

“The Longing of Creation”

Romans 8:18-22

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For those of us old enough to remember, 1970 was the height of the hippie culture in our country. Both Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix—two of rock’s biggest icons--died of drug overdoses while the Beatles, following the release of *Let It Be*--their final album--officially ended their partnership. A loaf of bread could be bought for thirty-five cents while a gallon of gasoline cost only a quarter. The front page of our newspapers and the lead stories of our nightly newscasts were dominated by the war in Vietnam and the student protests over it taking place all throughout our country. Well it was ALSO in 1970, after a massive oil spill had ravaged the Santa Barbara coastline in California the year before, that Senator Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin realized there needed to be a greater public consciousness regarding the growing problem of air and water pollution in our country. He had the idea of a “national teach-in on the environment” and persuaded Republican Congressman Pete McCloskey of California to join him in creating a public movement to raise greater awareness on these issues.

As a result, on April 22, 1970, fifty-one years ago this week, twenty million Americans took to the streets to demonstrate for a healthy, sustainable environment. They found common cause with others who for years had decried the on-going oil spills, the rise in factory and power plant pollution, the gallons of raw sewage discarded in our waterways, the proliferating number of toxic waste dumps, and the pesticides that poisoned our soil and drinking water. Uniting both rich and poor, city dwellers and rural farmers, Republicans and Democrats, corporate CEO’s and labor leaders, it proved to be a great success as it eventually led to the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency (the EPA) and the passage of the Clean Air, Clean Water, and Endangered Species Acts. “It was a gamble,” Gaylord recalled, “but it worked.” Since then, such environmental problems as toxic waste dumps, growing mountains of garbage, auto emissions, shrinking tropical rain forests, global warming, acid rain, and depleted levels of ozone in the atmosphere have now become a part of the national conversation. There is now a heightened awareness which hadn’t existed previously that the earth is our home and a precious legacy we need to preserve- not just for OURSELVES but for our CHILDREN and our CHILDREN’S CHILDREN as well.

Well the Bible contains a specific teaching regarding the creation that is often overlooked or not stressed strongly ENOUGH and our text this morning from Romans 8 highlights the theology behind it. In fact, because of the emphasis St. Paul places on the creation, it might not be TOO far-fetched to call him “the world’s first environmentalist.” Beginning with v. 18, he makes a series of assertions about the world we live in and the Christian’s relation to it. First, he says that it has suffered since the time of the Fall. Since Adam and the Garden of Eden, the world and everything in it does not work the way they were originally intended to. There is chaos all around us with earthquakes and hurricanes, tornadoes and tidal waves capable of striking at any time and killing thousands of persons in a matter of moments. We saw this with the earthquake that leveled Port-Au-Prince, Haiti in 2010 killing two hundred thousand Haitians within minutes, and again the following year with a tsunami that struck the area around Fukushima, Japan and nearly caused a nuclear disaster when an energy reactor there began to

melt down. This Tuesday will be the eleventh anniversary of the explosion at BP's Deepwater horizon rig that killed eleven workers and spilled upwards of five million barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico.

Charles Darwin described nature as “red in tooth and claw”- a domain in which only the fittest survive and the weakest must perish. There is nothing just or fair about nature and this was attested to me some years ago in an interview I saw on the Charlie Rose Show with Sir David Attenborough, the noted filmmaker who has spent his life making nature documentaries. When asked what he considered the greatest lesson he has learned after years of studying animal and plant life, he replied without hesitation that it was how terribly violent nature was, that behind all the beauty and complexity, there is a tremendous savagery everywhere you look. This was even true of FLOWERS and he used as an example the Venus Flytrap and how it unsuspectingly lures its prey close to its jaws before snapping shut on it like a steel trap. The whole of earth is subject to suffering, decay, death, and eventually dissolution, and this is what it means when the scriptures say that the creation is under sin.

ALL OF US in our own way have participated in this sin and thus have contributed to our world's decline. An overwhelming majority of scientists say the climate is shifting in ways that could cause serious impacts, and they cite the human release of greenhouse gases as a principal cause. The fact that our winters are growing shorter and that each year is now recorded as being warmer than the year prior have only added more substance to the argument. You have only to see how ice glaciers all over the world are melting at an alarming rate, raising ocean levels to precipitous heights to see proof of that.

We Americans are a very exploitative and wasteful people, and our lusts and desires no less extend to the world immediately around us. Consider that though America has only 5% of the earth's population, we use 26% of the world's oil, release 26% of the world's nitrogen oxides, produce 22% of the world's carbon dioxide emissions, and dispose of 290 million tons of toxic wastes, much of which we dump in poor Third World nations! In the past couple of centuries, we have rapaciously exploited the earth's resources for our own benefit without any thought of what will be left or in what condition it will be for future generations. Hence, we've come to view nature as a giant commodity which can be bought and sold on the open market, and that it hasn't much INTRINSIC value other than what profit we are able to derive from it.

But then Paul says something, truly amazing. If the suffering and exploitation of creation is linked to the Fall, and with it the suffering of humanity as a whole, then the redemption and glory that await us as children of God extends to the CREATION as well. His argument as outlined in Romans 5 is that as sin and death and destruction came through the trespass of one man, Adam, so did forgiveness and life and redemption and regeneration come through the obedience of another, Jesus Christ. In other words, the effects of the former are being overturned by the latter. Now here in chapter 8, the Apostle is saying that this redemption goes well beyond the regeneration that goes on WITHIN us, that is, within our hearts and souls, but extends even to the CREATION ITSELF, that even the world OUTSIDE us with all of its brokenness and problems is being reborn and reconstituted through Christ AS WELL! The creation is inevitably tied to humanity, and so if there IS a promise of deliverance for human beings, it includes the promise of deliverance for CREATION too. Even as WE long for the day when Christ will return to put all things under his feet and thus put an end to all sin and suffering and death, so does the REST OF CREATION—including the birds and bees, the rocks and trees, the fish and

creepy-crawly things—live in the hope of that day- a day in which “the wolf and the lamb shall graze together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox” as it says in Isaiah.

When Paul says that the creation awaits in eager anticipation of its redemption, he uses a Greek word which means “to wait with the head raised, and the eye fixed on that point of the horizon from which the expected object is to come.” It is a picture of someone “standing on tiptoe” or “stretching the neck, craning forward” in order to see someone or something that is being expected. Paul gives us a picture of the entire universe and all that is in it as eagerly watching and waiting, anticipating something which, though slow in coming, is sure to come one day.

However, that new day cannot wait until Christ’s return for the renewal to begin for as Paul says in v. 22, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together UNTIL NOW.” Prior to our Lord’s work on the cross, the earth—just like our human spirits--struggled and groaned under the weight of sin and death. Like us, it TOO longed for that day when there would be a NEW heaven and a NEW earth. But NOW, the redemption and renewal that has begun in our lives with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ has no LESS been extended to the REST of creation so that both fallen humanity and fallen creation are involved in a new beginning. Through the work of Christ, the redemption of creation occurs hand-in-hand with the redemption of humanity, and this has great significance for us.

It means that for Paul, the redemption of creation actually BEGINS WITH THE CHURCH, and through her efforts, it will CONTINUE until the Last Day with the creation of the long-promised New Heaven and New Earth. WE become the means by which this earth is presently made more habitable and sustainable. Until we enter into our FINAL home which God has prepared for us, THIS is our home. As children of God who are equally part of the created order, we understand that our relationship to the rest of the natural world is not to dominate it, not to put a “for sale” sign on everything in order to enrich ourselves, but to serve as LOVING STEWARDS over it, faithfully preserving it until the Day of the Lord arrives. We do not have absolute dominion over it for it ALL belongs to God. As the Psalmist declares, “The earth is the Lord’s, and all it contains,” and “The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and the firmament is declaring the work of His hands.” Granted, the Bible teaches that humans are separate and above nature, but that’s not a license to EXPLOIT it. Rather, it speaks of our responsibility to CARE for creation, NOT ABUSE it. As Presbyterian theologian Harold Nebelsick wrote in his book Theology and Science in Mutual Modification:

*The intent of Genesis is that humankind is to be responsible for nature, to care for it as a shepherd cares for his flock and to live in inner harmony with it. As God is the Lord of all creation, including humankind, so humankind is created in his image to exercise a derivative dominion over creation. Adam and Eve were nature’s “gardeners.” They were to cultivate it, care for it and keep it in order. As they cared for nature, nature in turn was to provide for them.*

Unfortunately, where a central part of the Church’s mission has been to reclaim our heritage as stewards or caretakers over what ultimately does not belong to us but merely ENTRUSTED to us for our care, we have often been guilty of promoting just the OPPOSITE, for encouraging the thoughtless exploitation of the earth and its resources for our own enrichment. The argument has been made, and it is a compelling one, that the West’s exploitation of nature actually BEGAN with our own Judeo-Christian tradition with the assertion that the Bible gives us license to exploit nature because we have been set above it. Many Christians are convinced

that the world and everything in it was made expressly for their OWN benefit, and because we are SUPERIOR to the rest of creation, we are free to do with the earth's resources whatever we want. They point to those verses in the Bible where God commanded Adam to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing" (Gen. 1:28), and where even the psalmist says, "Thou has given humanity dominion over the works of thy hands; thou has put all things under his feet." (Ps. 8).

The truth, however, is much to the CONTRARY as the Bible WARNS US that we do NOT have absolute dominion over the earth for we are and ALWAYS SHALL BE responsible to God FIRST. If "the earth is the Lord's" it is because God created it. The land ultimately belongs to God and we are no more than trustees or stewards over it. When we view ourselves as anything MORE than that, then our attitude towards the rest of creation is distorted by our pride and greed and we become arrogant and ruthlessly exploitative.

Furthermore, the Bible informs us that nature does INDEED have an intrinsic value. The created order is valued in itself and never simply as an instrument for our own purposes, like a piece of property to be parceled out and sold on the open market for profitable gain. This is clearly shown in the first chapter of Genesis where long before the first human being is even created, God fashions each form of life and then pronounces it "good."

The fact is that learning to live as a child of God means learning to live within established limits, to observe certain proscribed boundaries. We must never forget how God ALONE is the Creator and that even AS his beloved children, we still REMAIN his creatures and thus part of the created order. However, the day we think we are no longer accountable to anyone EXCEPT ourselves, that we are FREE to do whatever we want and for WHATEVER REASONS we might have, then we will have OVERSTEPPED those bounds by trying to REPLACE God's authority with our OWN, by becoming, in effect, AS GODS OURSELVES. Our PROPER relationship to God can only be one of SUBJECTION to him, and our relationship to the rest of nature must be to CONSERVE or PROPERLY USE that which we have been entrusted with as willed by our Maker.

Thus, we learn from this morning's text that environmentalism is not some left-wing fad but a spiritual responsibility, grounded in the Bible, and an inherent part of the Church's mission. It says that our OWN fate as children of God is inextricably tied to the fate of the CREATION. We've been entrusted with A DIVINE DUTY, A SACRED OBLIGATION to care for this world and all nature within her- may we REMEMBER that this coming Tuesday as our nation celebrates "Earth Day." And this is because absolute ownership does NOT belong to us but only to GOD, and to the extent we keep faith with this, our present home, we thereby show our faithfulness towards HIM. Let us pray...

*Lord, grant us the wisdom to care for your earth that we might be responsible stewards over it. Help us to act now for the good of future generations and all your creatures. Help us to become instruments of a NEW creation, founded on the covenant of your love. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.*