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Proper 15B
Peace, Seattle
August 19, 2018
John 6:51-58

OF ORCAS AND INCARNATION

The fate of Puget Sound's orca population moved to front and center this summer as we watched Tahlequah, a female orca of the critically endangered J-Pod, carry her dead calf in a ritual of grief lasting 17 days and covering 1,000 miles. Her story captivated people around the world.[1]

For three years running, lack of food has been linked to the southern resident orcas' failure to produce offspring. "The reason [she] lost her baby and the others are losing their babies" says Ken Balcomb, of the Center for Whale Research, "is [that] there [are] not enough salmon."[2]

The experience of Tahlequah brought this reality home in a profoundly visible way.

Meanwhile, another member of the J-Pod, 4½ year-old J-50, known as Scarlet, has been showing signs of malnutrition, and NOAA biologists have been working for weeks to closely monitor her condition.

Scarlet's family is one of three that make up the southern resident orcas, whose numbers have declined to a total of 75 animals, mimicking the decline in the chinook salmon their diets rely on.[3]

Fishers from the Lummi Nation, a tribe with deep affinity to orcas, have rehearsed a method whereby they can attempt to feed live salmon to Scarlet. Nobody knows if will work, but they're standing by.

Yet even if it could make a difference for this single emaciated orca, how, we wonder, could such a method as this possibly be sustainable?

A lawsuit filed by the Center for Biological Diversity last week seeks to hold the federal government accountable for violating the Endangered Species Act by failing to expand the area considered to be critical orca habitat.[4]

But even if the lawsuit succeeds, the complexity of the ecological challenges involving the Salish Sea—human-sourced pollution and industrial wastes, noise from ships and boats, increasing acidification, rising temperatures, and degraded salmon habitat—make us wonder whether any of the measures taken will prove to be enough; will come in time to save the species.

It's not just a single issue that needs attention, but this whole range of interrelated, intersecting and overlapping ones, in which every species and habitat surrounding the Salish Sea—particularly human ones—play critical roles.

We're talking eco-systems, folks! Which means that the WHOLE is something greater than the sum of its PARTS, a reality that many of us have still not fully grasped.

[1] https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/environment/after-17-days-and-1000-miles-mother-orca-tahlequah-drops-her-dead-calf/
[2] Ibid.
[3] https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/sick-orca-gets-shot-of-antibiotics-as-rescuers-prepare-to-attempt-feeding/
[4] https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/environmental-group-sues-federal-government-in-seattle-to-protect-endangered-orcas/

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In the latest issue of Holden Village Voice, Lutheran ethicist and eco-theologian Larry Rasmussen makes a claim that is becoming more self-evident by the day: That "human common good is [simply] not possible without care for the goods of the planetary commons."[5]

As Thomas Berry put it, the first law of the human economy is the preservation of nature's economy. Until we get this right—not in words and attitudes only but in practice, in habit—species large and small, iconic and unknown will continue to decline and disappear.

But in this new epoch of our own creation, of rapid climate change, higher temperatures, increasing wildfires, unhealthy air, and emaciated orcas, moving away from fossil fuels and antiquated energy and economic policies, says Rasmussen, is not enough.

We need to cultivate a "gut connection [with this planet home. A connection] that is Earth-honoring and Earth-healing as well as God-praising and God-fearing." We must affirm as Christians that not only human life but all life, all creation, is sacred. [6]

Now, let's hold these thoughts as we turn our attention to John's gospel, whose opening prologue in chapter one, you'll recall, takes us back to the very beginning of life itself.

The first verse of John's gospel reads:

> IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD, AND THE WORD WAS WITH GOD, AND THE WORD WAS GOD….

Language about light and darkness follow, leaving us to wonder at first, in hearing these opening verses, whether we've stumbled onto some esoteric belief system that shuns the material world in favor of the spiritual world.

But then comes verse 14: AND THE WORD BECAME FLESH AND LIVED AMONG US.

God makes the leap, you see! The eternal becomes temporal; heaven comes to earth! Jesus, says John, is God in the flesh—and that's just where God wants to be.

And here's the thing:

This enfleshment, this in-carnation, says something crucial about this whole created realm in which we find ourselves. It affirms at the most fundamental level, that LIFE—which came into being through the WORD—has God's fingerprints all over it! It is, indeed, SACRED. **Matter matters.**

Now, fast-forward to chapter six, where for four weeks now we've been eavesdropping on the conversation between Jesus and those who were captivated by what he did with five barley loaves and two fish.

After feeding the people with food to sustain them physically, Jesus invites them to dive deeper with him into understanding the nature of the life he offers.

> I AM THE LIVING BREAD THAT CAME DOWN FROM HEAVEN, he says.
> WHOEVER EATS OF THIS BREAD WILL LIVE FOREVER;
> AND THE BREAD THAT I WILL GIVE FOR THE LIFE OF THE WORLD IS MY FLESH.

[5] *Holden Village Voice,* Summer 2018 edition, page 6ff.
[6] Ibid, p. 27

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In typical Johanine fashion, throughout the chapter Jesus and his conversation partners seem to talk past one another. The depth of the mystery Jesus seeks to impart seems beyond his hearers—the words themselves, though repeated again and again and again, leave them tied up in knots.

HOW, they say, CAN THIS MAN GIVE US HIS FLESH TO EAT?!

Brother Martin, in a sermon on this passage to his own congregation, has this to say:

> Christ says FLESH and they see sausage; he says FLESH and I imagine roast pork.
> But what Christ wants to say here is "I am placing flesh and blood before you; eat and drink it, that is, believe"....for his flesh "is godlike flesh, [which] impels you and me to say:
> 'I know not where to find God, either in heaven or on earth, except in the flesh of Christ."[7]

Luther's point is this: to know God is to know Christ in the flesh. And to know Christ in the flesh is to know him as the one who became flesh to offer himself on the cross for the sake of the world.

His words, I AM THE LIVING BREAD point to the miraculous feeding and at the same time beyond it; they point to the Eucharistic Meal and beyond it; they point forward to his own death on the cross."[8] And this is where God in Christ meets us.

Unlike the other three gospels, there is no account of the Lord's Supper in John. Yet here in chapter six we hear the invitation loud and clear to come to the Meal and receive Christ—crucified & risen.

This meal in which we share is only the beginning of the relationship. For when we dine with Christ—the Word become flesh—we join all of creation at the Feast. And the Eucharist becomes the starting point for a planetary commons.

There is a phrase—a prayer—in the Lakota language that speaks to this reality, this planetary commons to which we're invited.

The phrase is Mitakuye Oyasin. It means "All My Relatives—All My Relations."[9]

- When we say MITAKUYE OYASIN we acknowledge explicitly the relationship which exists between us as members of the tribe of human beings and the other tribes of living beings with whom we share this planet home.
- When we say MITAKUYE OYASIN, we recognize the whole circle of life of which we are part (it's a circle, not a pyramid!), and we take our places in that circle with humility as co-habitures with all of Earth's life systems and creatures.

Such a prayer as this helps us see through the lens of a "kin-dom" [K-I-N D-O-M] we are part of through God's grace and by God's design.

- A kin-dom populated with orcas, salmon and arthropods; where grain from fields and grapes from vineyards are gathered, ground, baked, and crushed into bread and wine.
- A kin-dom where the enfleshed Christ stands at the center with arms and heart wide open; ever offering himself, ever beckoning us and all to life to share in the fullness and abundance of life with God.

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[7] *Luther's Works,* American Edition. Volume 23, p.122.
[8] Wayne Meeks. *Feasting on the Word, Year B Volume 3.* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) p. 359.
[9] This prayer is an integral part of Lakota pipe ceremonies, sweat ceremonies, and other sacred occasions. I became personally familiar with the prayer when I served as Director of Lutheran Ministry with Native Americans on the North Coast of California from 1986-1991. Though Tribal communities of that region have their own languages and sacred ceremonies in which similar sentiments accompany the prayers, I found that this Lakota prayer, Mitakuye Oyasin, was widely used among urban Indian communities and gatherings that bring people of different tribal traditions together.

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THOSE WHO EAT MY FLESH AND DRINK MY BLOOD ABIDE IN ME, AND I IN THEM, says Jesus.

A full-bodied affinity, a gut connection, to this sacred home in which we live begins with the acknowledgement that all life, all creation, is sacred. And for those who trust Christ's claim, I AM THE BREAD OF LIFE, that connection is deepened at this Table.

The life to which Christ calls us is not, finally, about biding our time here until we're beamed up from this mess. It's about discovering the fullness of God's presence in our midst right now, especially among the vulnerable, the threatened, the emaciated ones—wherever forces of death threaten to snuff out life, wherever darkness seeks to quench the light.

And in discovering him there, staking our trust, our lives, in his power to resurrect and restore.

Amen.