

Today's sermon continues our focus on the Grace Covenant around which our congregation gathers. Today, we reflect on our pledge to "care for God's creation in which we share a common destiny as brothers and sisters of the earth."

Several weeks ago, following our worship service celebrating Earth Day, a member of our congregation spoke words of heresy. The sermon had made a casual reference to our worshipping God rather than nature, and this very lovely person on her way out commented that she had considered the possibility and had decided "why not worship nature?" Every fiber of my theological training wanted to rise up and give a long and deeply informed response to her question; but, recognizing that she was contrasting herself to the use and abuse of nature wreaking such havoc in God's world and reflecting on the deep sense of worship and thanksgiving we had just experienced in pondering God's good gift of nature, I restrained myself.

Judeo-Christian theology has long drawn a distinction between God and God's creation. Positively, we have held that unlike peoples who are fearful of the natural world, we see ourselves as having received the natural world as a good gift from the hands of a good God. Endowed with the responsibility of stewardship for the world, we are freed to explore, discover and utilize the world God has placed in our keeping. Ours, we say, is a God of history, a God who leads us forward, not a God caught up in the repetitive cycling of the seasons of nature.

Negatively, however, we have come to recognize that we have subverted our freedom to use God's world into a license to abuse it. Acting more in accord with the first century Greek mind set than the ancient Judaic principle of stewardship, we have divorced the spiritual and the physical. God's disembodied spiritual presence is "out there," not mixed up in the stuff and decisions of our daily lives. Grateful reverence before God's overwhelmingly good gift of creation gives way to masterful manipulation of the earth and its resources.

Reflecting on the harm we have done, Susannah Heschel, Professor of Judaic Studies at Dartmouth College, calls attention to the fact that while our earth is four and a half billion years old, human beings have been here a mere twenty thousand years. Yet we are by far the most powerful force the earth has encountered, and unfortunately, the most destructive. Even in the midst of our concern for the earth, we tend to ask, "What should we do to make this a healthier environment for humans?" and not "What does the earth need? Does nature have rights apart from benefits to humans? Do our fellow creatures, both animals and plants, have a moral right not to be made extinct?"

Rather than being dismissive, we might do well to view our understanding of the world that surrounds us in light of foundational Jewish teachings. God's *ruach*, God's breath, sustains, not just human beings, but animal life as well. God's covenant includes, not just the people of Israel, but all of creation, giving commandments even to the animals, who are to rest on the Sabbath. We read in the Psalms that the whole earth worships and sings praise to God; and in the Bible, miracle includes not just God's intervention in history, but the workings of nature itself, such as the rising and setting of the sun. "Nature," Heschel insists, "is a vehicle for all spiritual experience, but nature also has its own spiritual life, which we have no right to diminish, let alone destroy" [Comments at the UN Conference on Population and Development, posted by the Religious Consultation on Population].

God is present in wounded creation. Some thirty-five years ago, the great writer, teacher Henri Nouwen sought to put together a book to enable Christian ministers decipher their peculiar calling in the midst of a "dislocated" world. He recalled a legend from second century Judaism in which a rabbi encountered the prophet Elijah. "When will the Messiah come?" the rabbi asked.

"Go and ask him yourself," Elijah replied.

"Where is he?"

"Sitting at the gates of the city."

"How shall I know him?"

"He is sitting among the poor covered with wounds. The others unbind all their wounds at the same time and then bind them up again. But he unbinds one at a time and binds it up again, saying to himself, 'Perhaps I shall be needed: if so I must always be ready so as not to delay for a moment'" [from the tractate Sanhedrin in Nouwen's

The Wounded Healer, pp. 83-84].

Ministers, Nouwen concluded, following the example of Messiah, must recognize themselves as wounded healers. We are not immune from the hurts, pains and failures of the world. but moving in the midst of them and informed by our own sense of affliction, we recognize and seek to tend to the suffering and alienation in others.

And so it is with Israel's God and the God of Jesus Christ. Far from a God removed from the ills of this

world in triumphant splendor, God is encountered again and again as the God who knows the shortcomings and sinfulness of this world from the inside out and yet repeatedly chooses to start again.

Walter Brueggemann delights in finding just this God in the midst of the perplexing story of the flood of Genesis 6-9. Caught in the midst of the devastating Exile of the 6th century BCE, this ancient Babylonian story takes on new life and meaning. Just as the prophets denounced the people of the covenant for chasing after other gods and other ways, so this tale marks the tragic downward spiral from the time of beginnings when God's pronouncement of "very good" is displaced by God's resolve to "blot them out" (Gen. 6:7).

The focus of the story is not on "the much water," but the change that takes place in God. The story moves from God's resolve to meet the sinfulness of creation in righteous annihilation to God's resolve to fashion a new creation and a new covenant in the face of the failure of that has gone before it. God does not indulge God's anger. God does not wink at or excuse a hostile creation. And God does not somehow change creation so as to take away the freedom with which God has endowed it. The change takes place in God. God moves from plans for total destruction to the hope of new beginnings. It is reminiscent of the God who weeps in Hosea before the impending doom of God's people: "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not come in wrath" (11:8-9). Just as Israel will step out of Exile to begin anew as God's covenant people, so Noah and his family and the animals on the ark will walk down the gangplank to the liberation of a new day. The symbolic rainbow to which God points is an unarmed bow at rest, not drawn rigid in enmity.

The new covenant to which God beckons is universal in scope. It is an "everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." Like the wounded healer, God has chosen to identify with hurting creation in order to heal it.

God's covenant calls God's people to embody hope and healing in God's world. In the dismal story of the flood, there is one human being who stands apart. Noah, the narrator tells us, "walks with God" and as such, embodies a whole new set of possibilities. Noah is the first person in Genesis' story, other than the barely mentioned Enoch, who is distinguished by his faithfulness. Think of the irony! At the very moment of deep pathos and impending doom, the first person proclaimed for his faithfulness steps on stage. What we have here, Brueggemann delightedly proclaims, is "a minority view. Faithfulness is possible even in this world" [*Interpretation: Genesis*, 80].

The pronouncement of scripture is bold. God has chosen to identify with the suffering of this world. In the words of Mark Wallace,

Because God as Spirit is enfleshed within creation, God experiences within the core of her deepest self the agony and suffering of an earth under siege. The Spirit, then, as the green face of God, has also become in our time the wounded God." [*Cross Currents*, Fall 2000, p. 315].

The story, however, does not end there. Scripture goes on to affirm the significance of a minority of one or two or more, who accept God's invitation to be a new covenant people, banded together to bring possibilities of hope out of seemingly impending disaster. "See," the Deuteronomist triumphantly concludes, "I have set before you today life and . . . death. . . . Choose life" [30:15, 19].

Assessments of the prospects for our planet are not good. The ravages of pollution, over consumption, a burgeoning population, global warming, and the loss of tens of thousands of species of plants and animals annually are sobering, even frightening. Our bidding as people in covenant with the God who renews creation is to constitute that "minority view" that faithfulness and hope in this world are possible and to get to work.

Some thirty years ago I moved into a tiny office on the third floor of the Southern Seminary Library to write my dissertation. Lacking windows and somewhat dark and grim, it needed some color and cheer. I purchased a number of posters of beautiful mountain and lakeside scenes. Recalling words from Robert Frost's poem, "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Afternoon," I named the posters "promises to keep," using them as a reminder of the promise of having the freedom to go on camping trips with my family if I completed my work by the designated deadline.

We promise in our Grace Covenant, "We will care for God's creation in which we share a common destiny as brothers and sisters of the earth." This is a promise to keep. Our small church may seem like a very small minority; but history tells us that's the way God works—through a seemingly small, insignificant group of people, who though small are faithful. We have promises to keep to our world, its future generations and God. So, let's get to work.