

Finding the Future

sermon digest

April 29, 2012

Colossians 1:15-20

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Some 31 years ago, our family was making its way to Los Angeles for a denominational convention. We were enjoying visiting points of interest along the way and sort of dragging our feet as we went, for we dreaded the confrontations we would meet on the convention floor. We made our way to the Grand Canyon where two experiences made a particular impression upon my memory. One was the experience on the morning after our arrival of stepping out and viewing the Grand Canyon for the first time. No picture could have prepared me for the immense and colorful panorama that stretched before us. It literally took my breath away. Later in the day we dropped by the visitor center where we stood before a huge geologic clock symbolizing the formation of the world. Marking 4½ billion years in a 24 hour day, every minute on the clock represents a little over 3 million years and every hour, just under 190 million years. Nearly 4 hours go by as the earth cools and stabilizes. The first simple life forms appear at 3:55 in the morning, and more than 2 billion years pass before the first multi-cellular creatures evolve at 5:39 in the evening. At 10:47 pm early dinosaurs walk the planet. At 11:37 pm North America shakes and quakes as the Rocky Mountains emerge; and at 11:40 pm, an hour after their appearance, the dinosaurs vanish and mammals appear. Finally, at 2 seconds to midnight, the first humans appear. Not unlike, I think, the authors of the hymns to creation in the first two chapters of Genesis, I was moved with awe. Although I knew that the debates that lay ahead of us in Los Angeles would seek to whittle our world view back to manageable and comfortable proportions, I found that my view of the God who was supposedly at risk was larger and broader than I could ever have imagined.

I recalled those Grand Canyon musings this week as I read Rabbi Andrea Cohen-Kiener's article, "Reaching into History and Finding the Future". Serving as a state director for Interfaith Power and Light, a national coalition of 14,000 congregations in 39 states making "a religious response to global warming," the rabbi reflects on the challenges posed to her own historic faith tradition by the knowledge that we are the first generation in history possessing the knowledge that we can erase ourselves from the face of the earth. The new science of environmentalism, she acknowledges, poses "new questions" to the Jewish tradition, a tradition with "a venerated history of questioning." Rather than seeking to avoid the questions as if somehow they pose a threat, we must, she insists, sit with both the new questions and the old traditions. As both an environmentalist and a Jew, "I find myself," she confesses,

reaching into history to find future. I find myself whispering, or sometimes raging, new questions, and then sitting—waiting for The Word to bounce off the mountains and reach back to my ears [in S. Bingham, ed., *Love God Heal Earth*, 33-34].

In the process, she suggests, her faith tradition becomes more alive. It lives and breathes. It is relevant to the pressing demands that grip her life and the lives of so many seeking guideposts to the future.

Is that the way it is in the religious faith that you know? Does it live and breathe, offering from the deep recesses of its treasure trove hope and guidance for the future? Does the religious faith we embrace, like the faith of our Jewish cousins, invite us to struggle with the future of the earth? Are we "in the company of people of every faith who feel the call to love God by walking lightly, responsibly on earth"?

In a word: Yes!

We value the earth as the gift of God. The Bible celebrates the earth as God's good gift. Genesis, the book of beginnings, opens with a hymn of praise: "In the beginning . . . God created." Not once, not twice, but four times the story of creation affirms, "It is good, it is good, it is good, it is very good." Pronouncing God's blessing upon the plants and animals, birds, fish and humankind, Genesis' story of creation becomes, in the words of Walter Brueggeman, "a litany of abundance," "an orgy of fruitfulness" as everything multiplies and replenishes itself as an expression of the overflowing goodness of the Creator who calls it into being [*Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope*, 69]. The psalmists sing of creation's wonder and gracious provision. The intricate beauty, the rhythm of the seasons, the expanse of oceans, the soaring of the mountains, the spectacular display of the heavens, the profusion of plants and animals call us to praise the God of heaven and earth.

In light of God's gracious gift, the Torah delineates careful laws of responsible stewardship so that the earth may be passed on to future generations. Speaking of human beings as created in the "image" or "likeness" of God, the first story of creation calls to mind the imagery not of pompous little gods

manipulating the world for their own satisfaction, but of human beings bestowed with the dignity and responsibility of representing the God who made them and working in accord with God's own purposes. The commissioning of human beings for dominion over the earth is often misunderstood as underwriting humanity's wanton abuse of nature. It rather calls to mind the covenantal responsibility assigned to Israel's kings, who again and again were instructed to rule not in the name of their own self-interest, but in care and responsibility for those whom they ruled, particularly the poor and marginalized.

Scripture, however, goes on to tell another story. The Creator's gift of abundance becomes subservient to humankind's myth of scarcity. From Man and Woman grasping for the fruit of immortality to Cain's jealousy of Abel to Jacob's embezzlement of his brother's birthright and Pharaoh's paranoia before the growing tribe of Joseph, the gripping fear is the same. "There's not enough to go around! Let's get it while we can." And creation, given from the hand of a gracious God, is subverted for selfish dominance and gain; and the consequences are breathtakingly tragic. Abuse of God's good gift is contrary to the lives of reverence, gratitude and gracious sharing to which God calls any who would identify themselves as a people of God. It is an embarrassment to the faith of Abraham, and it is an embarrassment to the faith of Jesus.

We value creation through the person of Jesus. Although the Christian faith lives from its deep roots in the rich faith of the Jewish people, every aspect of our faith turns upon the moment in time when, as the Gospel of John puts it, "the Word became flesh and lived among us." "In him," the ancient hymn in Paul's epistle to the Colossians sings, "all things were created" and "in him all things hold together." The centrality of Jesus is such that we look through him to interpret the meaning of creation and our responsibility for and to creation. "In the Incarnate One," Geoffrey Lilburne says, "God enters into the deepest possible relationship with space and time;" leaving nothing the same, no stone unturned" [*A Sense of Place*, p. 91].

The Gospels indicate that as an adult, Jesus owned no home. Born in a borrowed stable, he often sat at table as a guest in the homes of others. His disciples borrowed an upper room for the last supper, and he was buried in a borrowed tomb. The Gospels go on to picture, however, a Jesus who was at home in nature. His teaching and parables borrowed heavily from nature. He pointed to the sun and rain as witnesses to God's nature. He spoke of the sparrows of the air and the lilies of the field, of fruitful trees and barren trees, of foxes and goats and sheep. He hosted a multitude for dinner on a remote hillside and he presided over an intimate breakfast with his disciples along the Galilean sea. Like the prophets of old he was acquainted with the wilderness. Far from one who merely skimmed the surface, Jesus is depicted as one who knew the world up close and personal. He moved through the natural world with a familiarity and freedom that seemed to reside in his assurance of its reality as the sacramental presence of the living God.

But more than just who Jesus was, we also affirm who we believe Jesus continues to be. Early Christians spoke of the day of Jesus' resurrection as "the eighth day of creation" or the first day of God's new creation. As Walter Brueggemann puts it, "From broken Friday bread comes Sunday abundance." Far from being just about spiritual things, resurrection hope transforms how we see the world itself. No longer restricted to a hand-to-mouth existence, we find ourselves submerged in an orgy of grace, guided more by an economics of doxology than human greed.

Last week, more than one billion people in 192 countries took part in the 42nd Anniversary of Earth Day. Participating cities ranged from Cairo to Beijing, Melbourne to Rome, and Rio to St. Louis. After two years' effort, the Earth Day Network's A Billion Acts of Green campaign met its goal, enlisting community organizations, businesses, faith communities and individuals in the largest environmental service campaign ever. Commitments ranged from the very small to the very large. Individual commitments included pledges to quit using paper cups and promises to plant gardens and begin recycling. Reflecting some humor, one fellow even promised to break up with his girl friend because she refused to recycle. Corporate efforts included such massive undertakings as Earth Day Philippines' engaging in massive tree plantings, water projects, river clean-ups, recycling drives and school greenings. Two hundred Catholic parishes contributed 100,000 acts of green through local service projects.

Too often we sit back and wait for the big. Big, impressive steps are essential, but our own day-to-day decisions, multiplied by those of millions of others, are monumental, too. Putting off modifying our

lives to safeguard our environment for future generations or thinking that what we do doesn't make a difference is contrary to the faith we profess. The resurrection hope to which we are called provides our pathway into the future. Decisions we make today and tomorrow will either live out our faith or deny it. The question comes to each of us. Which will it be?