

## **“Translating”**

**Sermon from Romans 8:22-27**

**Given Sunday, July 3, 2022**

**for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville**

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*We know that from the beginning until now, all of creation has been groaning in one great act of giving birth. and not only creation, but all of us who possess the first fruits of the Spirit – we too groan inwardly as we wait for our bodies to be set free. In hope we were saved. But hope is not hope if its object is seen; why does one hope for what one sees? And hoping for what we cannot see means awaiting it with patient endurance. The Spirit, too, comes to help us in our weakness. For we don't know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit expresses our plea with groanings too deep for words. And God, who knows everything in our hearts, knows perfectly well what the Spirit is saying, because her intercessions for God's holy people are made according to the mind of God.*

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Earlier this season at the shelter that happens downstairs every Friday night, a family came in. We don't see many families with children there. Some couples, and some folks who have been living outside together for so long they sort of function like families, but this was a mom with three kids. At first just the mom and the daughter came down, to check it

out, to see if it would be ok - they'd never been in before. When they'd looked around a while, they went back outside to get the girl's older and younger brothers, and bring them downstairs, too. We set up four mats, heads facing towards each other, in the corner of the room, to try to create some privacy for them. And, as volunteers, we worried about them.

We hadn't seen them before, but we worried about why we were seeing them now. We worried about what had happened that left this family with a low-barrier shelter in a church basement their best - or only - option for being indoors on a Friday night.

The daughter - maybe ten years old - was translating for her mother. We shared the shelter expectations with her and she shared them with her mother. We asked if they'd like to take showers that evening and she asked her mother. We told her the kinds of pizza we had for dinner and she listed the choices for her mother. Her mother nodded, smiled, held her hands in a prayer position, saying alternately, "It's ok," and "thank you" with a heavy accent.

The daughter was very conscientious, and clearly practiced at this role. Her mother seemed grateful to her. I know we volunteers were grateful. A couple of us had some rudimentary Spanish but we couldn't have communicated nearly as well, nearly as fully, without her. She wanted her mother to know everything we were saying. She wanted to run every question by her mother for her answer. Some of them she probably could have told us herself, but it seemed important to her to have her mom be a part of the conversation.

Until a volunteer asked, "What brought you here tonight? Where were you before this?" And without missing a beat, and without translating, the daughter responded to the volunteer directly. "We have been staying somewhere else for a while," she said. "But we had to leave that place, because they disrespected my mother." And the mother, who had been watching her daughter, listening to a language I wasn't sure she understood, just smiled sadly.

And I thought about how some truths, some experiences, are deeper than language. I wondered if the mother had told the children that they needed to leave the last place, and for that

reason. I wondered if the children knew, without being told. I wondered if the daughter, young as she was, played any role in making that decision. Because a translator is also - or can be also - a protector, an advocate, a counselor, a champion.

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The verses we read for today have long been among my favorites. And I realized, in talking with the folks at Bible Study this week, that that's not because I can make any good sense of them. There is some strangeness happening in this letter to the Romans - we're getting some of Paul's idea that the end of the world is coming, and fast, we get to overhear how he thought his original hearers should orient themselves to that time: with hope, namely, that the current pain and struggle is part of a larger story, part of the birthing of what's coming to be. It's not so much that part that I've loved in these verses, but the depiction of the Spirit that we find here:

We don't know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit expresses our plea with groanings too deep for words.

When was the last time you didn't know how to pray? Maybe you didn't know what to say, maybe you couldn't summon the energy, maybe your mind or your heart wouldn't still itself for long enough, maybe you didn't know why you should bother.

We don't know how to pray as we should, but it doesn't matter.

It doesn't matter that we don't have the words. It doesn't matter that we don't have the will. It doesn't matter if we don't believe that even if we have the words or the will, either of those would make any difference.

It doesn't matter because there is this Spirit, this aspect of the sacred, that knows us, that lives within us and all around us, and that groans with us. This Spirit that says, of course you don't have words. There are no words. There is only this being present - to the pain, to the anger, to the confusion, to the sorrow - there is only this inhale, and this exhale, all of us and all of creation together.

The promise of these verses is that when we have lost hope for ourselves - the Spirit calls the church and all of creation to be in solidarity with us. All of it crying out, all of it yearning, all of it hoping together.

We are bound together, it says - all of us, and all the earth - bound together with one another and with the divine. And these verses promise that it is a connection that works together for good, that urges everything toward understanding.

There is much that we don't have words for, the joy and the sorrow, but we do have the Spirit, this translator, who maybe also is protector, is advocate, is counselor, is champion.

We're spending this season thinking about different images for God, as they appear in scripture and in the world around us and we've heard for a few weeks now from different people telling us the story of what they imagined as a kid and how their imagination guides them these days in thinking about the sacred. I wanted us to take a little time together and do a little in-class exercise, if you will...

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Complete these sentences -

God is...

God is not...

My sources:

I once thought...

Now I wonder...

Mark the names meaningful to you from this list, and/or add your own -

Father	Judge	Redeemer	Rock
Mother	Shepherd	Wisdom	Mountain
Parent	Friend	Presence	Fire
Holy Spirit	Liberator	Good	Ocean
Jesus Christ	Healer	Love	Bread of Life
Lord	Mystery	Cosmic Energy	Living Water
Goddess	Creator	Helper	I Am

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What people have been sharing the past couple of weeks - what Dave and Georgine and Jim shared - are sort of expanded versions of these worksheet exercises. More people will be sharing in weeks to come; I'm looking forward to that, I hope you are, too. And I hope this exercise gives you a little bit of a sense of your own story of God, a little bit of a way that you might begin to tell it, to share it. There's much in our spiritual lives that we don't have words for - and there are lots of words

out there. There are lots of ways of naming, and one of the beautiful exercises of coming together in a community is to learn those names from each other, to learn what's resonant for each other, and life-giving for each other, and to see how it might be for us, and for more than us, too. Let's pray:

*God of so many names,  
We give thanks for the ways  
you are made known among us  
in this community.*

*We give thanks for the ways  
the whole world witnesses  
to your presence, your goodness,  
your creativity, your mystery.*

*We give thanks  
that when we don't have words,  
there is the promise of this spirit  
that takes what is deepest in us  
and lets it be known.*

*God, teach us to be with each other  
in ways like that,  
that we might protect and counsel  
and advocate for and champion one another,  
and all who are vulnerable. Amen.*