

The Cry of Creation
Psalm 104:24-34; Job 38:1-7, 25-27, 39-41
April 23, 2006

There is a famous story in the Jewish Talmud about two men in a rowboat heading toward land. Suddenly one man starts to bore a hole in the bottom of the craft. When challenged, he retorts angrily, "This is none of your business. I am boring the hole under my seat!" The Jewish perspective, as well as the Christian view, is that the earth is a boat, a conveyance on which we are privileged to ride and be carried. We ride on the boat together and we all are responsible for our fellow passengers, our boat, and the earth on which we ride.

As we celebrate Earth Day this weekend, we must acknowledge that unfortunately we seem to have lost sight of that larger perspective. We are like the man on the boat who is interested in saving ourselves, regardless of the impact upon others. Bill McKibben wrote a book called *The Age of Missing Information*. He found the largest cable television system in the world at the time, which was in Fairfax, Virginia, with 100 channels. He had people in Fairfax tape everything that came through on those channels and then he watched the 2,000 hours of programming. Distilled down to its essence, McKibben discerned this message from all those television programs: "You are the most important thing on earth, the heaviest object in the known universe."

That message is particularly troubling from a spiritual point of view. "You're the most important thing on earth. You're the center of the planet."¹

Where human beings stand in relation to everything else is an old question. It seems to be the question that animates Job. Job is a prosperous man, a good man, always doing his share for the community, treating his family well. One day Job wakes up and finds himself seemingly cursed by God. His cattle start dying of hoof and mouth disease, his children die, his property is taken from him, he ends up living in a dung heap at the edge of town covered with oozing sores. Naturally, Job begins to question why this has happened to him. His friends come and visit, representing the orthodoxy of the day, and they tell him it must be because he has sinned. He must have done something wrong and God is punishing him. This is the common belief of the day.

Job cannot accept that answer. He keeps saying, "But I didn't do anything that bad. There must be some other explanation." He audaciously demands an interview with God. Job wants God to justify God's self. Job

demands this in increasingly belligerent language and finally God appears. God speaks in a voice from a whirlwind. Job has stirred up a hornet's nest. God seems in a sarcastic mood, "Well, where were you when I laid this whole thing out? Do you know how to stop the waves from breaking? Do you know where they should go? Do you know where I keep the hail and snow? Do you hunt game for the lioness?"²

God's discourse is one of the most beautiful and powerful passages in the Bible. It is a reminder to Job and to the rest of us that we are not at the absolute center of the universe. We are but one small part of a vast creation. God cuts us down to size. There is a second theme running throughout the discourse. This world of which we are but a minute part is incredibly beautiful, full of meaning, sweetness, and beauty. "Have we seen a doe give birth to her fawn? Have you seen the wings of an ostrich flap with joy? OK, their feathers aren't as beautiful as a peacock's, but my can the ostrich run with those long legs! Have you marveled at the strength of the horse, with its neck clothed with a flowing mane? Did you train the hawk to fly stretching his wings to the wind? Does the eagle soar at your command and build his nest in the clouds?"

Job is stunned speechless by God's eloquent accounting of creation. "I am unworthy—how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth. I have said too much already. I will say no more."

We humans need to hear God's powerful discourse again and again and again, for we have forgotten that we are not the center of the universe. There is a force larger than us, perceivable in the daily miracles of nature found all around us. Whether the earth and its creatures were given life through evolution or intelligent design, whether it came through the Big Bang or a Big Burst of Love, however life came to be, it is the gift of God. We do not own creation; we are planted here to be stewards of the precious creation of God.

One of the unwarranted ways in which we are exerting our influence in the world is through climate change. With the Industrial Revolution, human beings began burning large amounts of coal, gas, and oil, carbon-based fuels. One relatively minor effect is smog. The major effect of burning fossil fuels is the release of carbon dioxide (CO₂) into the atmosphere. Carbon dioxide traps heat close to the atmosphere – heat that would otherwise radiate back out to space. With only 4.5% of the world's population, Americans produce over 25% of its greenhouse gases as a result of our affluent lifestyles.³

Scientists have estimated that in this century we can expect to see the global average temperature increase about 4 to 6 degrees Fahrenheit. That

would take it to levels higher than it has ever been in human history, indeed than it has ever been long before human history began.

We have already increased the temperature about 1 degree Fahrenheit and we've begun to see what happens when we do. The world gets stormier, wetter. That is because warm air, in the fashion that God designed this planet, holds more vapor than cold air. Temperature increases create more evaporation in arid places, resulting in drought conditions. The evaporated water has to come down somewhere, so in wet places there is more precipitation, more flooding. Severe storms dropping more than two inches of rain in a twenty-four hour period have increased about twenty percent across this continent against the baseline.⁴

A respected colleague called last week to recommend a book for the budding scientist in our family. I happened to have a review of the book on my desk at that moment as I was preparing this message. The book is called *The Weather Makers: How Man is Changing the Climate and What It Means for Life on Earth*, by Tim Flannery. He is director of the South Australian Museum and professor at the University of Adelaide. The book gives evidence of how the delicate web of life around the world is being torn apart.

For example, "crocodiles and alligators may also be at risk, for the eggs of the American alligator produce only males when hatched at higher than 89.6 degrees F, and only females when hatched at less than 87.8 degrees F."⁵ The beloved emperor penguins population, the subject of the film, *The March of the Penguins*, is half what it was thirty years ago. The sharp decline in sea ice has diminished the habitat for microscopic plankton that is the base of the food chain. The krill that feed on the plankton in turn allow penguins, seals, and great whales to thrive. As the krill disappear, so do the penguins.⁶ Great white polar bears are slowing starving as each winter becomes warmer. They are already 15 percent skinnier on average than a few decades ago, threatening their survival during hibernation. Their feeding season is too short for bears to find enough food. Starving females give birth to fewer cubs.⁷

Creation is crying, both in dry heaves of anguish and in heavy torrents of tears. In a *Wall Street Journal* cartoon, a child cries to a parent: "If your generation doesn't learn to save the planet, it won't matter if my generation can't learn to read or write." God's creation is crying out, suffocating from abuse by its tenants.

Tim Flannery writes, "The best evidence indicates that we need to reduce our CO2 emissions by 70 percent by 2050....The transition to a carbon-free economy is eminently achievable because we have all the

technology we need to do so....70 percent of all people alive today will still be alive in 2050, so climate change affects almost every family on this planet.”⁸ It is not an issue that will reach a crisis only for future generations. Many of us, as well as our children and grandchildren, will be impacted.

It is not too late to do something to answer the cry of creation. We can slow and eventually stop the train of global warming by transforming our energy system from one based on fossil fuels to one based on natural, renewal energies including sun, wind, tides, plant growth, and geothermal energy.

The Union of Concerned Scientists suggests that three household activity areas account for the majority of our environmental impact: food, household operations, and transportation.⁹

The kind of automobiles and number of miles we drive is currently the most harmful activity in which we all engage. The everyday act of eating carries with it a significant environmental impact. The average bite of food in the United States travels 1,200 miles to reach our plates. The majority of our fruits, vegetables, and grains are grown non-organically, contributing to soil and groundwater contamination. Most farm animals are now raised in factory farms which require intensive water use, antibiotics, and grain, and where manure contaminates groundwater and local rivers.

We can make lifestyle choices that make a difference in our world. Many of you are already exemplary in recycling, taking public transportation, walking, and using energy efficient appliances. Few are as fortunate as I am to live within walking distance of your workplace. Within the first year I lived in Lafayette, I drove my car 5,000 fewer miles than the previous year. The cost of living in our area has forced so many to commute long distances in order to find affordable housing, diminishing the quality of life in many ways.

Although the problem of global warming seems daunting, we can each take steps to reduce our impact on the environment. Carpooling to events or work, even one day a week, makes a difference. When it comes time to buy another car, consider a fuel-efficient, low polluting car. We might consider eating one less meal of meat every week. Try purchasing locally grown produce, which is easier to find in our state. Even churches are doing energy audits of their facilities and installing various efficiency measures. One congregation promotes alternative energy sources with a small wind turbine and solar panels on the parsonage roof.

We can and must respond to the cry of creation. As stewards commissioned to care for creation, we have a great responsibility to foster

life, not to contribute to the death of the earth and all its creatures. There is hope; it is not too late, but we must act now.

In Nikos Kazantzakis' novel, *Zorba the Greek* a powerful story is told. He writes, "I remembered one morning when I discovered a cocoon in the bark of a tree, just as a butterfly was making a hole in its case and preparing to come out. I waited a while, but it was too long appearing and I was impatient. I bent over it and breathed on it to warm it. I warmed it as quickly as I could and the miracle began to happen before my eyes, faster than life. The case opened, the butterfly started slowly crawling out and I shall never forget my horror when I saw how its wings were folded back and crumpled; the wretched butterfly tried with its whole trembling body to unfold them. Bending over it, I tried to help it with my breath. In vain. It needed to be hatched out patiently and the unfolding of the wings should be a gradual process in the sun. Now it was too late. My breath had forced the butterfly to appear, all crumpled, before its time. It struggled desperately and, a few seconds later, died in the palm of my hand.

"That little body is, I do believe, the greatest weight I have on my conscience. For I realize today that it is a mortal sin to violate the great laws of nature. We should not hurry, we should not be impatient, but we should confidently obey the eternal rhythm."¹⁰

The book of Job reminds us that God has put an eternal rhythm in place, an order to the delicate web of life, which we do not have authority to disrupt. May we reclaim a reverence for the eternal rhythm of life, of every creature from the aardvark to orangutan. May the groaning cries of creation be transformed into songs of praise for the Maker of us all.

Prayer

Author of Life, you cast your canvas in space and designed whirling planets and gaseous spheres of light set in the midst of the darkness. One planet, named earth, was chosen to have a delicate balance that it could give birth to life in a multitude of forms. We are the recipients of your life-giving design, born to delight in the wonders of your magnificent creation. We marvel at the cycles of birth and death and rebirth set in motion. We rejoice in the signs of renewal taking forth before our very eyes as babies are born and sprouts peek out of the barren soil. Your inventions are irreplaceable, O God, precious and valuable, each and every one.

We are humbled to be one of your unique designs. We praise you for the gift of life and the gifts of Mother Earth given to sustain our lives. We recognize that as a people, we have oftentimes been thoughtless in our use and abuse of our home. Forgive us for using your creation to our own ends.

Help us stop the treadmill toward disaster. Call us back to healthy ways of living that sustain the planet and all its creatures.

We thank you, O Source of Knowledge, for the gifts of our minds, whereby we have come to understand so much about the world in which we live. May we harness the energies of intelligence to foster peace and justice, health and reconciliation.

We pray for people and lands which are suffering from drought, disease, flooding, or warfare. Instill in us a passion for justice and healing for all your people and for lands which are abused.

We lift our prayers for those whom we love, for persons seeking renewal of strength following illness, for those in need of healing from broken relationships, for those seeking guidance for their next steps. We pray for those longing for companionship, for youth emerging into their own identities, for persons in the midst of transition.

In thanksgiving for the gifts of life given to us, we renew our commitment to be faithful stewards of all our resources, including the environment. May we walk with reverence and grace upon the quilt of your creation. Amen.

¹ Bill McKibben, "The Comforting Whirlwind: God and the Environmental Crisis," *The Cry of Creation: A Call for Climate Justice, An Interfaith Study Guide on Global Warming*, Earth Ministry, www.protectingcreation.org. Retrieved April 2, 2006, p. 3.

² Ibid. p. 3.

³ Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb, "Judaism & Energy," *The Cry of Creation*, cited above, p. 14.

⁴ Ibid. p. 4.

⁵ Tim Flannery, *The Weather Makers: How Man Is Changing the Climate and What It Means for Life on Earth* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2005), pp. 91-92.

⁶ Ibid. pp. 96-98.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 100-102

⁸ Ibid. pp. 6-7.

⁹ "Paper or Plastic, Cloth or Disposable? Effective, Focused Actions that Make a Difference," *The Cry of Creation*, cited above, p. 19.

¹⁰ Nikos Kazantzakis, *Zorba the Greek*, trans. by Carl Wildman (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952), pp. 120-121.

The Rev. Lori Best Sawdon
Lafayette United Methodist Church, Lafayette, CA