

Broken: Labor Pains
Romans 8:12-25
August 2, 2020

Our nation has been mourning the death of Congressman John Lewis, who devoted his life to the cause of justice for all persons. The march toward justice has been a lifelong journey for this son of a sharecropper, a journey from the cotton fields of Alabama to the halls of Congress. The labor pains of injustice yielded to a legislator of justice.

Martin Luther King, Jr. nicknamed Lewis “The Boy from Troy,” a nod to his birthplace of Troy, Alabama. He sought admission to Troy University, an all-white college at the time. He was denied admission, but years later, the university awarded him an honorary doctoral degree. Troy University welcomed Lewis’ body as it lay in state last week. The pain of denial acknowledged by repentance and embrace.

Fifty-five years ago in 1965 Lewis led some 600 protestors in a march for civil rights across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. State troopers beat the demonstrators, including Lewis, who suffered a cracked skull on that “Bloody Sunday.” Last Sunday Lewis’ body crossed the bridge for the final time accompanied by a military honor guard and escorted throughout his home state by Alabama state troopers. The pain of a bloody beating prompted the Voting Rights Act of 1965, finally giving birth to voting rights for Black people in this country.ⁱ

Congressman John Lewis endured multiple experiences of labor pain in order to right the wrongs of the past and move his nation toward justice for all. A generation of Civil Rights leaders have endured great labor pains to give birth to the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness intended for all residents of this land, rights that never should have been denied them. As this generation, including Rev. CT Vivian, passes on, others, that means you and I, inherit the ongoing struggle for justice. These women and men gave their blood, sweat, tears, and even their lives, laboring for racial justice in a land which has far too long prospered on the broken backs of people of color. Sadly, the work toward equality has been set back, but the present swell of the anti-racism movement feels like labor pains leading to release from bondage. We pray that in this day the groaning will be heard and addressed in ways that lead to genuine freedom and justice.

Paul writes his letter to the Romans with the pain of a broken world in mind. Christians in many places are suffering at the hands of the Roman government. Many hoped for Christ to reappear and rescue them from suffering. In the face of their turmoil, Paul offers a message of comfort and empowerment. The whole creation is breathless in anticipation, waiting to be set free from slavery, and adopted as full children of God. The difficult experiences of pain throughout the world are birth pangs. God does not cause suffering, but God is at work to deliver God’s people from suffering. Paul encourages them to hold on to hope through the labor pain. The pain of birth is not a fruitless pain. It is pain with a purpose. It holds the promise that new life is emerging. We are that new life, ever forming and growing under God’s creative guidance.

Paul acknowledges that the glorious birth may not come in our lifetime. John Lewis, CT Vivian, Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, devoted their lives to co-creating the Beloved Community envisioned by Jesus, but they did not see its completion. Nevertheless, they persevered. God worked through them and continues to work with us, pushing us, guiding us

to live as the new creations we are made to be in Christ. We are in the birth canal; the labor pains are stretching and pulling back the status quo. When the pain is over, after being squished through the birth canal, after some ripping and tearing of our old vices and hateful patterns, we will be revealed as the children of God we are born to be.

This kind of creation and rebirth is uncomfortable, but God is with us in the pain. God knows the stretching and tearing, the rupture and disruption that is necessary. God is using all of it to recreate us, to change us, to transform us. There is no pain that God cannot use or redeem. There is no struggle that God can't use to strengthen us. Our role is to release ourselves to the presence and guidance of God, who has the power to create beauty from brokenness, to bring life out of pain.

We are called to be midwives in this process of birthing new life. We're called to get our hands dirty in the work of fostering change. Our congregations are active in ministries of social justice, serving the unhoused, feeding the hungry, embracing LGBTQ persons, advocating for justice. As John Lewis said, we're called to get into trouble, good trouble, the kind of trouble that raises consciousness and precipitates justice.

In our advocacy, it is easy to feel burned out, especially when we see little or no progress and setback after setback. As shelter in place goes on, we feel rather powerless to impact change, but change is happening around us, among us, within us, and through us.

In the midst of all the bad news, there is a bit of good news. Our planet earth has been groaning and choking from pollution, overconsumption, and climate change. However, the pandemic seems to make people more efficient with our grocery shopping. Most of us are shopping less frequently, so our purchases are efficient, which means less waste. An exception, of course, is the paper and plastic bags we must use instead of our own specialty grocery bags! We all had finally grown accustomed to bringing our own bags and now we have to temporarily reverse course. We're less mobile these days, so autos, trucks, and airplanes are emitting much less carbon dioxide. We're using less water. Showers at home tend to be shorter than those at hotels or health clubs. Earth's atmosphere and waterways are cleaner this year.

This is evidence that we humans can change our behavior and make a significant a difference in our climate. We need to set our minds to it and make a commitment. Hopefully, we've found some value in a slower pace. I spent my staycation visiting our local regional and state parks. What a wonderful corner of the world we inhabit! There is so much to explore here that we don't always need to fly afar to exotic places – although I, too, love to do that. We have proof that the human race can positively respond to the groans of God's fragile creation and reduce our human footprint. We must simply simplify our lives. I know that goes against the grain of our culture, but if we want a future for our children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, we need to listen to the groans of creation here and now today.

This sliver of good news does not compensate for the massive brokenness experienced by so many losing lives, employment, health care, housing, health, human connections. The whole world is literally groaning, awaiting the birth of new life.

Romans 8 presents the vision of an unfinished world. Humankind and the natural order have been marred by human greed and self-centeredness. The world is suffering labor pains, longing for healing. There is hope for healing, but it must come through us - through our spiritual transformation embodied in acts of kindness toward one another and toward the natural world.

Jim Wallis, founder of Sojourners, has said, “Hope is believing in spite of the evidence, and then watching the evidence change.” The evidence has long indicated that the cruelty of humanity to other humans has diminished the life force for multitudes. The current pandemic has exposed the inequities of our society, but the forces of goodness are at work, laboring to transform society into God’s Beloved Community. Humans invested in equity and justice are changing the evidence. That gives us hope, hope for today, hope that we can weather these current crises, and hope for the future.

In his book, *Across That Bridge*, John Lewis writes about a former Klansman who participated in a vicious 1961 attack on him and other Freedom Riders in Rock Hill, South Carolina. Many years later, the man came to Mr. Lewis seeking forgiveness, which was granted without hesitation. Of his attacker, Mr. Lewis writes, “I was surprised to hear him clearly restate forty-eight years later the essence of what I had said to the police officer as I declined to press charges almost half a century earlier: ‘We’re not here to cause trouble. We’re here so that people will love each other.’...The impact we left was undeniable.”ⁱⁱ

John Lewis said the spirit of the cause for civil rights always was love and redemption, never malice or hate. Even after beatings. It took years for the cause for equality to take root in that former bully’s life, but it turned from a seed into a majestic canopy of human togetherness.ⁱⁱⁱ

“Hope is believing in spite of the evidence, and then watching the evidence change.” In spite of our current brokenness, hold fast to hope for God is at work among and through us bringing new life to birth. Thanks be to God.

ⁱ Eric Velasco, “John Lewis makes final journey across Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma,” *The Washington Post*, July 26, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/powerpost/john-lewis-to-make-final-crossing-over-edmund-pettus-bridge-in-selma/2020/07/26/b0dfc2f4-cf42-11ea-8d32-1ebf4e9d8e0d_story.html.

ⁱⁱ Editorial Board, “How John Lewis caught the conscience of the nation,” *The Washington Post*, July 18, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/how-john-lewis-caught-the-conscience-of-the-nation/2020/07/18/d8fdbcae-c8f4-11ea-8ffe-372be8d82298_story.html

ⁱⁱⁱ Andrew Dys, “Rock Hill man apologized on TV for 1961 attack on congressman,” *The Herald*, Feb. 4, 2009, <https://www.heraldonline.com/news/local/article12249260.html>.

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