

Sermon

The Languishing of Earth

A Sermon for Cary Presbyterian Church

Sunday, June 12, 2022

All Saints

Rom. 8:18 I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. 19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; 20 for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21 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. 22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; 23 and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Rom. 8:26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. 27 And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Isaiah 24:3-13

3 *The earth shall be utterly laid waste and utterly despoiled;
 for the LORD has spoken this word.*

*Is. 24:4 The earth dries up and withers,
 the world languishes and withers;
 the heavens languish together with the earth.*

5 *The earth lies polluted
 under its inhabitants;
 for they have transgressed laws,
 violated the statutes,*

broken the everlasting covenant.
6 Therefore a curse devours the earth,
and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt;
therefore the inhabitants of the earth dwindled,
and few people are left.
7 The wine dries up,
the vine languishes,
all the merry-hearted sigh.
8 The mirth of the timbrels is stilled,
the noise of the jubilant has ceased,
the mirth of the lyre is stilled.
9 No longer do they drink wine with singing;
strong drink is bitter to those who drink it.
10 The city of chaos is broken down,
every house is shut up so that no one can enter.
11 There is an outcry in the streets for lack of wine;
all joy has reached its eventide;
the gladness of the earth is banished.
12 Desolation is left in the city,
the gates are battered into ruins.
13 For thus it shall be on the earth
and among the nations,
as when an olive tree is beaten,
as at the gleaning when the grape harvest is ended.

I. Thirty two years ago I was a seminary student and was pleased to be invited by my presbytery to attend the meeting of the General Assembly as an advisory delegate.

A. The PC USA had a newly published document entitled *Restoring Creation for Ecology & Justice*.

B. Our church was talking and writing about the urgent need for better stewardship of the earth decades before that became mainstream.

- C. Notice the title though — the Office of Theology and Worship was wise in connecting the issue of ecological stewardship with *justice*,
 - 1. because it was clear then, as it is clear now, that our brutalizing of the earth hurts the poor and marginal the most.
- D. The bible has a lot to say about our place in creation and about how our commitment to creation and to justice forms a symbiotic and mutual feedback-loop.

II. In the opening pages of the Bible we find several texts about creation and our place within the created order:

Gen. 1:22 God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.”

Gen. 2:15 The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

From the start we had a role to play in being stewards of God’s creation!

We were invited to thrive - yes. But we were *also* given the responsibility to care for the gift which was given.

Why? Because God loves *the world* and not *just* the people in it! That is - God loves the whole created order.

Listen to the promise God made when the great flood was going to an end...

Gen. 9:8 Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 9 “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, 10

and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. 11 I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” 12 God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: 13 I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. 14 When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, 15 I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. 16 When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” 17 God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

FIVE times, God says the covenant is not *just* with us, but is with “every living creature.”

A. By the book of Leviticus we have God making a direct connection between us, creation, and justice:

Lev. 26:3 If you follow my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them faithfully, 4 I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. 5 Your threshing shall overtake the vintage, and the vintage shall overtake the sowing; you shall eat your bread to the full, and live securely in your land. ... 10 You shall eat old grain long stored, and you shall have to clear out the old to make way for the new. 11 I will place my dwelling in your midst, and I shall not abhor you. 12 And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people. ...

Lev. 26:14 But if you will not obey me, and do not observe all these commandments, 15 if you spurn my statutes, and abhor my ordinances, so that you will not observe all my commandments, and you break my covenant, 16 I in turn will do this to you: ... 20 Your strength shall be spent to no

purpose: your land shall not yield its produce, and the trees of the land shall not yield their fruit.

B. No wonder, then, that Isaiah in this morning's passage laments that:

*Is. 24:4 The earth dries up and withers,
the world languishes and withers;
the heavens languish together with the earth.*

*5 The earth lies polluted
under its inhabitants;
for they have transgressed laws,
violated the statutes,
broken the everlasting covenant.*

C. No wonder that Paul in Romans connects the redemption of all creation with the redemption of God's people:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; 20 for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21 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.

III. Poor creation! How sad to see its demise!

A. Do any of of need reminders of the current state of our creation and its bondage to decay?

† **The current mega-drought throughout the western half of the US**

† **The steady rise in global temperatures which already is leading to more and more violent weather — how many waves of dangerous tornados have already swept through the Southeast this year?**

† **In Camden, Maine I was appalled by a sign painted on the back wall of the harbor-master's office which showed the coming sea-level increases which clearly will clearly flood large portions of the harbor in the coming decades.**

† **In Asia and Africa the desertification of large swaths of previously tillable land which only increases food-insecurity in places chronically plagued by difficult conditions.'**

† **The ways that the world is increasingly soiled with endless piles of plastics which end up in the water, soil, air, animals, and even in *us*.**

B. Poor creation which groans in travail waiting for us to live fully into our calling as God's people!

1. It puts me in mind of Moses' last speech to us before he died. he said:

Deut 30:19 I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, 20 loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

2. Choose life!

IV. The predicament we find ourselves in now in the 21st century may seem to us to be new and unique . . . and I suppose it *is* unique in some ways.

A. But long before there were cars and airplanes and air conditioners — God was explaining to us that

† **Creation is loved deeply by God**

- † We have been privileged to be entrusted with its care
- † When we mistreat it — there are consequences
- † Our stewardship of the earth is a justice issue.

V. So what are we to do? How do we respond?

A. Here are some disciplines which come to mind:

- † Spend time daily giving thanks for creation
- † Pause long enough to marvel at the beauty of the created order — learn to be a friend of a flower.

“Nobody sees a flower—really it is so small it takes time we haven’t time and to see takes time, like to have a friend takes time.” — Georgia O’Keeffe

† **Do what you can to consume less:**

- Less fuel
- Less energy
- Less food
- Less *stuff*

B. To your pastor’s way of thinking the question of being good stewards of creation is part and parcel of the Matthew 25 initiatives we are already engaged in exploring around racial justice and economic equity.

1. The important conversations we are having about being better neighbors are inevitably *also* conversations about how to care for creation.

C. At CPC, we have also been moving in recent years to lower our carbon footprint by installing more

efficient appliances, and by moving to more efficient lighting fixtures.

1. These are important steps and I thank the generosity of the church which has made many of these changes possible.

D. Today, following worship, we are having an information-sharing meeting in the Fellowship hall about the potential of further lowering our use of non-renewable energy through solar collection.

1. This is meant to be a time when we can hear about what that might mean and to ask questions, too. I hope you will delay your departure from church and will walk down for the gathering following the charge and benediction today.

2. There are no current plans to install solar collection, but some of us, your pastor included, are interested in learning more about the potential of this as we consider how to be stewards of the gift of creation.

God's Grandeur

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; Bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the
soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright
wings.

— Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-89)