

M E D I T A T I O N

Creation in Labor

by John Timmer

Romans 8:18-25

Listening to the sounds of nature, it's hard to miss their tragic tone. The sighing of the wind, the endless breaking of the waves, the melancholy rustle of leaves falling in autumn—all these can create in us a feeling of sadness.

Nature is harsh. Consider the devastation wreaked by tornadoes, tidal waves, floods, and earthquakes. Consider how weaker animals fall prey to stronger animals, how insects bore holes into other insects and lay their eggs in them, how snakes bite with deadly venom. Or behold the spider! How gruesome is the craft that nature taught it.

Nature has beauty too, of course. But it is a beauty framed in tragedy. The book of nature looks beautiful only when you look at its cover. But open it, and what you see often turns your stomach. Nature is ambiguous. It both blesses and curses. It is benign and malignant. It smiles at you one day and seeks to kill you the next.

Nature reveals God's eternal power and divine nature (Rom. 1:20). But does it reveal God's compassion? And what about God's grace and love? Nature may be a most elegant book, but it's also a most cruel book. Why is that so? Who is responsible for all this?

Reflecting on the tragic side of nature, the apostle Paul writes, "The creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom. 8:19-21, NRSV). In other words, suffering is woven into the very fabric of nature—not through any fault of nature, not by nature's own choice—so that the whole creation order might

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strain forward in the darkness, searching for a ray of hope.

Some Bible expositors say that nature is shot through with tragedy because of the disobedience of our first parents. Now it is most certainly true that Adam and Eve's disobedience and ours has made a terrible mess of things. But that's not the whole story. There is something else, something deeper, something prior. In Romans 8:20, Paul isn't talking about the fall. He's talking about the will of God. The creation was subjected to futility because that was the will of God, so that out of it something new might be born. Creation already was groaning long before there were people. Creation already was plagued by natural catastrophes long before there were people. Animals were already afflicted with disease and death long before there were people.

Way back, long before there were people, God subjected the creation to futility in hope. But in hope of what? In hope of reaping an infinitely more glorious new creation from the seed of the old creation. A new creation raised imperishable from the creation that was sown perishable. A new creation raised in power from the creation that was sown in weakness.

And just as the present creation is looking forward to the day of liberation,

so are we, for we are in creation and creation is in us. We are as tied up with creation as a mother is tied up with her unborn child. We and creation are both going through the same birth process. We are in this together. We are groaning together; we are hoping together; we are being born anew together. Being born anew is not just an individual experience. It is also the much more comprehensive movement of the entire creation out of the realm of Good Friday death into the realm of Easter life.

Christian hope always has its eyes on this world. For this is the world God made; this is the world over which God set his rainbow as a visible sign of his everlasting faithfulness; this is the world to which God sent his Son, not to condemn it but to save it. The old creation is a pointing finger. The one to whom it points is Christ, the firstborn of all creation. As Christ died, so the whole creation dies. As Christ rose, so the whole creation will rise, and we along with it.

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