

Reformation Series A  
Peace, Seattle  
October 22, 2017  
Isaiah 55:1-11, John 1:14-16

## **CREATION – NOT FOR SALE**

We're marking the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation movement this month with worship services built around themes from the Lutheran World Federation Global Assembly last May.

The overarching theme of this series is LIBERATED BY GOD'S GRACE. Last week we began exploring the implications of that claim refracted through our first sub-theme: Human beings-not for sale. And this week we shift our focus to the second sub-theme: CREATION—NOT FOR SALE.

**Now "CREATION" is one big topic! So we're going to narrow things down a bit.**

Building on our reading from Isaiah, I'd like to focus on the most essential and impactful feature in all of creation; the element that makes life on Earth possible: WATER.

**We begin with a journey back in time to Earth's origins, to the period documented by Cynthia Barnett in her book, RAIN: A Natural and Cultural History.<sup>1</sup> Barnett writes:**

"As even tempered as it grew up to be, Earth started off 4.6 billion years ago as a red-faced and hellish infant...For its first half-billion years, Earth was a molten inferno...hotter than [the surface of] today's Sun." Scientists aptly name this violent period in Earth's evolution "the Hadean eon," from the Greek word *Hades*, or hell.<sup>2</sup>

But the same process that made Earth a molten mass also set the stage for what it would some day be. You see, the flaming meteors that bombarded Earth as our solar system was forming, had water locked inside of them, and as they crashed and split apart, they spewed out that water in the form of vapor.

"All that water," Barnett continues, "would prove an invisible redeemer [when]... about a half-billion years after it started, the [meteoric] blitzkrieg began to wind down. As the last of the flaming chunks fell to the surface or hurtled away, the planet finally had a chance to cool. The water vapor could condense. [And] At long last, it began to rain."<sup>3</sup>

We're not talking Seattle drizzle, Midwest gully washer, or even a Hurricane Harvey—sized rain event. We're talking cataclysmic torrents that fell and were taken up again and again and again in a seemingly endless cycle; storms that went on, literally, for millions and millions of years, eventually forming the primordial oceans, aquifers, lakes, and rivers from which life itself would eventually emerge.

**Rain, the wellspring of life, has shaped the story of life on this planet for 4 billion years. It has seeded whole civilizations and led to their undoing.**

**Rain and its wondrous offspring—clouds and rainbows—have inspired painters, writers, and poets for thousands of years.**

**One of those inspired poets is the prophet Isaiah, who in today's reading uses the water cycle as a grand metaphor for the life-sustaining dependability of God's word:**

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<sup>1</sup> Cynthia Barnett. *Rain. A Natural and Cultural History*. (New York: Broadway Books, 2015)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, page 2-3.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, page 3.

“For as the rain and snow come down from heaven and do not return there until they have watered the Earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”<sup>4</sup>

**Building on Isaiah’s metaphor, I invite you to imagine how, for countless eons, God’s creative and lifegiving word has been manifested in the life sustaining system we call the water cycle:**

- Water, warmed by the sun, is taken up from the ocean,
- collects and distills in clouds,
- falls as rain on mountains, plains and lowlands,
- gathers in creeks, lakes and rivers,
- and finds its way through local and regional watersheds back to its source,
- thereby bringing to birth, renewing, and reshaping life on Earth.

**Think for a moment of the rivers that surround us here:**

- The DUWAMISH and the GREEN; the CEDAR and TOLT;
- the SNOQUALMIE, SNOHOMISH, SKYKOMISH and SKAGIT.

Not only do they function as conduits returning rain and snowmelt back to the Salish Sea, they are life-bringing highways, concentrating and distributing nutrients, feeding wildlife, irrigating crops, transporting fish, reshaping the landscape. They are the collection and distribution system on which all life depends—the circulatory system of Mother Earth.

**As people of faith we see God’s fingerprints all over this—it’s the way things are meant to be.**

**But now in our time human fingerprints are impacting these processes in profound ways. 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.’”<sup>5</sup>

**Over the eons, Earth has developed finely tuned feedback systems.** 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.

**In their book “Big World/Small Planet,”** Johan Rockström and Mattias Klum describe how the Holocene Epoch—a period of tremendous stability and natural harmony for Earth that began roughly 11,700 years ago—is ending. And how 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.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 55:10-11

<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’: On Care for our Common Home*. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press), paragraph 2.

<sup>6</sup> Johan Rockström and Mattias Klum, *Big World/Small Planet*. (

**The year 2017 is on course to trump 2016 as the warmest year ever recorded. Our warming atmosphere and warming oceans are stoking more intense storms, increasing floods, deepening droughts, and paving the way for wildfire conditions never seen before.**

**Such changes are also contributing to the reduction of fish stocks around the globe. One local example of this impact is the declining stocks of Pacific salmon.**

For at least 4 million years Pacific salmon have plied the waters of our region. Following courses determined by their inner compass they've journeyed through endless cycles of mass migration from stream to lake to ocean and back again. Yet just how they manage to do it remains cloaked in mystery.<sup>7</sup>

**No narrative in nature captures the story of God's generosity, God's self-giving sacrifice more powerfully than the migrating salmon. Writer David Duncan puts it this way:**

"The real sacrificial dramas of the Northwest, the Christ-like activity, as I saw it, was taking place ... in the lives of the salmon...[in] the way they poured in from the sea in defiance of every threat, predator, and Pharisee, climbed increasingly troubled mountain streams, nailed their beautiful bodies to lonely beds of gravel, and died there not for anything they stood to gain, but for the sake of tiny silver offspring."<sup>8</sup>

On Friday, my daughter Naomi's class took a field trip to the Cedar River to watch that drama play out in real time. I'm happy to say that she reported seeing "tons" of red Sockeye salmon in the river and adjacent pools, and even had a close up look at a discarded clump of eggs, which some unknown critter had left untouched after enjoying a riverside salmon buffet. Naomi and her friends returned them to the river.

Now those eggs won't be fertilized, they'll never become little Sockeye fry—but they won't be wasted either. As part of this grand ecosystem, they'll provide nourishment for a host of other creatures in the river which rely on the generosity of the salmon for their own survival.

In order for a new generation of fish to return to that stretch of the Cedar in subsequent years, they'll first have to navigate their way safely out to the ocean. And once there, they'll need to find conditions and food sources adequate to sustain them.

**But as ocean temperatures rise and Ph levels become increasingly acidic, finding food adequate to sustain their growth and enable them to return to their natal streams is becoming more and more challenging for salmon.**

And even if they manage to navigate all of that, invisible lethal elements, chemicals and byproducts that you and I have made part of our lifestyles, lie in wait for their return.

Last Wednesday's Seattle Times featured a front page article detailing how stormwater pollution in Puget Sound streams is killing Coho Salmon before they can spawn.<sup>9</sup> "Every time it rains," writes reporter Linda Mapes, "a witch's brew of pollutants from every impervious surface — roofs, parking lots, roads and more — sluices into storm drains. Most of it passes untreated into Puget Sound."

<sup>7</sup> Biologists suggest that salmon may use Earth's magnetic field to navigate—along with other cues such as the ocean currents and the position of the sun—until they get close enough, and then they use an acute sense of smell to detect their natal stream. See *The Miraculous Nature of Salmon* by Liz McKenzie, in the Wild Explorers website: <http://www.encountersnorth.org/wildexplorer/salmon/natural-history.html>

<sup>8</sup> David James Duncan, *My Story as Told by Water*, Sierra Club Books, p. 14. Quoted by John Rosenberg in a presentation entitled *As If Salmon Matter: Making Ethical Choices*, presented by Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon's Interfaith Network for Earth Concerns at Portland State University, December 4, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Portions of the article, authored by Linda Mapes, are excerpted here. The full article can be found here: <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/environment/stormwater-pollution-in-puget-sound-streams-killing-coho-before-they-can-spawn/>

Stormwater is causing death rates so high that some populations of wild Coho are at risk of local extinction. One example given: West Seattle's Longfellow Creek.<sup>10</sup>

**The God who revealed himself to us in Isaiah's prophesy desires his incarnate and liberating word to fall on us in the form of lifegiving rain, not death dealing storm run off. This God promises that her word will not return empty, but will accomplish the thing for which it is sent.**

**We are partners with God in proclaiming and embodying that message.**

Aldo Leopold once lamented: "We regard [the Earth] as a commodity belonging to us" rather than a "community to which we belong."<sup>11</sup> Such an attitude can be ours no longer.

In this world of rising temperatures, where natural tipping points are making Earth and all her offspring vulnerable to catastrophic changes on land and sea, we must say unequivocally:  
CREATION IS NOT FOR SALE.

In this century, being liberated by God's grace means having the veil removed from our eyes, so we can see with crystal clarity the impacts our species is having on all of Earth's systems, and the choices we must make to move toward ECO-REFORMATION, toward restoring balance once more.

The resources of this faith in which we are grounded—the stories, songs, and visions of Scripture, the sacramental life we share at Font and Table, our choices as citizens and as stewards—all of these point us toward a future in which Earth's water cycle will continue to be essential.

**Addressing new converts preparing for baptism, 4th century Bishop Maximus tells them:**

"In the baptism of the Savior the blessing which flowed down like a spiritual stream touched the outpouring of every flood and the course of every stream...[so that] now Christ is everywhere and the Jordan is everywhere...Thus even if perchance a river should have some other name in this world, there is in it nonetheless the mystery of the Jordan."

**All streams are sacred; all water is holy; and protecting it, relishing it, sharing it, giving thanks for it, is the duty and delight of every Christian community wherever it may be.**

Liberated by grace, we are free to love God, to love one another, and to love creation in a never-ending cycle that shall not cease until we gather by that Great River, clear as crystal, which flows from the throne of God.

May it be so! Amen.

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<sup>10</sup> Over an eleven-year period, researchers surveying 51 sites throughout the Puget Sound basin found that in nearly half of their range, anywhere from 10 to 40 percent of Coho salmon die from pollution before they can even prepare their eggs for the next generation. In one study, 100 percent of hatchery Coho exposed to unfiltered highway stormwater died, while none of the fish showed any sign of distress after encountering the same stormwater after it was filtered. Still there are simple solutions available to help mitigate that damage, including filtering stormwater through a matrix of soil, bark chips and gravel. If that mixture sounds at all familiar, maybe it's because that is what our raingardens do for almost all of the rainwater that falls on our property here. Video of salmon dying: <https://www.seattletimes.com/video/5614939726001/coho-salmon-dying-from-pollution>

<sup>11</sup> Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.) Introduction by Finch, viii. Quoted in Mark Brouck, *Coming Home to Earth*. (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2016) p. 32.