in the midst of all our pain and suffering and fear, in the midst of tornados, droughts, volcanos, and deadly pandemic, with the power of the Spirit, we can boldly say together, "Nevertheless ... nevertheless!"

Amen