

Sermon for November 29: 1 Advent
Nicholas M. Beasley

Romans 8:22-23 *"We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time." and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.*

The time between Thanksgiving and Christmas may well be a time of groaning.

The Thanksgiving meal often leaves us groaning.

As much as I like Thanksgiving food, it's gloppy and heavy most of time.

Vegetable casserole, sweet potato casserole, dressing, rice and gravy. Heavy stuff.

It seems to gather in the stomach like cement.

I know that Tiger fans are groaning today, as Carolina fans gloat.

I am sure the Black and Garnet will remember some groaning in the past.

In the weeks ahead, I'll be groaning as I shop and practice my grinning.

I am sure that some will groan because it's Advent; because you are ready for Christmas and will find your holiday spirit sorely inhibited by solemn and somewhat dark lessons we will have before us.

You might have come to church this morning with a good feeling left over from Thanksgiving.

A long and restful weekend and now a long holiday season ahead.

And the month which we spend looking forward to our Christmas feast, the Nativity of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, his birth in Bethlehem 2000 years ago, that creation-changing event that marked God's strong will to reclaim the lost creation.

You had the warm feeling and found us today in a different key in church.

Much of the music is in a minor key; plainsong has replaced the melodies we were singing.

Our Advent hymns are better than groans, but the carols some are already singing will not be heard here for a long time.

My theme of groaning is meant to point to one of Advent's themes; the connection between the birth of Jesus and the rebirth of the whole creation through him.

Again, as St. Paul said it, *"We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time." and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies."*

The lessons today are mostly not about the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, which we look forward to remembering at Christmas.

No, they are about a different birth, the rebirth of the whole creation at the second coming of the Lord.

His first birth into the creation, through the body of the Blessed Virgin Mary, set the stage for the rebirth of the whole creation that will accompany his return.

Some of you have given birth to children; others have witnessed it, as I have, from the strange position of husband and soon-to-be father.

Two of you in the congregation preside over the birth of children as blessed and skilled physicians.

It is a terrifying and beautiful thing, the way that infant humans come into the world.

It is a great struggle and surpassing joy.

There may be hours and hours, even days of pain and uncertainty leading up to the blessed moment.

There is pushing and walking and waiting; blood and sweat and a man's

useless encouragement.

And then finally, when the time is right, when the baby is ready and the woman's body has finished its mighty work, then a new human being is held up to the light, a new creation, the fruit of wondrous love.

The trauma of birth is real; our son's head looked like half a football.

Some of the odd red marks on his head and neck have faded only in the last several months.

This is my point about an Advent season of groaning; a season to prepare for birth and rebirth, the birth of Jesus surely but also the rebirth of all us, the rebirth of the creation at his second coming.

Neither are as easy as whipping out the credit card at the mall;

Preparing for Christmas should not be easy; preparing for the new creation cannot be.

When we do arrive at Christmas Eve, we will speak about Jesus' birth in the careful and sentimentalized way that we usually do; swaddling clothes, manger, shepherds and the like.

We will not pay much attention to Mary's struggle and the human reality of what his first birth was like; few will think about contractions and suffering and a useless husband and the tiny cries of a baby whose survival was never taken for granted.

Perhaps we should speak more about the struggle of his birth, for the struggle of his birth prefigures the struggling, halting emergence of the new creation that will accompany his return.

There are, as always, signs all around us of a creation broken by human sin and of an emerging new creation, restored in Jesus.

Tremendous economic uncertainty, two lingering wars, the possibility of a long and violent conflict with those who do terrorism; great cleavages in our society; constant intemperate voices.

People do indeed faint with fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the

world, as a young and terrified mother might as the rhythm of the contractions begin.

But in the struggle is great promise.

I need to confess that we know little about what Jesus means in a passage like this.

Signs in the sun and moon and stars; power and great glory.

What is that all about?

We cannot take a passage like this literally, as a map of the road ahead, but we can be sure that these mighty words are meant to convey the power of God's plan, the majesty of Jesus' final perfection of the creation.

And like a woman's labor, it will be out of our hands. We'll get some hints but then, we will be along for the ride.

It may be happening in your individual life right now.

Are there hints that God is making you a new creation?

Is there a new calling, a deeper discipleship?

Are you in the birthpangs of really grabbing hold of the hope of the Kingdom of God?

It could be happening in our church right now. Is there pain and promise; is there suffering and hope and new possibility?

Jesus' warning to be alert, to be on guard, that we not be surprised, may be endlessly applied, individually, as a church, even in global terms.

It is sound counsel for every day of our lives and for whatever great day is coming; sound counsel for preparing ourselves for Christmas and for the Lord's return.

Birth and rebirth are our themes for Advent.

Let me leave the theme in your hands.

As you pray this month, picture pregnant women, full of promise and some fear.

As you pray this month, picture a baby at 38 weeks, ready, almost ready for an unknown and frightening and wondrous life.

Those are images of Christ's first Advent and his promised second.

And picture yourself, somehow, full of the Lord's promise of rebirth.

Turn the metaphor where you will, but turn it, and pray for strength that you may greet the coming Savior with joy.

Our groans will be turned to cries of joy.