

Prayer ... Psalm 104:30 – O Lord heal our world, heal the earth. Amen

I have spent the past few days in the midst of the immeasurable beauty of our Canadian landscape in Banff. The Rockies are magnificent right now, the mountains wrapped in a blanket of snow, the valleys sun-filled, chilly yet alive already with Spring flowers and bears, just emerged from their winter sleep.

Awed by the silence of the mountains, the smell of pine in my nostrils and the sun on my back, I felt at one with the Earth. The words of the Psalm vibrated in me: “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it.” Ironically, as I enjoyed the beauty of it all outside my hotel window, I heard about the oil slick hitting the Gulf Coast, “Obama’s Katrina”!

On Tuesday, I went to the Tourist Information office. With my trail maps came a pamphlet, “Bears and People”. The first thing I noticed about the pamphlet was a statement about protecting the bears! Gee, and I thought it was mainly for my safety!! *I’m* the threat, to **them**!?

Mountains and valleys moved me to the core; thankfully, I did not encounter the bears! As I walked, a concern grew in me, for our future and the future of my children and grandchildren. I had heard how some native traditions consider the impact of their actions on the next 7 generations.

A storm that closed Calgary airport added to the beauty of the scene in front of me as I hiked up Tunnel Mountain and the Hoodoos Trail on Thursday and Friday. I saw elk and prairie dogs, and remembered that the original covenant was not only between God and humans. As the story of Noah repeats 6 times, the covenant was between God, humans *and* “every living creature.”<sup>1</sup>

This covenant, we humans have betrayed, plundering the earth of its resources and wearing out our welcome here. We continue in our love affair with cars and speed and mass-produced food transported over long distances. [I myself had travelled a couple of thousand miles to get there.] We continue to make the choice for DEATH rather than LIFE. I am not over-dramatizing here. It is the reality of our situation and it came home to me in a new way this week, in the mountains.

An elderly farmer from near Edmonton told me yesterday morning as we waited for the airport shuttle that he never would have imagined 60 years ago that some day he would worry about water. Now he has to distil the water from his well because, he admits, it contains too much nitrogen from the fertilizers he has used on his land.

On Tuesday, I read from Revelation, as we have this morning:

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more ... And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them’ ... And the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘See, I am making all things new.’”

The Revelation to St. John rang out for me this week like a word of hope addressed to our age; it is a word of challenge too.

---

<sup>1</sup> This insight and associated environmental reflections I owe to Dr. Myshka Lysack in an address to the Canadian Association for Pastoral Practice and Education Conference in April, 2010, as well as the comparisons made in this sermon between our present situation and the response of the abolitionists to slavery in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Our age has passed the point of no return. The carbon trap has snapped shut. We are now, by all sane scientific accounts, deeply into an era of irreversible climate change. Already by 2003, the UN had declared that there were more environmental refugees in the world than refugees from war or political trouble. Bangladesh is already submerging as the polar ice melts. And other profound changes are coming.

What is the impact on you when I speak in this way? For me, the litany of environmental woes is now so long and daunting that sometimes I feel overwhelmed and even a little apathetic – What can we do in the face of such enormous problems!?!? If we all feel overwhelmed by it all, where will we look for Hope?

Into such a reality, the Word of God sounds, challenging us to trust God's Way, to find Hope there, specifically in God's Way shown to us in Jesus. There may be hope, too, from human examples in history.

The movement to abolish slavery began in 1787 with the efforts of a small group of 9 Quakers and 3 Anglicans. Most of the world was caught up in the practice of slavery. It was as unimaginable then that there would ever be a world without slavery as it is to us that there might ever be a world without cars. Yet, since my great grandfather's grandfather sailed on the slave ships, the movement begun by those 12 people has changed the world.

How? Wilberforce, Clarkson and the rest of them re-discovered the original covenant, how all humanity was created equal under God. They began to act in faithfulness to that covenant and to call others to do the same.

To turn our present situation around we must re-discover our original covenant with God and with the entire non-human world. We must recover our trust in God ... trust that there is no limit to what a small group of people can accomplish when they act with God.

Hearing again, there in the mountains, the promise that God is making all things new also caused me to hear Jesus' new commandment in a new way. "Love one another", he said.

As I walked those trails, I heard Jesus' new commandment calling me to love by choosing life for the Earth, which along with God is our covenant partner. The Earth has fulfilled its covenant obligation to us; it has loved humankind by providing for our life and well-being. It is past time for us to love the Earth back, to love the Earth back to life. Perhaps even by our help, God will make things new!

If we do not choose LIFE, if we fail to choose soon to set our planet on a healthier path, the book of Revelation has another word about what will happen. It is spoken with certainty: "The time is coming for the Lord to destroy those who destroy the earth." Hear the ferocity with which God will protect the Creation. All that mountain grandeur spoke to me, as if to say: "Graham, you too must become fierce to protect what you love."

What is it that will make the difference? What will move us to action?

Only Love can move us, I realized this week. Wendell Berry writes: "The abstract, "objective," impersonal, dispassionate language of science can help us to know certain things ... with certainty. It can help us ... to know the value of species and of species diversity. But it cannot replace, and it cannot become, the language of familiarity, reverence, and affection by which things of value ultimately are protected."

There are lots of Aussies in Banff. Their accents took me back 20 years or more. Do you remember the rallying cry of that remarkable Aussie physician, Helen Caldicott, as she fought to end the proliferation of nuclear weapons: "We will have to change the priorities of our lives, if we love this planet."

Jesus' new commandment encompasses 'humans and "every living creature that is with (us)'. "Love one another" means ... "Change the priorities of your lives. Love one another and the planet too. Love one another *by* loving the planet."

God will renew the Creation with or without us. We will either fulfil our part in the covenant or we will destroy our species and the earth will finally be free to recover!

Only Love can move us. Fear is a terrible motivator. God's grace calls us to act in love, to defend what we love, to fulfil our part in the covenant.

Is there something you feel God is calling you to do, some concrete action you can begin to take today for the love of the Earth?

The early anti-slave activists acted on multiple fronts. They developed and utilized tools we will now need in our modern crisis: moral outrage; the appeal to people's compassion; brilliant organization; investigative research – they searched all over England for the tools of torture and for the chains of slaves that were then deposited at Westminster; they created a social movement across religious lines; they used the law; they engaged politically; they organized the first boycott in which many would not consume sugar produced on slave plantations ... and within a generation and half, slavery had been seriously impeded.

What can we do?

Let us at least turn to God for help in this modern crisis as they did in that older one.

Wendell Berry sums it up: "We know enough of our own history by now to be aware that people exploit what they have merely concluded to be of value, but they defend what they love."