

SUSTAINING GOD’S BEAUTIFUL CREATION

The Third Sunday in Lent

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As I began to think about this week’s sermon – against the backdrop of the Corona Virus pandemic, and my own family’s experience of voluntary self-quarantine – I found that my thoughts turned to childhood memories of time spent in the outdoors. The memories were primarily of two important summer places. The first was the state park just a short bicycle ride from my boyhood home. There, on countless summer days, my best friend and I would take picnic lunches, wrapped in bandanas and tied on the end of poles (carried over our shoulders Tom Sawyer-style), and eat them at the top of a favorite tree. Not a mile from home, we were transported to a world of wildness and freedom – while safely eating sandwiches prepared by our mothers.

The second, even more potent memory, was of glorious weeks spent at the Methodist summer camp on Shelter Island, called Camp Quinipet. Here, the focus was less on forest and more on water. The beautiful outdoor chapel looked out on the Shelter Island Sound, and each day our worship there was a reminder of the glory of God’s Creation. There, much of my early faith was formed, linked inseparably to the natural beauty all around me. Later, as a college student and counselor at the camp, I would sit by the water reading theology during my breaks, beginning to sense the vocation that was awaiting me.

So why, I wondered, was I having these particular memories this particular week? I’m quite sure I know why. It’s because, for me, the virus pandemic is one manifestation of the environmental catastrophe in which we live today: what I have increasingly come to think of as a situation in which our world, God’s own Creation, is “beyond capacity” – strained in numerous ways beyond sustainability. In the case of the pandemic, one of those strains – human encroachment into wild habitats – is at the forefront, as a virus whose natural hosts are animals has jumped over into the human population. And, because there are so many of us, and we travel so much and so widely, it has proven to be extraordinarily difficult to contain.

“How much is too much?” is a question we are asking on many fronts. How many parts per million of carbon in the atmosphere can be added before climate change is irreversible? How much nuclear waste can be safely stored? How many people can live on this planet? The world population in the year 1000 was about 300 million – less than the population of the United States today. In 1950, it was 2.4 billion. Today, it is 7.8 billion, growing by over 80 million a year. Estimates are that it will reach 9.7 billion by 2050, and finally peak at 11 billion by 2100 – almost 37 times larger than it was in the year 1000!

How much is too much? God’s good Creation is ours to enjoy – but within the limits of what is sustainable. The current crisis has the potential to challenge us all to think prayerfully about how to staunch humanity’s savage takeover of the planet we share with the rest of Creation, starting by looking at our own lifestyles. We are being required to slow way down right now. We can’t keep the busy schedules we are used to; we can’t travel; we can’t burn as much carbon as we are used to doing. We can spend more time building the relationships in our own households; we can find new ways to reach out to the lonely; we can take time for our own spiritual disciplines because we have more time. There’s an opportunity for us to ask ourselves, how has our way of living been destructive and wasteful? And how can it be lifegiving and sustainable, instead?

Our psalm today provides us with intriguing guidance for our reflection on these matters. Walter Brueggemann and William Bellinger, in their magisterial commentary on the Psalms, point out that Psalm 95 consists of “two parts . . . [that] do not easily cohere” (p. 412). The first part is a joyful summons to praise: “O come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!” (Ps. 95:1). And it reminds worshippers that the Lord we praise is the Creator of all things: “In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also. The sea is his, for he made it, and the dry land, which his hands have formed” (Ps.95:4-5). Indeed, Brueggemann and Bellinger say, the first half of the psalm “permit[s] worship to be imagined as a benign, agreeable meeting between a generous God and responsive people” (p. 412).

But then: “O that today you would listen to his voice!” (Ps.95:7b). The whole tone of the psalm changes. The worshippers are reminded of the disobedience of their ancestors in the wilderness, and that most of those ancestors were deprived of entry into the Promised Land. The psalm ends on a note as discouraging as its opening was joyful:

“Therefore in my anger I swore, ‘They shall not enter my rest’” (Ps. 95:11). The sense is that the very people singing God’s praises may be forgetting that along with joy must come trust and obedience. The psalm is coherent in that it reminds us that we can’t have one without the other. Loving and praising the Lord of Creation is intertwined with living within the limits of the created order.

Which brings us to our wonderful Gospel text. While taking a short cut through Samaria on his way back to Galilee, Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well. Of the many things we could say about this extraordinary interaction, what’s most pertinent for us today is that both Jesus and the woman are outside their usual contexts. The Jews and the Samaritans are distrustful neighbors with similar histories who have wound up as separate communities. In this encounter, neither Jesus nor the woman have the ease and familiarity of interactions between members of the same tribe. Despite this, though, and remarkably, Jesus persists through the woman’s skepticism and offers her the living water that comes to those with faith in him: “The water that I will give will become ... a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (John 4:14b). After Jesus amazes the woman with his knowledge of the story of her life, she returns to her village, wondering whether Jesus might indeed be the Messiah (John 4:29). Movingly, the villagers come to Jesus, and he stays with them for two days. Many come to believe in him.

The whole sojourn in Samaria is off agenda, for Jesus and for the Samaritans. It is an unexpected encounter under odd circumstances that allows for Jesus to be heard with fresh ears and responded to with open hearts. It is a story for us, in this moment.

Each one of us has had to set aside any agendas we may have had for the days ahead. We have to do our jobs differently, conduct our relationships differently, and above all be church together differently. Deprived of the familiar, we have a chance to encounter Jesus out of context, to experience the living water he offers when we are stripped of our usual defenses. It’s a chance to experience the coherence of our psalm with greater clarity and depth: to experience Jesus, who was present at Creation, as One who both loves and challenges us, as a Savior who requires us to care obediently for the world we share.

And of course, Jesus is with us not for two days only, but for always. We Christians are people whose lives are organized in community; we know that we are never alone. But perhaps these strange new days provide an opportunity for each of us to experience more deeply the companionship of Jesus, which forms the basis for our community life. And perhaps once we can move more freely again in God’s beautiful Creation – and we will – we will do so with a deeper sense of stewardship of the fragile world we love. May God give us this grace.