

Sermon / Tsuchiura Megumi Church, Ibaraki / January 26, 2025 (Sun.) /
Takehiro Kamiya

Sermon: “Groaning of Life”

Bible (New Revised Translation 2017): Romans 8:18-27

Praise: Hymn No. 298 “Yasukare, Waga kokoro yo”、 Hymn No. 191
“Itomo Toutoki”

(α) Good morning.

I am honored and at the same time grateful for the opportunity to serve for the Word of God at this important service of Tsuchiura Megumi Church. This is the second time for me to come to Ibaraki, following last August. Last year, I was invited to serve at Ryukasaki Church of the Japan Christian Church, and now I am coming to Tsuchiura again in less than half a year. Thank you very much.

Actually, my daughter and son are living in Tokyo, so I am thankful that I can see them whenever I have a chance to come to the Kanto area. My daughter got married last year to a man she met in Tokyo, and she is now living in Tokyo, which is not easy for her to get used to. My son has just started working in Tokyo and seems to be having a hard time and is finding it difficult to live there, but he seems to be doing his best. I think he is gaining good experience.

When I was listening to the radio, I heard a man called Mr. Takehara singing a powerful song. The song is called “Tokyo First Year,” and it seems to be a song for young people who have come from the countryside, started living in Tokyo, and are suffering in various ways. Here are some of the lyrics... Tokyo First Year Student

It's not the city's fault that it's hard to live in

It's not the city that makes life hard, it's the dreams

Hang in there, hang in there! First-year Tokyoites!

It is quite common to come out of the countryside to the big city of Tokyo and find yourself in a busy city and society, intoxicated by the city and its many people, and feeling a sense of difficulty in living. It is easy to blame the city for such a situation. But the reason it is hard to live is because you are working hard toward your dreams. It is proof that you are alive. It's okay! It's okay to moan in the midst of the difficulty of living. You're alive, you're doing your best, so moan, moan, moan, and work toward your dreams! Hang in there! Tokyo First Year. I listened to the song, thinking to myself that it must mean something like that.... To moan is proof that you are alive. It must be accompanied by moaning because you are facing life and walking with it.

I have been to Ibaraki only twice, but I have been to Fukushima, Miyagi, and Iwate in Tohoku many times. 14 years ago, in response to the unprecedented situation of the Great East Japan Earthquake centered in Tohoku, I was appointed as the Disaster Relief Committee Chairman of the Okinawa Baptist Convention, to which I belong. I volunteered in many places while traveling by car from Aomori to Fukushima at the end of April of that year, and I visited there several times to serve.

However, I did not travel as far as Ibaraki... I think that even in Ibaraki, there was a huge earthquake, tsunami damage, and contamination from the nuclear power plant, and I am sure you suffered a lot of damage. I can only imagine the pain, suffering, and sadness you must have been going through.

When the news of the earthquake disaster was broadcast in Okinawa, many elderly Okinawan people said in unison in the Okinawan language, "Ikusa uminjasunya." Older people who experienced the Battle of Okinawa say, "It reminds me of the war." I was deeply saddened to learn that the people who suffered from the earthquake must have been in such a difficult situation that elderly Okinawans recall the Battle of Okinawa with the words "ikusa uminjasunya."

I once saw a survey that asked, more than 10 years after the disaster, "Have you felt the recovery?" Many people said, "I don't think it has recovered," or "I am sad to see the memories of the past being erased.

“Reconstruction” does not mean just buildings and roads. It should be done by listening to and feeling the differences in the way each person perceives “reconstruction”. If the government had listened with such care and attention, would the Tokyo Olympics have been held? The government should aim for “reconstruction” in the true sense of the word. The government needs to seriously listen to the voices and moans of the people.

This morning, I would like to talk about the “groan of life”. Paul, who wrote this letter to the Romans, wrote this about “life” in his other letters. In Philippians 1:21, he says, “For to me to live is Christ,” which can also mean, “Christ is my life”. And in Colossians 3:4, the phrase “Christ your life” is also used. And in the Gospel, Jesus Christ Himself says, “I am the resurrection. I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 11:25), and Jesus Christ Himself declares, “I am the life”.

This means that life, all life, leads to Jesus Christ, and that in my life, Christ is present, and my life is His life. And in your life, Christ is present, and your life is His life. Furthermore, all lives, even the animals, trees, plants, and flowers that live in this world, all lead to the life of Christ.

We take the lives of animals, trees, plants, and flowers that God has given us, but it is very important to think carefully about the lives of animals, trees, and flowers that God has given us, and to “take” them with gratitude, not devouring their lives for nothing, so that our lives may be nurtured in abundance.

We want to remember that all life leads to Jesus Christ. When so many human beings understand this and remember the preciousness of life, there will be no more disregard for life, no more threats to life, no more violence against life in our world. In this sense, we need to preach the word of Christ, the gospel.

In this morning’s Epistle to the Romans, three “groans of life” are mentioned. First, in verses 19-22, we read about the groaning of creation. Creation refers to everything God created, including animals,

trees, plants, flowers, and all other living things. Verse 19 says, “The creation also longs with earnest expectation for the manifestation of the children of God,” referring to that the manifestation of those who know that “life” leads to Jesus Christ, those who create peace, and those who are called the sons of God, are eagerly awaited. A world where life is not despised, not threatened, not taken away by violence.

Next, verses 23-25 describe our groaning and the groaning of Christians. Verse 23 says, “Not only that, but also we ourselves, who have received the firstfruits of the Spirit,” referring to Christians, who are Christians in that we desire what we cannot see. Since we are already believers in the invisible Jesus Christ, we are naturally to wait patiently for the things we cannot see.

In other words, we are to look forward with hope to a world where life is not neglected or threatened, where life is not taken away by violence. Just as Jesus Christ bore those lives, we Christians must face those lives that are neglected and accept the mission to bear them. This is what we are being asked to do.

And verses 26 and 27 describe the groaning of the Holy Spirit, the groaning of God. What does it mean that the Holy Spirit, God groan? Here we see God’s deep love and strong desire for us. God, like us, is suffering and in agony, but He intercedes for us with His groaning and helps us. What does it mean that the Holy Spirit groans and that God Himself also groans? It means that we too can and must groan. To live in this world means “to groan.

I am sure that some of you who come to worship today have your own sufferings and sorrows. Are there any of you who have your own groans, those that you cannot tell anyone, those that you cannot talk about? God hears your groans. He hears your groans of pain and sorrow and intercedes for you so that you may be delivered from them. It is okay to moan. The church also accepts your moaning, so please talk about it with your pastor or with other members of the congregation. The church is a place to listen to each person’s groan, a place to share, and a place to pray for each other.

On the other hand, if you live a life without groaning, I am concerned that you are not facing life. It may also mean that we are not facing our own lives or the lives of others.

To groan is evidence that you are alive. It is because you are facing your life and walking with it that it is accompanied by moaning. We groan because we face the lives of others and our own lives. Christ accompanies that life, that groaning.

I would like to share a little about the groaning of life in Okinawa with you this morning....

We, Futenma Baptist Church, have been expressing our “NO” to the military base by singing gospel songs in front of the gate of the Futenma base of the U.S. Marine Corps since October 2012 as a work of our church. The military base is located about 300 meters away from the church.

The group, called “Gospel Singing Group in front of the Futenma Air Base Gate,” gathers people from various denominations, including other Baptist churches, Catholic churches, the Anglican Church of Japan, the Japan Christian Church, the Japan Christian Association, Seventh Day Adventist, and non-denominational people, and every Monday evening for one hour from 6 p.m. they display a red banner with a cross on it, saying “OSPREY NO! RAPE NO! BASE NO” in English, and offer prayers and praise to the Lord. This year marks the 13th year.

I will tell you more about this ministry in detail at the open worship service this evening, showing you a video, so I will mention a little about it.

Actually, the reason why we started this gospel ministry in front of the gate started when we were encouraged by the prayers of children in the nursery school. At that time, in 2012, there was a great uproar over the forced deployment of the Osprey at Futenma Air Base, and on September 9, a “Prefectural People’s Convention Against Osprey Deployment” was held, with 103,000 people gathering to shout “NO” to its deployment. The governor of Okinawa and the mayors of all cities, towns, and villages in Okinawa have clearly expressed their opposition

to the deployment. Nevertheless, the Japanese government ignored the will of the Okinawa people, and the U.S. flew the Osprey over the heads of Okinawans on October 1, 2012, as decided without any restrictions, and deployed it with impunity. The Osprey has been called a “defective aircraft” that has been involved in numerous crashes and emergency landings, resulting in many fatalities. Perhaps because of the military industry and economic priorities, operation and use are prioritized over safety, and the Osprey frequently flies over the residential areas of Okinawans in a manner that “It is OK for Okinawa”. In the U.S., U.S. military aircraft are not allowed to fly over civilian airspace, nor are they allowed to fly over forests where bats, a protected species, live. Does this mean that Okinawa is no better than bats? This situation is discrimination against Okinawa itself.

On the Saturday of the week the Osprey was deployed, it was a field day at Midorigaoka Nursery School. It was held under clear autumn weather. At the end of the sports competition, the head of the parents’ association of the nursery school gave a speech and said, “I am glad that the Osprey did not fly over during the field day today.” I was also concerned about that, so I was really glad that he was right. In fact, I heard that his son (a preschooler) had prayed before the field day, “May the Osprey not fly”. I was very moved to hear that. I was wondering whether or not I should mention that Osprey in my opening address and prayer, but in the end I did not. I decided to forget about the Osprey and enjoy the field day today. I was not sure if I had the courage to pray that the Osprey would not fly over. I was not confident in my prayer. I am a really pathetic pastor because I thought, “What if I prayed and the Osprey flew over...?”

But I was so encouraged by the children’s prayer, “May the Osprey will not fly over.” Yes, prayers are answered. Prayer has power. With this in mind, a gospel singing group started in front of the Futenma Air Base gate. Now, gospel groups are being organized in more than ten places in Japan in response to the Futenma gospel. It seems to that they have taken courageous action from where they stand, in response to Okinawa’s “moan”.

Can you hear it? The “groan of life”.... Life, all life, leads to Jesus Christ. It is the groan of Jesus Christ, who said, “I am the life”. To hear the “groan of life” is to hear the groan of Christ.

Is our Christian churches listening to this groan of life? Do “we who have received the firstfruits of the Spirit” hear the unseen groaning? We want to be taught the importance of listening to the “groan of life” from this place.

May the grace and peace of the Lord Jesus Christ be upon you all. (Ω)

Let' s pray.

O Lord of peace, who liveth and worketh in the past and ever liveth and worketh in the present and everlasting. Thank you for the grace to worship with you this morning. May the Lord guide us abundantly as we walk this week.

May the Lord comfort and heal those who are sick at heart and those who are carrying illness.

May we always desire true peace, and may we always pray, raise our voices, and take on one of the tasks of creating it.

We pray in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.