

A Hymn of Love

sermon digest

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Psalms 19:1-6; Romans 8:19-25

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In 2008 Richard Cizik, who had been a staff member of the National Association of Evangelicals for some 28 years and its current Vice President for Governmental Affairs and chief lobbyist, resigned his position. Convinced some years earlier on hearing scientist and fellow Evangelical John Houghton present evidence on global warming that environmentalism, and especially climate change, should be a part of the Evangelical political agenda, Cizik had increasingly come to champion an approach to environmentalism called "creation care," which had its roots "not in politics or ideology, but in the scriptures." Cizik had his strong supporters as well as serious opponents. In 2007, James Dobson, head of Focus on the Family, and 24 other evangelical leaders signed a letter asking "the NAE board to ensure that Mr. Cizik faithfully represents the policies and commitments of the organization" and suggesting that Cizik resign "if he cannot be trusted to articulate the views of American evangelicals on environmental issues." In late 2008 mounting pressure over Cizik's environmental activism joined with evidence of his changing views on LGBT issues and his espousal of family planning as environmentally responsible, finally eventuating in his resignation. You may remember something of the furor.

Far from a futile effort, Cizik's efforts met with wide acclaim. Beliefnet named him one of the "Most Inspirational" leaders of the year in 2006; TIME magazine named him to its list of the 100 most influential "Thinkers and Scientists" in 2007; and the governor of Virginia named Cizik to the state's Climate Commission. In 2010, Cizik with David Gushee, professor of Christian Ethics at Mercer University, and Steve Martin, a pastor and documentary film maker from Oak Ridge, launched the New Evangelical Partnership for the Common Good with the purpose of "bringing evangelicals, scholars, and policy-makers together in the search for common ground on a host of national and international challenges, including climate change, civil liberties, economic justice, and national security." Cizik continues to travel widely to speak on these issues, both in the U.S. and abroad. According to *Science* magazine, he is considered one of America's "most dynamic public speakers" [newevangelicalpartnership.org].

Far from diluting his public witness as some of his detractors charged, Cizik's efforts on behalf of the environment and other pressing issues has broadened the scope of his witness. He has moved into the enviable position during a time of historic division and animosity in our country of establishing common ground with thinkers and activists both within and beyond the church. Broad collaboration and constructive action in the face of issues threatening not merely humanity, but the future of the earth, are not just permissible for those who would be followers of Jesus. They are mandatory.

Creation is God's good gift. While scripture distinguishes God from the world of nature, it celebrates nature as God's good gift. The opening affirmation of Genesis, "In the beginning . . . God created" is a hymn of praise for God's generosity. Not once, but four times the story of creation repeats, "It is good, it is good, it is good, it is very good." Our own vital kinship to the rest of nature is signified in the very fact that the Hebrew name for humankind (*Adam*) reflects the very ground (*adamah*) upon which we walk and from which we come. God's blessing upon the plants and animals, birds, fish and humankind, turns Genesis' story of creation, in the words of Walter Brueggeman, into "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 invest the creation with its own voice and depict a creation that worships God. In Psalm 19, the passage with which we opened our service, the heavens become something of a congregation, praising and proclaiming the mighty works of God. True, the psalmist acknowledges, the heavens have no speech and their voice cannot be heard; yet day speaks to day and night to night, "all in ringing choral antiphony" [Mays, Interpretation: Psalms, 97].

In like manner, throughout the psalms we find the sun running its joyous course of praise to the creator (19:4-6) and the psalmists' anticipation that the sea, field, and trees, sea monsters, fire, hail, snow, frost and winds, mountains, hills, fruit trees, and cedars, wild animals, cattle, and birds will all give praise to God. Nature is not divine, but it sings praise to the divine, and we find ourselves confronted by a creation that is mysterious and marvelous. We find ourselves "in the midst of an unending concert sung by the universe to the glory of God" [Mays].

A simple chorus traditionally used as a part of the Jewish Seder says it well. Looking out on the teeming abundance of creation, we cannot help but exclaim "*Dayenu!*"—"Enough!" Any one of God's

good gifts would have been “enough,” but there is so much more. The intricate beauty, the rhythm of the seasons, the expanse of oceans, the soaring of the mountains, the spectacular display of the heavens, the provision of plants for food and animals for companionship—any one of these gracious gifts would have been enough to call us to praise; and yet the list of creation’s treasures goes on and on. *Dayenu!* in celebration of the God of creation.

And yet, the story does not end there. Genesis goes on to weave a story of intrigue and deception. God’s good gift meets up with humankind possessed of a fear that there really is not enough. One must grasp what one can while one can. The epic stories of Cain, Babble, Noah’s flood, Jacob, Pharaoh and later of an insecure Israel languishing under insecure and greedy rulers paints a tragic scene. Creation, given from the hand of a gracious God, is subverted for selfish dominance and gain. The myth of scarcity replaces the hymn of creation’s litany of abundance; and the ruination of the earth is off and running. These, you see, are not just quaint stories of a simple people of long ago. They compose the story of Everyman and Everywoman in Everytime. Substitute the names of modern political and economic players and the consequences are breathtakingly tragic. They speak of world forests being cut, billions of tons of oil burning carbon emissions into the atmosphere, rising food costs, and the spread of disastrous weather conditions, malnutrition and hunger.

Scripture, you see, and the application of scripture is not just concerned with the so called “spiritual.” It is also about the physical world in which we live. Similarly, the story of creation does not just concern itself with the happy and good. It turns its attention to the disastrous. It takes seriously that which inflicts real pain and harm upon human beings and upon the world in which God has placed us. “Faith,” as Walter Brueggemann puts it, “is about the transformation of the world. The closer we stay to Jesus, the more we will bring a new economy of abundance to the world” [75].

Christ’s resurrection marks the first day of God’s new creation. Hope, including the Christian hope, does not reside in turning our eyes from that which is troubling. Hope resides in looking the darkness of our world square in the face and finding the courage to continue to move forward still. The Apostle Paul struggles with the prevalence of suffering, obvious at every turn. Creation groans, he says; and 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 must walk the road to and through Jerusalem. Far from mere wishful thinking, the hope of Easter engages the pain. It does not succumb to the pain 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 know ourselves as both gifted and responsible. 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”

—*Radical Monotheism*, 52-53

True, we do not have all the answers, but taking seriously our work as midwives, we rejoice in the many positive steps we can take today. And reaching out to the host of scientists, political and community leaders seeking to make a difference, we search out common ground and get to work. Our efforts, more than burdensome duty, become, then, a hymn of love given back to the God of Creation.