

Labor Pains

BROKEN: Good News for Tough Times

Romans 8:12-25, Proper 1, Year A

August 6, 2023

Rev. Melissa Hatfield, First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, MO

WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/labor-pains/

Never in all the world has there ever existed a more faithful fan than my nephew, Blake, and his undying devotion to basketball legend LeBron "King" James. At 10, Blake started watching LeBron James highlights on YouTube and instantly fell in love with basketball and LeBron. When Blake was 11 and our family was on vacation at Disneyworld, LeBron and the Cavaliers lost to the Warriors in game six of the NBA Championship. Blake was inconsolable. For that night and most of the next day, Disneyworld was not the happiest place on earth.

In 2019, when Blake was 15 years old, our family was in Indianapolis, Indiana, for a weekend basketball tournament. There was a rumor that LeBron James would be in town, watching his 15-year-old son play with his team. Blake's coaches hatched a plan to make sure the boys and their families could see LeBron in person. I'm not sure Blake slept much that night as he eagerly anticipated seeing his idol and hero in the flesh.

On Saturday afternoon, their van arrived, full of hopes, dreams, and a potent mixture of middle school body odor and sweaty uniforms. When our family entered the complex a few moments later, it only took a second to discern which of the three courts Bronny James was playing on, for a sea of people encircled it.

I walked over to the spectators looking for Blake and finally spotted him standing on the top row of some bleachers. He was mesmerized; eyes fixated across the court. I followed his gaze, and there he was – the King himself, cheering on his son, coaching from the sidelines as parents do, even though they're not professional basketball players. These are a couple of photos Blake took that day. Blake saw LeBron twice because we stalked his suburban as any normal person would do.

But here is the photo I took, a photo of my nephew in the blue hoodie, craning his neck alongside his teammates, finally able to see what he had long dreamed and hoped for. I don't remember taking any pictures of LeBron that day. What I had waited expectantly for all weekend was Blake's joy at seeing his hero in person. And I wasn't disappointed. At one moment, we exchanged a little glance and a big smile. No words were needed.

There are so many things in this world we look forward to. We eagerly await significant life moments like graduations, first loves, and career accomplishments. We hope and look forward to our first homes, cross-country adventures, and the arrival of children and, even better, grandchildren. The seasons of our lives are filled with moving from one moment to hoping for the next.

These hopes, as wonderful and beautiful as they are, pale in comparison to the hope we have in Christ. The hope Paul tells us about in our scripture reading this morning. The dream all of Creation, including us, waits for with craned necks and anticipation.

Our scripture today, and throughout this sermon series, comes from a letter Paul writes to a people he had never met, to a small group of Christ-followers living and struggling in Rome. It was now two decades since Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, and his message of good news for all people was still spreading throughout the Empire. And yet, the Roman Christians were living at the very center of a hostile government under the rule of a paranoid and oppressive ruler who would later persecute and torture Christians. This community of believers was incredibly diverse, a community from all sorts of backgrounds, ethnicities, religions, and socio-economic statuses. Living in a deeply segregated system, these people weren't always sure how to interact and overcome their differences. Despite the good news and the miraculous works of Jesus, brokenness was the reality for these Roman Christians. They saw and experienced pain and suffering and wondered why Christ's life, death, and resurrection had not yet transformed the world. Perhaps they even wondered if the suffering they were experiencing was proof their faith had been worthless—that the world's brokenness wouldn't heal after all. So, Paul wrote this powerful letter, this message of hope and assurance to these people trying to make it through tough times. People like us.

On Thursday and Friday, our sanctuary was full of hurting and broken people grieving the death of someone too young gone too soon. Some of you were among them. Some of you are hurting and broken for other reasons. It is painfully clear to us that the world is not as it should be, that our lives are not as they should be. We need words of hope to remind us our faith isn't worthless or in vain. We need to set our eyes on King Jesus and remember who he is and what is true.

Paul spends the first seven chapters of Romans talking about sin, and how it separates us from God, and how we need to be justified or made right by God's grace, through our faith in Christ Jesus, in order to have peace with God. Our sinful choices contribute to the suffering in our world, and like the Roman Christians, it can be discouraging and easy to feel defeated, to believe brokenness and suffering have won. I hear this often from people who wring their hands in

worry, who throw up their hands in despair, or act as if this world or an individual is beyond redemption. Friends, we aren't the first, nor the last, to feel defeated by the brokenness in and around us. But let us not be the last to long for the day when that will no longer be the case and to join Christ now as we work towards that end.

Paul tells the Romans that "all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God." God has adopted us as God's children. As God's children, we are to inherit the richness and abundance God has in store—a new world established in God's love, justice, and life for all Creation. By living in the Spirit and the ways of God, we can experience and realize this new reality now, even if not in its fullness.

But this inheritance as God's adopted children does not come easily, and the brokenness of this world will not heal overnight. Paul compares this time of struggling for change to the labor pains of childbirth, a dangerous comparison for any man to make, if I'm honest.

I've never given birth, but I've had the honor and joy of being present and in the room for three births. And each one made me fully aware that I know nothing about what it feels like to give birth. The movies and eighth-grade health class did not adequately prepare me for the experience nor the pain my sister or my best friend experienced as they labored to bring their children into the world. Suffering not just in those final hours and minutes but for the nearly nine months leading up to the birth. The discomfort, fatigue, morning sickness, heartburn, high blood pressure, pain, swelling, and so much more that is part of the journey. Yet, the suffering and struggling have a purpose. It holds the hope of new life, the birth of a new reality.

I often read John 16:20-22 at funerals. Jesus is speaking with his close friends, the disciples, in the Upper Room as he prepares their hearts for the grief and suffering soon to come as he is handed over for his trial and death. He has promised them that although he is leaving, they will not be alone, for the Companion, the Advocate, the Spirit, will come to be with them and guide them in all truth. Jesus tells them and us, "Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. When a woman is in labor, she has pain because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So, you have pain now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you." So, we have pain now, and oh do we have pain. But one day we will see Jesus and our hearts will rejoice, and no one will take our joy from us.

Paul says that part of the reason that all Creation is groaning is that we have glimpsed a new reality of how the world could be, yet we labor in the world as it is. We have tasted, because of

Jesus, what he calls the "first fruits of the Spirit"—a world where all people are welcomed and loved as they are, where oppressors are cast down, and the lowly are lifted, where God's table is open to all, and there is food enough to share. The saving work of Jesus and the guiding work of the Spirit has given us a taste of what is possible, of what God intends and dreams for us, and we are left unsatisfied with the brokenness of our lives and world. Even those far from the Lord recognize, especially when their suffering is greatest, that this is not how it is supposed to be. We are made in the image of God. No matter how far we run, we can never change whose we are and what we were meant for. You are God's child, and nothing will ever be right until You come home to and make peace with God.

The whole Creation is groaning, Paul tells us in verse 22. All are longing for the time when God's mission is accomplished, and all creation is redeemed. We can all hear the labor pains in our world, country, communities, and ourselves. The groans of societal and political division and the work to find a just and common ground. The groans of a changing climate as our created world groans in its suffering. The groans of people near and far suffering injustices, persecutions, and a lack of resources to meet their basic needs of food, shelter, and safety. The groans of people going through the motions and facades of life, carrying heavy burdens, and unsure how or if they can ever lay them down. We feel it for the world. We feel it for ourselves. What we all want is redemption. We want God to put us back together again, to help us, to heal us, to make us whole. The entire Creation anxiously awaits that promised transformation, and we all have a role in bringing that new world.

Seeing LeBron in person was something Blake hoped for one day. Even though he had seen videos of him, something shifts in us when we find ourselves in the presence of our hero. It was nearly all he hoped it would be, short of getting his photo taken with him and maybe playing some one-on-one. A kid can dream. Eventually, Blake had to return to his games, but I believe the next time he stepped out on the court to play, Blake held a vision of LeBron on the sidelines, cheering and coaching him just as he did his son. And this vision gave him the endurance to persevere and to hope for even greater things.

We have been given a vision. It makes waiting hard and painful. And yet, the hope of what is promised and what is to come inspires us to keep working to bring the Kingdom of God to Jefferson City, even though we know we are not there. We keep working toward that, hoping toward that, craning our necks in the expectant wonder of the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

This illustration is titled "Anticipation" from Ukrainian illustrator (EYE-rain-us YOUR-chuck) Irenaeus Yurchuk¹. In the background is the current reality of devastation and destruction due to

the war. It is the brokenness that is home at this moment for so many Ukrainians. It is the brokenness they see with their eyes. But in the foreground is the remembrance of what was and the anticipation of what can be again. It is the result of a heart seeing something your eyes don't. It is hope.

Just as the broken body of Jesus Christ was resurrected, our broken world will be restored and healed. We know it's not here yet. We can see that God's kingdom hasn't come. But in our hearts, we can see what our eyes don't. We can see what our lives could be like if we allowed God to love and lead us. We can see what our city and world would look like if God's will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. So, we keep on working, laboring, and hoping toward that, believing someday a new creation will be born. We work for it, we hope for it, we pray for it. We've seen King Jesus and what is possible. Now, let's get off the bleachers and onto the court to play our part in making this world and our lives as much like God's dream as possible until all of Creation is restored and redeemed.

Melissa Hatfield 2023 ©

ⁱ <https://globalworship.tumblr.com/post/723600255558483968/anticipation-ukraine-art>