

GIVING BIRTH TO A NEW CREATION  
The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost  
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July 19, 2020

For the next four Sundays, we will be engaging with Paul's Letter to the Romans in a series of sermons that I hope will take us deeply into the message of this remarkable text and show, as well, its pertinence to our own extraordinary times. As we get started today, I ask that you remember these basic facts about Paul, which will guide our engagement with him throughout these weeks:

First, that Paul never thought of himself as anything other than a Jew, and would not have recognized or understood the "Christian Paul" most of us learned about in Sunday school;

Second, that Paul understood his ministry to be one of joining the Gentiles to Israel's God, which was only possible because the *Eschaton* (the End of the Age) was near;

Third, that we can only understand Paul fully if we remember that he, along with all first generation Jesus followers, believed that they would be not only the first but the only such generation – that God's redeeming work in the world was about to be concluded; and

Finally, that any interpretation of Paul's letters that does not take these ideas seriously is going to miss the mark. We need to take Paul on his own terms, while at the same time remembering that his words are, for us, the inspired Word of God.

In today's passage, we hear that "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains *until now*" (Romans 8:22). The "now" that Paul is talking about is the very recent period of years in which large numbers of Gentiles have attached themselves to a Jewish movement. Paul thought of his ministry as a Jewish ministry to Gentiles; not to convert them to the full observance of Judaism, but to bring them to commitment to Israel's God. This took place through embracing Jesus as the Christ – the One who, as the historian Paula Fredriksen says, was, for Paul, "the definitive self-revelation of God at the End of the Age" (Paula Fredriksen, *Paul: The Pagan's Apostle*, p. 74). Jews had long believed that all nations – *goyim* – Gentiles – would embrace Israel's God in the last days. The fact that so many Gentiles were responding to the Jesus movement by doing just this demonstrated, for Paul, that Jesus was indeed the Messiah.

So *now*, Paul believed, Creation was about to give birth to something new: a new creation in which all things would be made new. And Paul believed that this event was truly at hand – that it could well occur in his own lifetime.

"The whole creation has been groaning in labor pains *until now*." We could use these words about our own time – these extraordinary days of pandemic. Think of the pain that has been brought upon Creation by human depravity: the reckless pillaging of our ecosystem; the addiction to material consumption; the oppression of people of color, women, and the LGBTQ community; the proliferation of gun violence... We could all add to this tragic list. But what if this pain turned out to be the pain preceding new birth? The pandemic has certainly stopped us in our tracks. We cannot live the way we did before March of this year. What if this turned out to be not an ending, or at least not an ending only, but a beginning? What if the pandemic were teaching us about limits, about sacrifice, about reordering our lives, as individuals and as communities? What if this were a time in which God is making all things new?

The Jews believed for many centuries that in the last days, all nations would turn towards the God of Israel. This would involve a radical reordering of society. In the ancient Greek and Roman world, ethnic identity and religious identity were joined; each ethnicity had its own god. For a

nation to turn towards a new god was for that nation to give up its ethnic identity. The Jewish vision, which was Paul's vision, was one of humanity being united in the worship of the one true God. For Paul, that was taking place because now the God of Israel had revealed himself in the person of Jesus, for all the world to see.

The challenge for us in the church today, if we listen to Paul and take his message seriously, is to ask ourselves: what do we need to turn away from in order to truly follow Jesus as Lord? What gods do we need to leave behind? I know that for me the list is long. My carbon-dependent lifestyle is a big one. My participation in white privilege is another. My devaluing of species other than *homo sapiens* is yet another. What are yours?

Maybe, just maybe, COVID-19 is showing us the way to the birth of a sustainable planet. We all have gods to turn away from in order to be a part of this new order. May God give us grace to turn from them, and towards the One whose life, death, and resurrection made all things new.