

8th after Pentecost, Proper 11, Year A

July 23, 2023

Church of the Incarnation

Groan much?

I know I do; it seems almost unavoidable these days.

St. Paul writes: “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; 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.”

I groan, and in fact weep a good deal, too, especially about our present global ecological crisis. During this time of year, what the Union of Concerned Scientists has dubbed “Danger Season” in North America (May to October) we find the creation groaning a lot, and ourselves as a part of it. And wondering what the fate of Earth will be.

This summer I have been working on designing an online course for CALL at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific, on the topic of praxis eco-theology; that is, ecologically informed theology. And, of course, I have also been thinking about this opportunity to preach with you today. I may have been overdoing it a bit on the research, because when Rod reminded us in his sermon two weeks ago that even the tallest stack of theological books cannot get us to heaven, I laughed out loud. I thought about my desk, not to mention the bookshelf dedicated to science and theology, including eco-theology, and the shelf of commentaries on the writings of St. Paul. A book review of the several volumes I read on today’s epistle is not going to help us get to the Good News we’d like to hear as we groan with creation.

There really has been much use and some abuse on just four of the verses from Paul’s letter to the Romans which we heard today. I have tried to do a bit of distilling, and would like to offer two things.

First, the theme of participation which runs through Paul’s writings.

So often we read and hear Paul with the eyes and ears of American individualism - - me and my salvation.

Fortunately that is difficult to do with this morning’s passage; we is the pronoun employed repeatedly, and relationships are stressed - - ours with Christ, ours with one another, ours with all creation, ours as a part of creation.

I do wonder what Paul meant by the groaning of creation; I wonder how he understood it. One strong idea is that he probably strived to set the suffering of the Christians in Rome in a broader context, to offer them some perspective. But in doing so he set his reassurances to them in a cosmic context, which gives us room for interpretation.

We do know when we hear this now, that the suffering of creation is more than the “red in tooth and claw” of Tennyson and PBS nature documentaries; it is even more than the insights of Darwin and a century and a

half of evolutionary biologists, insights about the necessity of death and the toll of extinction in an evolving world.

What we hear is easy to describe. We hear creation groaning as temperatures rise, and particularly in this Danger Season as severe weather events become increasingly common. Reading news of recent flooding in the Northeast and other spots around this country it has not been unusual to see comments such as “What does it mean that we have had two one hundred year floods in the last six years?” Island, coastal, and Arctic peoples have begun to suffer loss of livelihoods and displacement. Species loss is accelerating. And yes, the fact that we humans have become the drivers of evolution and extinction has become clear.

It’s true that Paul did not have the tools, the models, and the sophisticated theoretical systems of science that help us understand how creation is interconnected; but when we consider his emphasis on participation in community throughout his letters, we can use this glimpse of our interdependence with all creation which he gives us in Romans to extend our use of Paul’s ideas about interdependence.

Early in my professional ministry, working on redeveloping small congregations as ministering communities in the Diocese of Nevada, the image of the body of Christ in the Pauline letters was a textual ikon, central to my understanding of the nature of the church. It’s a stretch, perhaps, but I feel that it’s a challenge we must accept, to extend the Pauline image of the body of Christ, with its emphasis on solidarity and interdependence, to all of humanity, and in fact, all of creation.

We are saved not from creation, but with creation.

That is the deep meaning of participation for us.

Second, the expectation of New Creation. We need to consider all that we do today -- to reduce human impacts and mitigate the escalating damage to creation’s systems -- in light of the promise of a transformed and freed creation.

Throughout his letters, Paul emphasizes the end of time, the liberation of all that is, of which the risen Christ is first born, first fruits, sacrament, promise, down payment. What is also abundantly clear is that we humans cannot bring this about. And yet we have a part, we who enjoy the first fruits of the Spirit. For decades there has been much talk in science and theology circles about humans as co-creators. This always makes me cringe a little, and yet it is a point. We can exercise our human creativity with attention and responsibility. In a similar way, we can pay attention to signs of the transformation and liberation of the world we see around us, and choose our actions in line with God’s hoped for action.

Christopher Southgate (biologist, poet, and professor of ethics) says it this way:

“...in some sense human beings can be -- if not the midwives of the new creation -- then at least among those that attend the birth, hold creation by the hand, and boil water as needed.”

We have a responsibility to live in ways that reflect our status as “freed, renewed, and reconciled people.”

What I'm really trying to say here is that there are at least two dimensions to the hope we hold. One is a hope in the ultimate renewal of creation. Another is the hope that emerges when we work to align our life with this promise through our choices and actions.

And please, I am not talking here about our individual habits, even when they give us that little glow of doing the right thing. I am talking again about Paul's image of participation in community, and considering the things we can do as congregations, neighborhoods, cities, counties, and countries.

Each Sunday this summer at our 10:15 service, the presider says, as part of the epiclesis in the Eucharistic prayer "Breathe your Spirit over the whole earth and make us your new creation, the Body of Christ given for the world you have made."

I don't really understand how New Creation is going to work. Which is to say that ultimately, I don't understand the ultimate, and would never pretend to, even with that stack of books. But the 10% of me that inclines toward the mystic - - the usually quite well hidden part - - is convinced that in the end the body of Christ will be not just the household of believers, not just humanity, but the body of earth, the body of creation.

And so we wait in Hope.

Patient waiting in hope, though, is not passive. Those two dimensions of hope work together. In writing of hope Paul "creates room for love and service not just in the [Christian] community but also to tormented creation." [Thanks Ernst Kasemann.] Hope is spacious.

Maybe, as a kind of coda, you will indulge me with a book recommendation?

One of my best reads this summer has been *The Planet You Inherit* by Larry Rasmussen. A few years ago, during the toughest times of the pandemic, Rasmussen wrote a series of letters for his young grandsons, about the transition from the Holocene geological epic to the Anthropocene. Rasmussen draws on his lifetime of theological studies - he's retired from the ethics chair at Union Theological Seminary in New York - to write about the challenges the boys will face, so different from those of their grandparents. It's a contrast between the old normal - that's the Holocene when the biosphere and its processes were quite stable - - and the we're not quite sure yet - that's the Anthropocene, when humans are driving rapid change. We're not quite sure yet about anything except that today's young children will face great ecological and social challenges.

I wonder what Martin and Eduardo will think when they read their grandad's letters as young adults.

There's quite a bit of grim in them, but Rasmussen deals with it gently and with great wisdom drawn from many sources.

He ends the last letter in the book on a note of hope, quoting two great twentieth century sources. One, his own professor, the great mid-twentieth century ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr, is not surprising. The other is Denise Levertov, whose poem "Beginners" opens this way:

But we have only begun  
To love the earth.  
We have only begun  
To imagine the fullness of life.  
How could we tire of hope?  
-- so much is in bud.

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