

Healing the Whole Creation ~ Earth Day 2020 ~ Job 12:7-10; Romans 8:18-25

(A verse from a hymn I learned as a child...)

Our God has made this world./ O let us ne'er forget/ that though the wrong seems oft so strong,/ God is the ruler yet./ God trusts us with this world,/ to keep it clean and fair./ All earth and trees,/ the skies and seas,/ God's creatures everywhere.

What a lovely affirmation and commentary on the words of scripture we just heard read: *The whole creation waits with eager longing... in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay... [and] In the hand of the Creator is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being.*

It's pretty obvious that the wrong is strong. Our planet is warming. Climate change is real. Humanity has contributed to the crisis. We are at a tipping point. We can still do something about it, but time is running out. We needn't rehearse the mind-numbing and soul-crushing details about this strong wrong: warming global temperatures, melting polar ice, rising sea levels, species extinction, drought, wild weather and fires. Layering all of this beneath the current coronavirus pandemic, it is just too overwhelming to contemplate. But in Paul's words, creation is in bondage to decay, and in the present crisis, we know that some of this is our doing, while some remains a scary mystery.

We need to curb greenhouse gas emissions, as we are forced right now into doing in the current shutdown. We need to join in setting free God's creation from its bondage to decay. The challenge is enormous, but we need not fear, and it's not all bad news. I am hopeful that we will emerge from this health crisis with a healthier attitude about our planet.

There is good news, and there is hope. Good news and hope are better motivators than bad news and fear anyway. Our faith is clear: though the wrong is oft so strong, God is the ruler yet. The creation waits with eager longing for redemption. The wrong is strong, but God is stronger. The life and breath of every living thing is in God's hand. This is Gospel. Good News. Hopeful news. God is at work in this world, even in and around its decay, disruption and social distancing. Even at a healthy distance, there is a great cloud of witnesses around us to confirm this truth. As Job says, "ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you...."

An ancient Latin mass had these words, worthy of recovery for our time: "The joy of the resurrection renews the whole earth." The message is not that the joy of the resurrection could or would or should renew some of the earth someday. The message is not that resurrection applies only to an afterlife for redeemed individuals. The ancient but ever new message is that the joy of the resurrection renews the whole earth. This renewal is taking place even now, and in it we see the hand of God at work, and in it we may join hands...right here. Now.

I am not here to convince you that our planet is in trouble. You know "the wrong is strong." You don't need a preacher to state the obvious. Calvin Coolidge was U.S. president a century ago. Known as "Silent Cal," he was notorious for one-word answers to questions from the press (something that is hard to imagine today). Coming out of church on a Sunday morning, (also hard to imagine today) the press asked him what the sermon was about. "Sin," said Coolidge. "What did the preacher say about it, Mr. President?" Said Silent Cal, "He was agin' it."

Please don't leave here today saying that the preacher was against global warming, though he is. What was the sermon about today? The healing of the Earth. What did the preacher say about it? He was for it!

Though the wrong is oft so strong, /God is the ruler yet./ God trusts us with this world,/ to keep it clean and fair/--all earth and trees, /the skies and seas,/ all creatures everywhere.

We are entrusted with the care of creation. God trusts us with this. This has always been true. But we have not always done right by our world. We have exercised careless dominion rather than nurturing stewardship. The wrong is strong. Yet we live in a special moment right now. God is the ruler yet. We have the opportunity to participate in the healing of the Earth. Martin Luther King, Jr. said in April of 1967, one year before his death, *We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time...*

“The fierce urgency of now” is this very moment. The time we have been given is a great gift, a redemptive gift. As strong as creation's bondage to decay is, the renewing joy of the resurrection is stronger, and now is the time to be swept up in it.

New Testament Greek uses two words for “time.” There is *chronos*, which is where we get our words chronology and chronometer. *Chronos* refers to passing time, ordinary marking time, one moment followed by another. The clock ticking. Nothing special. Except now the clicking *chronos* climate clock is running down. That's the fearful bad news. But there is hopeful good news, too. There is also

Kairos, the right time. Time laden with significance, opportunity, moment. Jesus announces in the first chapter of Mark's gospel that the right time has come, and the Kingdom (or Rule) of God has come near, and therefore we must repent (or turn) and believe the good news. That right time is *Kairos*. It is the right time for action. The fierce urgency of now. Turning time!

Kairos moments are simultaneously periods of crisis and opportunity. They are God-charged moments. King described them as periods when "history is pregnant, ready to give birth to a great idea and a great movement." He surely had Paul's letter to the Romans in mind: creation groans with labor pains and is ready to give birth to something new and sustainable, life-giving instead of death-dealing.

Amid the brutal violence of apartheid South Africa, now more than forty years ago, a group of clergy, laity, and theologians issued a famous declaration known as the Kairos Document. It highlighted how kairos moments are also moments of truth for churches. God issues a call for decisive action, and churches have no option but to respond. In their response, their true nature is revealed. So it is that the climate crisis of today will also reveal the true identity of churches. [Kairos Call to Action]

The United Church of Christ Council for Climate Justice recently published this Kairos Call to Action. The Conference Creation Care Team, of which I am a part, is urging our Conference to adopt this document and to encourage our Wisconsin congregations to take to heart its challenge.

Now, today, we hear the voice of the Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg who declares, "We are now standing at a crossroads in history. We are failing but we have not yet failed. We can still fix this. It's up to us."

[Kairos] As Isaiah the Old Testament prophet put it, “and a little child shall lead them.”

Though the wrong is oft so strong, God is the ruler yet. The fierce urgency of now affirms that the right time –the Kairos time—has come, and the very Rule of God is near. We have this crisis moment, which is both danger and opportunity, to turn from our old ways and live. The church can decide today to reduce its carbon footprint and be a witness. *Kairos: Churches now have the opportunity to assert that we are fully committed to our first calling as caretakers of God’s creation.*

God trust us with this world, to keep it clean and fair, all earth and trees, the skies and seas, all creatures everywhere.

Yes, our first calling, created in the image of God, is to be caretakers of God’s creation. One of the blessings of this creation care work in our Wisconsin Conference is to learn what God is already doing among us. Congregations all over this state have green teams, solar panels (as installed a year ago on the roof of our Conference Center in Deforest), sustainable, native grasses and wildflowers on their property instead of golf course-style lawns, study and action groups that help the community and the households of its members to live more sustainably, turning their backs on single-use plastic bags, bottles, drinking straws, cups and tableware, bicycling, walking and driving more responsibly and ride-sharing when possible, advocating for public policy and investment strategies that seek to reduce our reliance on fossil fuels to heat and light our buildings and power transportation. These and many other positive actions are helping to slow the rate of rising atmospheric and ocean temperatures. They are inspiring. They are making a difference. They are helping to set free a creation in bondage to decay.

They are living out the first imperative in the UCC “Be the Church” campaign: “Protect the environment.” And they witness to one of our “3 Great Loves.”

But we must do more. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say we must do less. When we find ourselves in a hole, we must first stop digging. We must reduce consumption, not only of fossil fuels, but foods and drugs and all manner of so-called “goods” that our culture tells us will make our lives better. We must live more simply, that others may simply live. We must reduce our carbon footprint and we must reduce our overall footprint on this good earth. The Hebrew word for Sabbath has “stop” in its meaning. Our faith shutdown beyond this pandemic might include more Sabbath stopping from ruining the garden that our Creator has given to us to tend.

I love the old Shaker hymn, ‘Tis a gift to be simple. ‘Tis a gift to be free. ‘Tis a gift to come round where we ought to be. And when we find ourselves in the place just right, it will be in the valley of love and delight. When true simplicity is gained, to bow and to bend, we shall not be ashamed. To turn, turn, will be our delight. Til by turning, turning, we come round right.

When Jesus announced that the right (Kairos!) time is here and the Rule of God is near, Jesus was confronting the world with the fierce urgency of now. We live now in another such Kairos moment. There has never been a planetary crisis quite like the one we face today. Yes, there have been widespread species extinctions during periods of revolutionary climate change. Yes, there have been plenty of wars, plagues, earthquakes, fires, volcanoes, storms and tsunamis, and all living things have suffered as a result. But climate change today is what the military calls a threat multiplier. A warming planet makes everything worse! It makes the

wrong stronger, the decay deeper. It makes everything worse for everyone, and it makes vulnerable populations more vulnerable. It is a threat multiplier, a wrong multiplier, an injustice multiplier. Yes, of course, we all are weary of endless bad news, 24/7 cable, shout-talking heads, impeachs, runaway tweets and X-rated social media. We are numb to Calamity Janes with their hair on fire.

But the mission of Christ's church is not to sound an alarm to be negative. It is not to scare people. Our mission is rather to offer good news to a broken world, to announce the gospel, to deliver hope. This Kairos is upon us as a sacred and most timely gift of God. It is a gospel alarm. It is a warning driven by hope and good news.

A century ago Swiss theologian Karl Barth was sounding a spiritual alarm across Europe, calling for a rediscovery of scripture as the Word of God. In modesty he likened the phenomenon to the old church sexton who was climbing the bell tower in the dark of night and stumbled. As he fell, he grabbed the bell rope. The bell awakened the villagers, as it was supposed to, even though the old bell ringer was just reaching out in the darkness to catch his fall. Perhaps this is the Kairos moment the church finds itself in right now. God calls us to ring the church bell, even as we stumble, to sound the alarm, and not just of coming danger, but of a pregnant opportunity to turn, turn and face the light, where there is healing power and hope. We ring the bell of reassurance that God is ruler yet, and that the joy of the resurrection renews the whole earth. Good news, sisters and brothers. Hope!

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