

“Labor Pains”
Broken — Good News for Tough Times: Part 2 of 6

a sermon based on
Romans 8:12-25

and delivered on-
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We continue this series: Broken – Good News Through Tough Times – as we explore where and how we can experience God’s grace in the midst of our brokenness, the troubles of life, and pain. Last week we began by talking about the spirit-body connection and recognizing that rather than focusing merely on the worldly state of our problems that sometimes we have to look for those spiritual problems that inhibit our ability to claim God’s healing.

Today, we’re going to look at pain – Paul talks about “labor pains” in the passage that we just heard. Our first impulse to pain – or anything that causes us discomfort is to get rid of it... Sort of like the desire to rip up the weeds in the Gospel. But as Jesus tells the disciples ripping out the weeds could do more harm than good. He’s telling them that God’s grace will overcome even those things that persist or cause us worry.

So let’s look at pain. Why does God allow it? If he loved us wouldn’t he give us relief? What are we supposed to do with it?

First – pain in itself is not necessarily a bad thing. It serves a good purpose. It protects us. A perfect example of that is Hansen’s Disease – or leprosy. It used to be that people thought that leprosy caused body parts to just fall off. It wasn’t an unreasonable assumption. Lepers often lost toes, fingers and other appendages. And it is related to the disease... but not directly.

Leprosy affects the nerves and sensation of touch – it prevents the afflicted person from experiencing pain – and this is where the problem comes in. Without the ability to feel pain – the person doesn’t notice minor injuries – doesn’t notice that infection is setting in – and by not noticing these things doesn’t take care of them – until the infection kills that body part and it drops off. The disfigurement that leprosy brings into life is caused as much – if not more – not by the bacteria that causes the disease but by the absence of pain.

Pain in this context protects us. Pain tells us to pull our hand away from a hot pot before we get a serious burn. Pain tells us to move away from thorns before our skin gets scratched up – exposing us to infection. Pain can actually be a good thing.

It can be a good thing not only because it keeps us from further injury – but because it can lead us to seek help – in the context of a broken limb - ... {PAUSE} ... or maybe a broken heart... or even a broken spirit...

This isn’t to say that pain is pleasant. By definition it is unpleasant. Pain itself isn’t good – but it can lead to good things. The pain of exercise can tell us that we are on our way to fitness – at the same time that it alerts us to our need for rest. How we approach pain affects not only our perception of it but our ability to discover hope.

We came to this discussion of pain – because St. Paul referred to the sufferings of the current age as if they were labor pains. This is one place where a woman preacher would really have an advantage. Except for annoying employees in my previous life (which isn’t what Paul is talking about when he refers to labor pains) – I’ve never experienced nor will I ever experience labor pain. But it still fascinates me.

I’ve heard women describe the pain of giving birth – of the incredible discomfort of labor – who then go on to get pregnant again. There’s this myth (until I looked into it for this sermon, I believed it) – there’s this myth that women forget about the pain of labor after the child is born. It’s just not true. But what is true is that their experience of giving birth affects how they remember and make sense of that pain.

Prof. Ulla Waldenström – a Swedish researcher – has done several studies related to women and their experience of labor. In one study – following around 2,000 women – who gave birth – the women were asked to evaluate their experience – two months after birth, at twelve months, and then five years later. What she found was that the women who had a “good” experience with the birth process were much less inclined to focus on the pain of labor – these were the women who although they didn’t forget the pain – were more likely to rate it less negatively. Women who didn’t have a “good” experience, however, were more inclined to rate the pain as more severe years later.¹

The good professor took care to account for “good” or poor experience by accounting for the experience of pain in the moment – it wasn’t that the “good” experience of labor involved less pain. One thing she and the other researchers found was that regardless of the pain, that when women were given the baby to hold right after delivery – that they were much more likely to rate the experience as positive.

In effect – what they discovered is that when the pain had meaning beyond the pain – that these women experienced something good and positive.

This is what Paul was talking about. The early Christians wanted to see Jesus return, soon. Now! That didn’t happen. They were starting to feel the pain of being shunned by family and friends – persecution in the community. Some were probably ready to just give up. Some probably did. Let’s face it.

If pain is meaningless, we try to avoid it – to get rid of it. And that makes perfect sense. But for the most part – pain isn’t meaningless. It calls us to safety, it calls us to seek help and it helps us to receive even greater joy if we look for the promise beyond.

God allows us to experience pain not as punishment – not to chastise us – but so that we can find our way to healing – to draw us toward him – and to keep us focused on the hope of the Gospel.

I’m not suggesting that we rejoice in all of our aches and pains. Physical pains call for treatment and relief. But those other pains and challenges in life should encourage us to look for God’s promises for us and to seek out those things that have meaning. The pain may persist for a time – but ultimately we discover how God is restoring us further. AMEN

¹ Waldenström, Ulla & Schytt, Erica. (2009). "A Longitudinal Study of Women’s Memory of Labor Pain: From 2 Months to 5 Years After the Birth." *Obstetric Anesthesia Digest*. 29. 10.1097/01.aoa.0000362095.56698.75.