

The Birth Pangs of Creation

sermon digest

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Romans 8:15-20

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Did you have an opportunity to take part in yesterday's Earth Day festivities? We're running a bit late this year. Earth Day actually fell on Good Friday, and I suspect because of the observance of Holy Week and Passover, our local festival was delayed. The festival was instigated here, in large part, on the initiative of members of First Methodist Church, and I have been appreciative over these last several years for the church's taking the lead in such a vital effort. The weather this year certainly cooperated. Yesterday's bright sun and the early blooming of flowers and leafing of the trees did their part to make celebration of earth a particularly joyous occasion. And Earth Day certainly should be joyous.

Earth Day is a celebration, but it is also more; and it is with respect to the "more" that many people turn aside from and disparage the effort. Painted as a frivolous preoccupation with whales and owls among affluent yuppies—now, more appropriately spoken of as muppies or even suppies (middle aged or senior urban professionals)—the environmental movement is about concern for threatened species, who do matter, but it is about so much more. It is about the sunny task of appreciating and committing ourselves to celebrating and preserving the wonderful diversity and beauty of our world, but it is also about the darkness of everyday suffering and death of those falling victim to a mismanaged earth. It is about looking at the world through the twin lenses of the cross and resurrection. For those of us in Christ's church, it is about taking our faith and its implications for who we are and what we do incredibly seriously.

Concern for the earth, you see, is not just concern for those parts of the earth that I see every day. It is about what the destruction, the mismanagement, the exploitation of the earth means in places around the world and to people you and I may never see. It is about the impact of what is happening to our earth on the poorest of the poor.

Today nearly one billion people (1 out of every 7 people on earth) earn their meager, subsistence living as farmers. Attention often focuses on the urban poor, the poor crowded to overflowing in our cities; but the rural poor make up almost 80 percent of the 840 million people in the world who are chronically hungry. Pushed to the outskirts of society, they eke a living out of land precariously perched on steep hillsides, in rocky ravines or along the edge of the forest. Their pillaging the forests for firewood and garden plots is often identified as a threat to the entire world as watersheds are destroyed and as CO₂ emissions are left to build up in the atmosphere. In the Amazon, these poor farmers do account for 20-25% of the loss of forests; and in the rest of the world, they account for 30-35% of the loss. In the Amazon, however, cattle ranching, raising beef for export, accounts for 65-70% of the loss and in the rest of the world, cattle ranching, large-scale agriculture and logging account for 45-60%. If we are concerned about these losses, we would do well, rather than pointing the finger of blame, to think about how we can cut our consumption of meat and minimize our waste of paper and wood products in order to stem the tide of deforestation.

Mountainside farming progressively pushes protective trees and vegetation back; and as the soil erodes and is depleted, more of the forest must be cut year after year. Lacking any savings and absent any other means of employment, the poor have no other safety net than the trees. A Haitian proverb says, "Either this tree must die, or I must die in its place." Or as one Honduran farmer put it, "I know what I am doing. . . . I am destroying the land." Scott Sabin, director of Floresta, a Christian nonprofit group, recalls one farmer describing his desperation during an extended drought when, unable to wait until the fruit on his trees matured, he had to cut the trees sale for firewood. "The problem," Sabin insists, "is not ignorance, but a lack of opportunity and options" [*Tending to Eden*, Judson Press, 15].

Like a long line of dominoes, the implications of these sad choices stretches into the future. As the watershed is depleted, women walk farther and farther to retrieve water and firewood for their homes; and as the firewood grows more and more scarce, they cease boiling the water and waterborne illnesses ravage the family. Trees gone, soil depleted, families are often left with abysmal choices. They may find themselves forced, purely for the sake of survival, to consider selling a child to traffickers. An estimated 27 million people are victimized by modern day slavery—more than at the height of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Or the family may become environmental refugees, fleeing the countryside for already burgeoning cities or crossing national borders in search of work. An estimated 25 million environmental refugees in 1995 grew by 1999 to account for more refugees than traditional refugees fleeing oppression and persecution. The state of Oaxaca, for example, buried deep in southern Mexico, has been named in a United Nations environmental report "the most eroded spot on earth"; and time after time, author Joel Simon reports, when asked why they are leaving their home and country, immigrants respond, "Porque la tierra ya no da"—because the earth no longer gives" [*Endangered Mexico*, 35, quoted in Sabin, 93].

Writing as if he were surveying the no win situation of so many suffering people in our day, the Apostle Paul speaks in moving terms about the groaning of creation. Although his are the earliest compositions of our Christian scriptures, written a mere decade and a half in the wake of Easter, Paul does not blush to look reality in the eye. He struggles with the prevalence of suffering, obvious at every turn. Creation groans, Paul says; and also we and the very Spirit of God groan. Paul utilizes, you might say, a dual lens. He looks at the world through the lens of Easter—yes; but he also looks at the world through the lens of the cross. As we observed during Holy Week, remembering the joy of the resurrection apart from the suffering that preceded it is to view only half the story and to fail to appreciate fully the meaning of the resurrection itself. In a similar way, viewing the reality in which we live solely in terms of the hope of Easter and failing to pay attention to the pain, suffering and evil that afflict our world, is to fail to take seriously the pathway hope must travel if it is going to transform the reality in which it emerges. Easter hope first must walk the road to and through Jerusalem. Far from mere wishful thinking, the hope of Easter engages the pain. It neither succumbs to the pain and gives up hope nor does it ignore the pain in order to hold onto hope. The hope of Easter transforms those who are held in its grip into midwives, who recognize in the suffering around them the opportunity to become co-laborers with God and thus to become captivated by the joyful task of bringing to birth a new and better day.

All of creation, Paul says, is standing on its tiptoes, waiting in eager longing to see if the children of God are going to stand up and be who they are. Far from a people who must protect ourselves from the pain of the world, far from a people who must throw up our hands and say that the ecological crisis that confronts our world is beyond our capabilities, far from those who merely find someone else to blame and then stand back in self-righteous anger, we reach back into our tradition of faith to know the earth as the good gift of a good God, who has placed it in our hands to “till” or use for human good and to “keep,” guard and protect. We know ourselves then as both gifted and responsible; and within that context, every day, in the words of Richard Neibuhr, becomes

the day that the Lord has made; every nation is a holy people called by God into existence in its place and time and to God’s glory; every person is sacred, made in God’s image and likeness; every living thing on earth, in the heavens, and in the waters is God’s creation and points in its existence toward God; the whole earth is filled with God’s glory; the infinity of space is God’s temple, where all creation is summoned to silence before God”

—Richard Neibuhr, *Radical Monotheism*, 52-53

Such a belief, well known ethicist and theologian Roger Shinn, observes, does not solve all the problems the world presents, “but it makes a place for all problems, and the latter is a wiser function of theology than the former” [*Earth Might Be Fair*, 144].

Theology and the church do not have all the answers, but taking seriously our work as midwives, we rejoice in the plentiful positive steps we can take today. And reaching out to the host of scientists, political and community leaders seeking to make a difference, we get to work.