

Alternative to Futility

sermon digest

September 21, 2014

Isaiah 24:4-12; Romans 8:15-25

larry dipboye

Paul's word about the groaning of creation was addressed to a much smaller, less complicated world than ours; but his description fits the present age. With more than seven billion people in the world and wars raging in numerous locations and another global pandemic on the horizon, the groaning agony of the creation is audible in our time.

At the height of the cold war, the 1959 movie "On the Beach" envisioned global nuclear war in the year 1964. A U.S. submarine that survived the mutual destruction of the hail of bombs exchanged between the Soviet Union and the United States arrived in Australia as the nuclear fallout slowly drifted into the last civilized place on earth. I don't recall any humor in the movie. The somber tone was that of a death march toward the end of the world, not advised for people who were prone toward depression. I particularly recall the scene at the end where the young Australian sailor, Anthony Perkins, chooses suicide for himself, his young wife, and their baby.

I attended the movie with a group of university friends. I recall the sobering effect of the movie as we were introduced to the potential of world destruction if the cold war turned hot. For the first time in my life, I became aware of the sin against creation that had grown out of the human struggle. To some extent, I had grown to awareness that death is a part of life. However, the total destruction of human life from the face of the earth was beyond imagination. Less than three years later "On the Beach" was still a fresh memory when the Cuban missile crisis brought us to the brink of nuclear war. I recall a conversation with a salesman in a automobile tire store. He was sure that he had the answer: "Death is death. It makes no difference whether I die alone or with the rest of the world."

Today the threat of nuclear war is still real, but it seems almost humane compared to some of the threats that have materialized in my lifetime: the most recent possibility of a pandemic of the ebola virus, increasingly dangerous hurricanes like Katrina, the looming prospect of a major earthquake on the west coast, the encroachment of the rising sea from global warming, global famine accompanied by a diminishing water supply, and geometric population explosion of more than seven billion people on earth today. We need to live with our eyes wide open, but it seems that the weight of doom and gloom is more that most of us can manage. The hailstorm of global crises has become the new normal. Unless we are in the direct line of fire, we respond with indifference, and ironically, indifference may be our worst enemy. I am sorry but the old saw, "eat, drink, and be merry," does not save the day.

Traditionally, the responsibility falls on the Creator. I have sometimes been accused of looking on the dark side of life. I resemble that remark. The dark side is there, and I look. I find it important to look through the lens of our faith in the God of love. Nevertheless, I look. Since our faith is grounded in the ancient experience of our predecessors, I look at the present in the mirror of the biblical past. Even if it leads me to a radical disagreement with the past, I find that listening to history is necessary for assessing what I hear today.

The oracle of Isaiah 24-27 is sometimes called the "Isaiah Apocalypse" because of the similarity to apocalyptic, end-time Jewish prophecy of later centuries, but it also sounds like something we might read in tomorrow's newspaper. "The earth dries up and withers." "The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants." "A curse devours the earth." "Desolation is left in the city."

Six centuries later, Paul addressed the Roman world of his generation. The personal suffering of Christians in a hostile political environment was an extension of the universal pain of nature itself. "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now." Paul was not contemplating an ebola pandemic, nuclear war, or a tsunami. Human suffering was an extension of nature. At the beginning, "The creation was subjected to futility." Our rendezvous with death is built in to our very being. We are a part of the creation, "subjected to futility." Genesis 3:17 declares to sinful humanity, "cursed is the ground because of you." Almost every subsequent experience with natural disaster was an extension of the curse of God on human evil.

Actually Paul's word to the Roman Christians was not all gloom and doom. A sense of hope was anchored in his belief that the Creator was not finished with the world. "We are the children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ." Paul believed that God will

eventually finish the creation. Not only the personal creation, humanity, but the entire universe with all that it contains will be redeemed by God. The suffering of the world is pregnant with hope. The groaning of creation is "travail," the labor pain of childbirth. Paul is a cockeyed optimist who believes that all of the suffering here is going to end in new birth.

Hope centered in the God of love is valid. The sense of futility that we get from looking into the black hole of universal suffering is not the final word on the meaning of life. There must be more.

Responsibility for creation rests on us. The only problem here is that Christians have often taken the word of hope to mean that we should take no responsibility for the groaning pain of the creation. In 1967, Lynn White, Jr., wrote an article in *Science* that assigned responsibility for the crisis in global ecology squarely on the foundations of creation theology. The literal destruction of the ground beneath our feet has been justified by the belief that humans have been given the right of dominion over all the earth. The creation was given for the glory of humankind, thus, may justly be exploited for human existence and comfort. The command to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it, has led to overpopulation and over consumption of the earth's resources. Applied in the industrial revolution to the development of technology, the "Christian" view of the world has led to a global population of more than seven billion people growing geometrically toward exhausting the food supply and destroying the very ground we stand on. We are turning the oceans into a garbage dump, the forests into deserts, and the air we breathe into a toxic witch's brew.

In 1987, Jürgen Moltmann described the global crisis, noting that in 1926, the year of his birth, the world population was two billion:

The living relationship of a human society to its natural environment is determined by human *technologies*, by which humans obtain their food from nature and then give their garbage back to nature. This "metabolism with nature," is in itself quite natural like our inhaling and exhaling of air, but since the beginning of industrialization it has been determined and controlled more and more exclusively by the human and no longer by nature as well. Our "throw-away society" believes whatever is thrown away is gone. But what exists does not disappear and therefore nothing that one throws away is "gone." It stays somewhere in nature. Where does it stay? Who cares! ("The Ecological Crisis," *Colloquium*, May, 1988, p 2).

I fear for the future of our children and grandchildren. In a world of growing proliferation of nuclear weapons with the capacity to do far more damage than the flood of Genesis, what is our responsibility for God's creation in a world of constant conflict? Will our grandchildren have air to breathe and water to drink as we rush toward economic progress poisoning the atmosphere and the earth with our industrial waste? Will they have room to grow and to live in a world of exploding population and shrinking supplies of food. But, more than I fear for my children and grandchildren, I fear for the covenant relationship we have with God and the whole of creation. God wills the redemption of this world.

No doubt Lynn White overstated the case, blaming Christian theology for all of the ecological crises of today. He failed to recognize that creation theology places the responsibility for the earth on human shoulders. Created in the divine image, in Paul's words "co-laborers with God," we are responsible for the care of the earth as much as parents are responsible for the care of their children. We are responsible for overtaxing the earth's ability to support life, and we have no guarantees that humanity can survive the headlong rush to a collision with global disaster. One thing we have learned from experience: nature has a way of making corrections in the flow of evolution that disregards the will of people. At the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Ben Franklin is remembered for saying, "We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately."

When Elton Trueblood wrote his book *Alternative to Futility*, he addressed the problem of war in the nuclear age. The dimension of our futility has grown with the population. Unless we come together as residents of earth we shall be guilty of sowing the seeds of our own destruction.