

Pentecost Sunday B
Peace, Seattle
May 20, 2018
Romans 8:18-27

TUNING IN TO CREATION'S GROANING

There's a section of the gravel road that runs from the boat landing at Lucerne, on Lake Chelan, up to Holden Village – a road some of us will be traveling this July – it's called THE NARROWS. It acquired that name because it's there that Railroad Creek Valley narrows considerably, and the slope of the mountainside the road traverses steepens to the point where it nearly resembles a cliff.

During winter, the school buses transporting guests stop before entering the Narrows to make radio contact with the Village, then they proceed slowly and deliberately, for this is prime avalanche territory.

But in summer, passengers may not pay much heed to the steep terrain unless something happens to draw their attention to it—which is what happened one spring as I rode on the lead bus going up the road to the Village.

At times, along those 11 miles, deer can be seen browsing along the roadside when suddenly they find themselves being set upon by one of those big lumbering yellow buses. Nearly all the time that encounter is brief: the deer, alert to danger, turns on its deft feet and bounds off the road and into the surrounding forest.

But on this particular day, we came upon a deer—a doe—a while making our way through the Narrows, and the steepness of the terrain made scampering uphill or downhill a risky proposition—even for an animal who had evolved in this landscape.

Caught in this quandary, the deer was forced to run ahead of the bus. This, again, is not an issue for these swift animals over a short distance. But with no left or right exit in sight, the deer was forced to continue running and leaping ahead of the bus time after time after time, until it reached the point of exhaustion.

By the time we finally exited the Narrows, the doe, worn out and unable to flee further into the woods, merely stepped to the side and let the bus pass. And as we drove by, I could see her spent legs shaking, her tongue hanging, and her lungs heaving.

I want to suggest this scene I've described as an apt metaphor for the effect our human species is having on the creatures and life systems — LAND, AIR, and WATER — by which life on our planet is sustained.

“The whole creation waits with eager longing,” writes St. Paul, groaning with the pain of one who is in labor; groaning with the pain of someone waiting for new birth.

The whole creation, says Paul—not just homo sapiens but this entire vast God-breathed cosmic realm—is waiting for redemption, for restoration, for wholeness, for the revelation of the true nature of our origin and destiny.

In these verses from Romans Paul enlarges the circle of what matters—and in the process shows us how God's vision for wholeness is about much more than just the human species!

We human beings are really good at making it all about us—but, says Paul, it’s not all about us. The whole creation has a place in God’s plan; the whole creation is on this journey away from bondage and decay and toward wholeness and freedom and restoration. The WHOLE creation.

And the more we remain entrapped in a ME FIRST mentality, the more we preoccupy ourselves with what satisfies our appetites, the more we continue entrenched in a human-centered understanding of why we’re here, the deeper the pain and the groaning will become.

We need a change of perspective, you see, for in truth, our species is rather late to the story of Earth. Just how late?

In his book, LENS TO THE NATURAL WORLD, pastor and paleontologist Ken Olson uses an analogy to help us comprehend how human beings fit within the scope of planet Earth’s long evolutionary history.

“One could represent [Earth’s] 4.6 billion years with a line fifteen miles long,” he writes.

(About the distance from the Space Needle to Seatac Airport)

“In that scheme, the last 6,000 years from ancient Mesopotamia to the present, which brackets what we usually call ‘civilization,’ would be represented by just the last single inch.”

Think of it! All of recorded human history, all our inventions, our theology, philosophy, and literature, our science, agriculture, and technology—our wars; all of it compressed in that last single inch.

This analogy seeks to help us grasp what is essentially ungraspable—the immense expanse of deep time that forms the backdrop to this planet on which we find ourselves, and the infinitesimal portion of time our species has been alive by comparison.

Yet, in spite of our brief existence, we *homo sapiens* have had an outsized impact on the health of the planet’s natural systems. **We’ve put ourselves in the driver’s seat and our pushing fellow inhabitants down the narrow road at an unsustainable pace.**

In their book “Big World/Small Planet,” (which I’ve cited before) Johan Rockström and Mattias Klum describe how the Holocene Epoch—the period of tremendous stability and natural harmony for Earth that began roughly 11,700 years ago—is coming to an end, and we are now entering the Anthropocene Epoch—an epoch marked by massive human impacts on Earth.

“Our way of life,” they write, “is threatening to trigger catastrophic tipping points that could knock the planet out of its stable state...The world as we know it has become an increasingly complex, turbulent, and globalized place, not only socially and economically but also ecologically.”¹

Over the eons, Earth has developed finely tuned feedback systems—we might call them “creation’s groanings.” For decades now those systems have been relaying increasingly urgent messages to us, but for a variety of reasons we have failed to heed them.

For millennia,” writes Christian Schwägerl, “humans have behaved as rebels against a superpower we call “Nature.” [But] in the 20th century, new technologies, fuels, and a fast-growing population [led to] a “Great Acceleration” of our own powers... we are taking control of Nature’s realm, from climate to DNA. We ... are becoming the dominant force for change on Earth. A long-held...idea — humans as the masters of planet Earth — has turned into a stark reality.”²

¹ Johan Rockström and Mattias Klum, *Big World/Small Planet*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015)

² Christian Schwägerl, *Living in the Anthropocene: Toward a New Global Ethos*. (Yale Environment 360)

https://e360.yale.edu/features/living_in_the_anthropocene_toward_a_new_global_ethos

Geographers [Erle Ellis and Navin Ramankutty](#) argue we are no longer disturbing natural ecosystems. Instead, we now live in “human systems with natural ecosystems embedded within them.” It’s no longer us against “Nature.” Instead, it’s we who decide what nature is and what it will be.³

In the words of Pope Francis:

“We have come to see ourselves as [Earth’s] lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is...reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms life...the Earth herself...‘groans in travail.’”⁴

For too long we have shut our ears to the groaning of creation. But her pains are becoming so loud, her wailing so intense, that we cannot ignore her any longer.

In today’s Pentecost story from ACTS, the Spirit Jesus promised springs upon God’s people with gale force winds and dancing flames that signal the end of “business as usual.”

Mouths are opened, ears unstopped, and before you can say HOLY HAVOC the sacred circle expands—disrupting received tradition, crashing boundaries and pushing borders far beyond what Jesus’ disciples dared even to imagine.

In our time that circle of moral imagination to expand once again—for ALL CREATION WAITS WITH EAGER LONGING. But how?

Willis Jenkins, professor of social ethics at Yale Divinity School, writes:

Creating a new moral analogue for the Anthropocene may rest...with communities that...know how to drive moral creativity by reforming their own traditions to reach beyond their own work to date. These “anticipatory communities,” work is to meet the adaptive challenges of a new geological epoch.⁵

I believe that Peace is one of these anticipatory communities, a community awakening to creation’s groaning, and beginning to grasp what’s at stake.

The outpouring of God’s promised Spirit on Pentecost injected the fledgling Christian community with a level of energy and confidence and love that enabled their mission to spiral out from Jerusalem’s center to Judea, Samaria, and beyond.

The Spirit-led process of forming communities around the story of Christ’s death and resurrection enabled the Jesus movement to reach into the heart of the Roman Empire, and the world turned upside down.

The Pentecost experience needed today is one that will shake our assumptions about human privilege to their very foundation; will blow away the hubris that keeps us centered narrowly on human welfare and desires, and will open our ears and eyes to what God has been telling us from the beginning—that we live downstream from all that has gone before and upstream from all that follows after us, and our conduct, the choices we make, the actions we take, how we choose to live MATTERS.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’: On Care for our Common Home*. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press), paragraph 2.

⁵ Cited in Larry Rasmussen, *Lutheran Sacramental Imagination*, *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*. <https://elca.org/JLE/Articles/42>

Paul's portrait of the Holy Spirit here in the 8th chapter of Romans tells us the Spirit is here for us, is available, is ready to help us in our weakness. That the Spirit intercedes for us and for all creation with "sighs too deep for words."

Even now, the Spirit is working to awaken compassion in a world where human beings do despicable things to one another. Even now, the Spirit is present, like a wise teacher, challenging us to think and act beyond entrenched habits.

Even now, the Spirit is cultivating LOVE among us—for LOVE is the very essence of WHO GOD IS—and the only true antidote to what ails this world.

A renewed creation groans in labor, longing to be born, and the Spirit is midwife to it. Forces driven by selfishness and greed oppose this birth, but God's dream for renewal will come to be.

Yet, the Spirit cannot act unilaterally; the Spirit will not act alone. The Spirit needs communities like ours all over the globe to be the willing partners and co-conspirators in bringing this renewed creation to birth.

The Pentecost story, you see, isn't simply an event in the dusty past, it's an awakening that's taking place right now as we open ourselves to the Spirit's power to transform our upstream habits for the sake of downstream goodness.

The Holy Spirit is among us today, seeking to pry and prod our imaginations awake, to nurture among us a "humbling sense that all creatures are fellow creatures and that human responsibility extends infinitely to the whole of creation."⁶

The Spirit is echoing in our voices of praise:

WHEN YOU SEND FORTH YOUR SPIRIT, WE ARE RENEWED WE ARE RENEWED!

Amen.

⁶ Ibid.