

The Groaning that Leads to New Creation

Psalm 80:7-15; Romans 8:18-25

Lewinsville Presbyterian Church

October 4, 2020 – World Communion Sunday/Climate in the Pulpit

Part I: Rev. Dr. Scott Ramsey:

As I mentioned at the beginning of the service, on this World Communion Sunday, we are glad to be joining our partners at Interfaith Power and Light to celebrate Climate in the Pulpit Sunday, where churches, synagogues and mosques are invited to lift up the importance of caring for creation in our respective faiths. As an Earth Care congregation of the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Session voted to affirm our participation in this effort.

It is particularly powerful to be marking Climate in the Pulpit Sunday on World Communion Sunday, given the global nature of both the church and the effects of climate change. Just as the church spreads all over the earth, climate change also affects people all over our planet. And, as the poor of the world are always going to be disproportionately affected by drought or fire or flood, the well-being of the poor is also at the heart of the church's mission, as expressed in our very own WHY statement. Lewinsville exists to love and serve God *by responding to human need*.

A core promise of biblical faith is that the needs of earth are heard in heaven. This is why the word "groan" plays such an important role in biblical faith. According to the Bible, the pain of the world – often expressed in an inarticulate way with a groan – is noticed by God, and God is responsive to it. The entire narrative of the Exodus is set in motion by the groan of the Hebrew slaves in Exodus 2:23. The 'groan' of the Hebrew slaves is echoed in our text from Romans 8, where the whole creation groans, as if in labor pains, awaiting the new creation of God. Romans 8 is actually not a lectionary text for today, but it is a text that has helped me to grasp creation's capacity to suffer and to respond to God's activity. Leviticus 25 teaches that the land needs to rest, Hosea 4 teaches that the land can mourn, Psalm 98 teaches that the sea roars (which draws close to Allison's children's message today about how we can clean up the oceans), Isaiah 55 teaches that the trees of the field can clap their hands, and Romans 8 teaches that creation can groan.

Now, writing almost 2000 years ago, it seems likely that the Apostle Paul did not have global warming in mind when writing this letter. But Paul is insisting in these chapters that disciples of Jesus live at the intersection, or as New Testament scholar NT Wright says in his commentary on Romans 8, "the overlap of the old and new creations." Wright points out that this does not mean "sitting back to await better times when the overlap is done and the new

creation fully present,” but rather to be bringing “signs and foretastes of God’s eventual full healing to bear upon the created order in all its parts and at every level.”¹

For many of us, loving and caring for creation may mean a deepening call to get to know creation better. A lot of us can be quite disconnected from the earth. We live and work in temperature-controlled buildings, we get our food from a store, and some of us (I’m embarrassed to admit this) have to be talked into things like camping and gardening. We can be disconnected from the earth. And *we cannot love that which we do not know*. Part of our calling may be to find ways to reconnect with the earth – to get out into nature – *and* to connect with the poor of the world, whose lives are most vulnerable to changes in the environment.

The promise of our faith – which impacts everything from our prayer lives to our lives in the world – is that God hears and responds to the groans of God’s creation. Our groans, and the groans of God’s vulnerable people and creatures everywhere, participate in and await God’s new creation. Amen.

Part II: Rev. Jen Dunfee:

Psalm 80 is a national lament, a communal prayer, in the words of bible commentator James Luther Mays (*New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*): “whatever the original historical setting, the psalm in its continued use belongs to the repertoire of the afflicted people of God on their way through the troubles of history.” It is part of a repertoire because it was meant to be sung: The heading before the Psalm says “for the director of music, to the tune of “the lilies of the covenant.” The ancient Hebrews set their communal laments to music, and even had existing tunes to draw upon, that is pretty cool.

They sang for restoration, for God to turn again towards them, for God’s face to shine upon them, for salvation. Like all songs that move the heart, beautiful metaphorical language describes what it felt like when they were less troubled and afflicted – like a planted vine, rooted and cared for, stretching from mountain to water, full of life. And they sang of what it feels like now – abandoned, trespassed against, devoured, helpless against forces stronger than they are.

Communal lament unifies a people, a church, a nation, around describing what is difficult. It holds outside of its song, for this moment, disagreements about how we got to our troubles and how we get out of them, as it turns towards what hurts, and asks God to turn with us.

We lament a broad range of things: that more than 200,000 people have died from the Covid-19 and we are not through the journey. We lament that African Americans and other people of color are disproportionately ill and dying from Covid-19 and that lower wage

¹ N.T. Wright, “Romans,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume 10* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002) 605-606.

Americans are most effected by the economic impact. We lament that the presidential debate was no example for our children of civil discourse and respect.

But especially, on Climate in the Pulpit Sunday, we join Jewish and Muslim neighbors to lament that the earth's climate is changing in ways that disproportionately impact the humans in poorer countries and communities, and alter the living patterns and entire health of animal and plant species across the world.

We lament that, in the words of Hope Jahren in her chapter on food waste from *The Story of More*, "everyday almost one billion people go hungry, while a different billion people intentionally foul enough to feed them." (All the statistics listed are from this book)

We lament the one billion people in the world without access to electricity.

We lament that 10 % of the plastic we throw away finds its way into the sea and has combined into a giant floating raft half the size of Texas.

We lament that the earth is 1.5 degrees warmer than it was 100 years ago, that sea levels are rising and ice caps are melting.

So we are left feeling like the Israelites in Psalm 80: abandoned, trespassed against, devoured, helpless against forces stronger than we are.

Lament can unify us in prayer for our nation and our world. Yet, lament Psalms do not function outside of the conversations about how we got here and where we go, but as a foundation for them. We will not be able to reflect God's hopes for the created world unless we feel for it the way that God does, unless we feel for the people most impacted by environmental crisis the way that God does.

Pastor Scott mentioned that we cannot love that which we do not know. Tuning our hearts towards the lament our creation is singing, or groaning, or simply becoming ecologically aware is, in Pope Francis's words, like falling in love, an act of heart. I have been falling more in love with nature after reading books on trees, birds, garden, what is hurt and broken in our ecology, for Lewinsville's monthly Earth Care book discussions. It took me by surprise, like many loves do, as I saw how much I had closed my heart off to feeling with the world of trees and plants and creatures. And that new love as, great loves do, is changing me from my (heart) To my willingness to allow the needs of the earth to impact my comfort and convenience (minds, money, hands, time).

Or to put it in the theological framing of Miroslav Volf (from his book on *Flourishing*) It redirects my, and our hunger for infinity: He says about our resource consumption culture:

To make worldly goods objects of our insatiability isn't just futile,
a Sisyphean effort. It robs us of our feelings of contentment and joy

with what we have, subverts love and compassion for neighbors, and undermines global solidarity and environmental responsibility.

He then says that the good life in response to transcendence involves living in sync with the environment. It is a bold claim, that our connection to God depends on our connection with God's creation. I think my connection to God has been growing, in the realms of awe and transcendence, the more I am connected to creation, and it is like another step in conversion to the path of Jesus, the conversion to mold the life of discipleship around decisions about less for me – less meat, less electricity, less purchasing, less equating consumption with self-care, with more for others in terms of my mind, money, hands and time.

So we lament together as a response to the world, because songs help us to see, and we can only love that which we have noticed. In lament we ask God to look directly at our troubles because that gives us strength to do so as well without turning away, and in the words of another lament song, this one by Pink Floyd:

No more turning away, From the coldness inside, Just a world that we all must share, It's not enough just to stand and stare, Is it only a dream that there'll be, No more turning away? (*From the song, On the Turning Away*)

Keep the song of creation's lament in your heart and see what it does in how you love, and from that love, experience conversion and orienting a life away from ourselves turned towards what God loves. Which is, of course, the world and everything on it. Amen.