On December 31, 2019 Chinese authorities alerted the World Health Organization of a novel coronavirus strain causing severe illness. An analysis of the genome sequence confirms that it was not made in a laboratory or otherwise engineered, but originated through natural processes. Scientists believe that a single transmission from possibly a bat to a pangolin to a man introduced this new strain, COVID-19, into humanity. The encroachment of people and commerce into the natural world initiated the spillover. And that initial transmission is now following an exponential trajectory – touching almost every community and corner of creation.

Roger Cohen writes about it this way:

This is the spring of fears. A scratchy throat, a snifflle, and the mind races...
Scattered masked pedestrians on empty streets look like the survivors of a neutron bomb.
A pathogen about one-thousandth the width of a human hair, the spiky-crowned new coronavirus, has upended civilization and unleashed the imagination...
From animal to human the virus jumps, as if to demonstrate the indivisibility of life and death on a small planet. The technology perfected for the rich to globalize their advantages has also created the perfect mechanism for globalizing the panic that sends portfolios into a free fall.

It is remarkable, isn’t it?
A tiny, rather unremarkable, pathogen has brought the world to a grinding halt. We’re left to washing our hands, keeping each other at a distance, and hoping that this invisible invader doesn’t take us down. Jobs will be lost, businesses will fail, schools, churches and colleges will be battered, and loved ones will die because we currently don’t have a vaccine, effective treatment, or for that matter, enough hospital capacity. The limits of current science, the inefficiency and incompetence of government, and the spin of the media are all on display – alongside amazing scientific research, human ingenuity, heroic medical care, and people coming together to protect human life, even for the most vulnerable among us.

Now, there may be gifts in how this crisis has upended contemporary life, but the human cost, by all manner of measure, is staggering. No one knows how life will be changed at the other end of all of this…

But, what is also remarkable to me is that it is the result of natural processes. Frailty and fallenness may be on display, but this new reality is not the direct result of some moral failing, or an evil plot, or human depravity and general cussedness. This is not sin as the breaking of divine law; this is sin as the brokenness of creation.
Dear friends, Paul writes that the “whole creation has been groaning” for release from its “bondage to decay.” That bondage, that curse, was not the choice of creation but the “will of the one who subjected it.” And Paul uses the same word to describe our longing for healing – the redemption of our bodies. We join creation in groaning.

That has deep resonance…
…because we don’t have much control. We can follow simple guidelines and we can manage money as best we can – but it is clear that the march of this virus and the accompanying financial impact is beyond our control. So, we worry, we long, we lament, we pray and we are joined with creation in groaning for “the redemption of our bodies.”

I’m struck by the physicality of all of this. Paul is not writing about a purely spiritual struggle; this is not something set aside in some box labeled religious concerns. This is the deep deep groaning of our bodies and of creation itself – even at a cellular level – for healing.

John Calvin puts it this way:

There is no fragment or particle of the world, which, in the grip of the knowledge of its present misery, does not hope for resurrection.

Is that plausible?
Is it helpful?
Does it make scriptural sense?
Does it make human sense?
What if we thought about it this way?

Shalom, God’s original intention for creation, has been defined as, “the webbing together of God, humans and all creation in justice, fulfillment and delight… a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed.” What Neil Plantinga describes as “the way things ought to be.”

And sin, which we’ve talked about this Lent as a swirling cauldron, is that disruption of shalom that leads to separation or death. Or, not the way things ought to be….

Sin, therefore, is more than our pint-sized peccadillos, or our misplaced priorities, or the idolatry of our hearts, it is the corruption of the created order. And, there doesn’t need to be human agency behind every expression of sin. Rather, creation itself, while beautiful and the arena of God’s glory, is also unjust and universal flourishing is fractured. Creation is bound and born into a state of being from which it can’t extricate itself. The very ground under our feet is so vandalized of the shalom that God intended that it too is groaning for healing and release. And, therefore, in some ways COVID-19 is nothing more than the latest example of that reality….

NT Wright wrote recently in Time magazine that “Christianity offers no answers for the Coronavirus. It is not supposed to.” He reminds readers that lament is part of the Christian tradition and rather than offer answers lament is “where we get to when we move beyond our
self-centered worry about our sins and failings and look more broadly at the suffering of the world.”

Listen to Wright on this:

_The point of lament, woven thus into the fabric of the biblical tradition, is not just that it’s an outlet for our frustration, sorrow, loneliness and sheer inability to understand what is happening or why. The mystery of the biblical story is that God also laments. Some Christians like to think of God as above all that, knowing everything, in charge of everything, calm and unaffected by the troubles in his world. That’s not the picture we get in the Bible._

Thanks be to God.
We are not alone.
You are not alone.
We are joined by God, even in lament.

When Lauren, our daughter, went into labor Sandi and I went to the hospital. Lauren wanted her husband in the delivery room, but she wanted us in the waiting room. We got there, saw her in early labor, and went to the waiting room. But, after a while the nurse came out and said that Lauren wanted Sandi with her. I was left alone in the waiting room.

I waited.
I waited alone.
Hours went by.
I paced and prayed and worried and the longer it went the deeper my groaning.
No one came out to give me any news.
Did I mention that hours went by?

Finally, Sandi came down the hospital hallway with tears streaming down her cheeks at the beauty of the moment and the healthy delivery of baby Jack. I felt waves of anxiety and tension and fear release into hope and joy. And, all those feelings started pouring out my eyes. I was weak-kneed and wobbly, like I’d been standing on my tiptoes for hours only to finally know the peace of solid ground.

One translation of our text has it that the entire created order is “standing on tiptoe” in expectation of what God will reveal in Christ and in his children. We may groan, but we also wait with great expectation, like those awaiting a birth. We wait, we strain, we long, we groan with creation, even on our tiptoes, for the birthing of God’s saving action and the healing of all creation.

For if the very ground on which we stand is longing for liberation, and if God’s work in Christ is more than just the saving of souls for some distant heaven, then

- every hunger,
- every ethnic hatred,
- every lost species,
every horror and holocaust,
every depleted resource,
every malignancy,
every broken heart,
and every pandemic will somehow be healed and creation itself restored to the *shalom*
that God intended.

And if that’s true then the Jesus that rode into Jerusalem is more than an enigmatic teacher, or a relic that belongs in a box labeled religious concerns, but he is the Cosmic Christ and the King of all Creation.

If that’s true then atop a donkey rode the answer to the groaning of our hearts, the groaning of creation, and the groaning of the very Spirit of God.

And as that is true then the very ground under our feet will finally – even through death and resurrection – be restored to glory.

Thanks be to God.
Amen.