

The Earth Shall Mourn

A sermon preached by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,
on Sunday, September 11, 2022.

Psalm 14:1-7
Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28

The prophet Jeremiah is calling on God's people to repent, to change their ways for they "are foolish, they do not know [God]; they are stupid children, they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil, but do not know how to do good."

If they will not change their ways and their doings, if they will not repent of their wickedness, their evil schemes, their rebelliousness, their foolishness, their stupidity, they face utter destruction. God's judgment will come upon them like a hot desert wind. (We know what a hot desert wind is like!)

Jeremiah is speaking metaphorically here about the threat to Judah posed by the Babylonian empire in the 6th century B.C. But to my ears, his words don't sound metaphorical at all. Rather, they sound more like current predictions of the global environmental consequences we face if we do not make dramatic changes in how we as human beings relate to God's creation, to the earth and all that is in it.

In Jeremiah we read: "A hot wind comes from me out of the bare heights in the desert toward my poor people, not to winnow or cleanse—a wind too strong for that." I think of the hot winds that have driven catastrophic wildfires across the western states this summer and the heat waves that have devastated the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and Europe with record-shattering triple-digit temperatures.

Jeremiah writes: "Disaster overtakes disaster, the whole land is laid waste. . . . I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and

void.” This reminds me that wildfires and heat waves are not the only natural disasters we are experiencing. Months of heavy monsoon rains this summer resulted in the worst flooding Bangladesh has ever seen and put a third of Pakistan’s land area underwater, impacting millions of people, killing more than a thousand, and causing billions of dollars in damage. Flooding in Jackson, Mississippi, has left that city with a lack of drinkable water. And a historic 500-year flood in June ravaged rural parts of Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming, triggering rockfalls and mudslides, and forcing Yellowstone National Park to close for the first time in 30 years. Meanwhile, the Horn of Africa is in the middle of its worst drought in 40 years, which means that millions there are facing severe hunger.

Jeremiah says: “I looked, and lo, there was no one at all, and all the birds of the air had fled.” Human populations are threatened by environmental destruction, and bird populations are the proverbial “canary in the coalmine.” A groundbreaking 2019 study determined that nearly 3 billion breeding birds have been lost during the past 50 years across the United States and Canada. Indeed, staggering declines in bird populations are taking place around the world. Almost half of existing bird species worldwide are known or suspected to be undergoing population declines.

Jeremiah tells us: “I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert, and all its cities were laid in ruins.” Desertification, the degradation of land by which fertile land becomes desert, is occurring on all continents except Antarctica and affects the livelihoods of millions of people, including a large proportion of the poor in drylands. It ranks among today’s greatest environmental challenges. And cities have been laid in ruins by natural disasters (think New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina or Paradise, California, after the town burned to the ground in 2018). Cities have also been destroyed by man-made disasters (think Chernobyl after the 1986 nuclear accident there or countless cities that have been destroyed in war).

“Because of [all] this,” God says, “the earth shall mourn.” Do we hear the earth’s cries? Do we see her tears? Christians, unfortunately, have been slow to respond to the serious ecological crisis facing us.

Years ago I remember attending a luncheon sponsored by Presbyterians for Restoring Creation. The speaker, theologian-ethicist Dieter Hessel, called for an “ecological reformation of Christianity” that would include activities parallel to those of the sixteenth-century Reformation:

- Reinterpreting scripture with alertness to nature
- Using new science and philosophy connected with an awareness of creation
- Restating basic doctrinal themes
- Broadening social ethics to include the ecological
- Redefining the human vocation
- Producing a fresh understanding of what it means to be church
- Making changes in liturgical life

Why an “ecological reformation of Christianity?” Isn’t that a little extreme? Well, one of the first Christian ecotheologians, James Nash, explains it this way: “For Christian traditions, the ecological crisis is also a theological-ethical crisis. Our traditional theological-ethical interpretations of the faith are generally quite inadequate, if not irrelevant or even harmful, in confronting the ecological crisis faithfully and effectively. Despite the emergence of ecologically sensitive theologies from a number of creative interpreters in recent decades, this assessment remains true of the currently dominant theological interpretations in the churches.”

What’s wrong with traditional theological-ethical interpretations of the Christian faith? Why are they inadequate? Well, Christian theology and ethics have focused almost entirely on human concerns and predicaments, and person-to-person relationships, to the exclusion of any systemic concern for the natural world in its own right.

I'll give you a simple example to illustrate this point. In 1977, seven years after the first Earth Day celebration, Catholic theologian Hans Kung published a book entitled *On Being a Christian*. Some of you may remember it. It is a huge book of several hundred pages, one of the most massive works of modern popular theology. If you look in the index of that book for the words "creation" or "nature," you will not find a single entry for either word. Several years into the environmental movement, and creation or nature seemingly had nothing to do with being a Christian!

"In most mainstream Christian traditions," James Nash writes, "the ecosphere is still perceived as theologically and ethically trivial, as the scenery or stage for the divine-human drama, which alone has redemptive significance. Nature is seen as a composite of 'things,' 'raw materials,' or 'capital assets,' that have only instrumental value for human economic production and consumption, without regard for the fact that these 'objects' are also an astonishing diversity of 'subjects' struggling for sustenance and space in complex interdependency. Humankind is viewed as an ecologically segregated species, designed for managerial mastery and possessed with an ultimately sanctioned right to exploit nature's bounty, with the only restriction being not to harm other humans. The theological and ethical focus is almost exclusively on human history, ignoring the reality that human history is rooted in, continually shaped by, part of, and dependent on, natural history. In neglecting natural history, these traditions have also distorted, indeed, truncated, God's creative, active, and redemptive relationship to the whole good creation."

The fact of the matter is, human beings are an integral part of nature and are entirely dependent upon nature. Yes, we can manipulate it to a certain extent. We grow food on farms. We build ourselves shelters. We make ourselves clothing. We heat and cool our living spaces so that we can live in otherwise inhospitable environments. Given our amazing technological achievements, we would like to think that our human capabilities are limitless. But then an earthquake comes along, or a hurricane,

or a tornado, or a flood, and we are put in our place by the awesome forces of nature. They remind us of our human frailty. They remind us that we do have limits. We are finite, mortal creatures, entirely dependent on the rest of Creation. It's humbling to recognize our radical dependence on nature and ultimately on God.

Dieter Hessel was right, I think. We do need to change our way of thinking—our theology and our ethics, our way of being church—in as radical a way as was done in the 16th-century Reformation, if we are to effectively address the ecological crisis. Fortunately, we Presbyterians don't see church reform as something that happened once and for all centuries ago. Rather, we understand the church to be always reforming. *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*—the church reformed is always being reformed. Today's ecological crisis requires the ecological reformation of Christianity.

The thing is, we don't have a lot of time. Rosemary Radford Ruether, the feminist scholar and Roman Catholic theologian known for her significant contributions to the fields of feminist theology and ecofeminist theology, wrote: "We do not have thousands of years to unlearn the wrong patterns that were established over thousands of years. The exponential speed-up of these cumulative patterns of destruction means we have to both learn new patterns and put them into practice on a global scale within the next generation."

It's this sense of urgency that led feminist theologian Sallie McFague to challenge us to make the health of the planet our highest priority in everything we do. She wrote: "In different ways each of us has a calling, is being summoned, to put our talents, passion, and insights into planetary well-being. Ecology is not an extracurricular activity; rather, it must be the focus of one's work, the central hours of one's day, however that is spent."

Somehow, we need to radically transform our thinking and doing if human society is to be ecologically sustainable for future

generations. This planet is a miraculous gift from God. Life is a precious gift from God. We take it for granted at our own peril, for our own destiny is connected to that of the earth. To paraphrase words that have been attributed to Chief Seattle of the Suquamish and Duwamish tribes in the Pacific Northwest:

“This we know: the earth does not belong to people; people belong to the earth. This we know: all things are connected; whatever befalls the earth befalls the children of the earth. This we know: if we continue to contaminate our own bed, one night we will suffocate in our own waste. People are strands in the web of life. Whatever we do to the web, we do to others, we do to ourselves. Hold in your mind the memory of the land as it is when you first see it, and with all your strength, with all your mind, with all your heart, preserve it for your children and love it as God loves you.”

This morning may we remember that as human beings we are integrally related to the earth and radically dependent upon it for our life and well-being. And let us take seriously our God-given responsibility to care for the earth and all its inhabitants. The health of the planet and the well-being of future generations are in our hands.