

## *All Creation*

Third Sunday of Easter

April 18, 2010

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Texts: Acts 9.1-6  
Psalm 96  
Revelation 5.11-14  
John 21.1-19

When the solid ground beneath your feet shifts, the reverberations - the after-shocks - can be felt for days after the initial quake has calmed. That's not just true for the geological phenomena we call an earth quake. This is a very accurate description for the experience of any kind of trauma. The gospel of John is very honest in showing the effects of the traumatic events of Jesus' death and resurrection on the life of the disciples. Like all people who live through trauma there is this surreal moment when you realize that despite the fact that your world has come to a grinding halt, life does go on. There is this awkward recalibration that goes on as you figure out what your life is going to be about now that everything has changed.

The gospel of John gives us these incredible stories that capture just a piece of the recalibration that goes on for Jesus' friends as they make sense of not only his death but also of his resurrection. As Gordon reflected with us last week, fear can have a tenacious hold on the human spirit. And so the resurrected Christ comes to the disciples not just once but three times in John's gospel: he breathes peace into them, he shows his wounds to Thomas, and then he meets Peter along the sea shore. Everything about this story is intended to trigger for Peter that fateful night when he denied his Lord: from the timing of it just after daybreak, to the presence of a charcoal fire, to the number of times that Jesus offers Peter the opportunity to profess his love. Like every story John tells after the resurrection, Jesus meets his friends in precisely the place of their pain. He comes to Mary in her grief, to Thomas in his doubt, and now to Peter in his shame. He meets them where they are, he offers healing, and then he sends them out.

He commissions each one to take up their place as followers of the Way. (This is really Luke's word to describe the movement Jesus started. Paul refers to the disciples in the book of Acts today as followers of the Way.<sup>1</sup>) When Jesus commissions Peter here in John's gospel he sends him to feed his lambs and tend his sheep. This is again an allusion to an earlier teaching in John's gospel when Jesus speaks of himself as the good shepherd. Peter is invited here to see himself stepping into that role. He is no longer a hired hand who runs away at the first sign of danger but is to become one who steps into the role of shepherd – who knows each lamb by name.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly Jesus in this story is restoring Peter's sense of place by lifting him out of the shame of his denial and setting his feet on a new course. But I cannot help but feel a haunting sense of premonition in Jesus' words. You get a sense of how precarious it is for him to entrust this ministry into human hands. This will not be the only moment when those who claim to follow Jesus will fail in that call. This will not be the only time when a leader of the Way will have fallen into shame. Jesus had to remind Peter that this work would involve feeding and tending those who are precious and beloved of God. We who hear his story need to be reminded because of how often we forget.

On Saturday morning I was listening to an interview on NPR with a priest who was reflecting on the sexual abuse crisis in the Roman Catholic Church. He was invited to respond to some of the speculation about the root causes of this crisis...in particular why the church when it learned of these abuses covered them up. Let's be clear. Sexual abuse is wide spread: it cuts across socioeconomic lines, it happens to people from all walks of life and across all religious traditions. That is why we are wearing these teal ribbons<sup>3</sup> to raise awareness for those who have suffered from it and to be a force for change. But the question remains. Why did the church cover up these abuses and move those predatory priests from one parish to another? What he said went wrong was that the professional clergy and the

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 9.1

<sup>2</sup> See John 10.1-18

<sup>3</sup> The Teal Ribbon campaign is supported by our Health Ministry and comes from the Center for Women in Transition in Holland.

hierarchy of the church is such a closed system. He wondered what would have happened if married people or especially parents had been part of those conversations. A kind of group think took over and they became more focused on the survival of the institution than their sacred pastoral calling that Jesus lifts up for Peter in this text.

Jesus says nothing about the growth of a church or the maintenance of an institution in this passage. He talks about people. He calls Peter and each of his disciples – all those who would become followers of the Way – to take all that they have learned from him into all their relationships. They are to take this message of forgiveness and repentance – this sacred vocation of feeding and tending – into the entire world.

When you move to the book of Revelation you see just how all-encompassing the nature of God's realm really is. God's healing which Jesus offers in each of these post-resurrection stories will not just touch the disciples but will move through his disciples to all the nations and peoples of the earth. And then it becomes clear that it goes beyond the people of the world. The very earth itself will be restored. This vision from the book of Revelation was a gift to the Christians living at the end of the first century. They were people living at another time and place who felt the earth shifting beneath their feet where it was dangerous to profess faith in Christ - where the world seemed to be falling apart at the seams. The primary affirmation of the book of Revelation is that this world belongs to God. And no matter how twisted and corrupt and fallen this world may become, God will restore the balance and wholeness and vitality of creation that is celebrated in the book of Genesis.

The passage we read today is a scene around the throne of God. Remember that this is a vision filled with signs and symbols - not meant to describe heaven in any literal sense. It creates images for us that evoke in us a sense of awe and worship for the One who is victorious - for the One who created this world and the One who will restore that creation. Surrounding this throne are angels, and living creatures, and elders numbering thousands upon thousands. And here's the part of the text that captured my imagination as we celebrate Earth Day this week: verse 13, "Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the

sea, and all that is in them singing, “To the one seated on the throne and to the lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!”

Every creature is bowing before God in awe and wonder. This is not an isolated text that envisions the whole of creation swept up in praise. We selected Psalm 96 for our worship today because it echoes this scene from Revelation. The Psalmist calls on the earth to rejoice: the seas to roar and all its creatures; the fields to be glad and all its fruit. When all creation flourishes and teems with life this is what constitutes praise for the Creator. It is a beautiful image; the stuff that poetry and art are made of. But it’s more than that. Revelation holds out this hope for the restoration of creation; for the eradication of evil and the triumph of God’s ways. But it isn’t just hope - - it is a call to action. When John wrote this vision, he wanted those who heard it to wake up and to find the strength to stand up to the corruption and evil that was around them. When I think about how far we are from a world where each part supports the flourishing of the whole – where all creation teems with life in praise of the Creator, well let’s just say there is a lot of work to be done.

Wendell Berry, in an essay he wrote almost 20 years ago entitled “Christianity and the Survival of Creation<sup>4</sup>”, offers a very helpful point of connection between this vision from Revelation and this commissioning story from the gospel of John. If it is true that God loves this world – not just us human beings – but the world itself and if it’s true that God’s work of redemption includes all creation...then we have to contend with the reality that this life we live in the body here and now and this world in which we live in is holy. “Everything that lives is holy,” William Blake once said.<sup>5</sup> If that is true, then Wendell Berry is right when he said: “We will discover that ...our destruction of nature is not just bad stewardship, or stupid economics, or a betrayal of family responsibility; it is the most horrid blasphemy.<sup>6</sup> ...How we take our lives from this world, how we work, what work we do, how well we use the materials we use, and what

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<sup>4</sup> Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, “Christianity and the Survival of Creation”, (Washington D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Wendell Berry, pg. 308.

<sup>6</sup> Wendell Berry, pg. 308

we do with them after we have used them – all of these are questions of the highest and gravest religious significance.<sup>7</sup>”

Everything that lives is holy....each human being, every creature, all creation. That’s what links this commissioning of Peter to this vision from Revelation...that’s what links our work to stop sexual abuse to our efforts to care for creation.

This world belongs to God and everything in it and ultimately all of creation, every creature in heaven and on earth will be joined together in the praise of God.

If that’s true – the question for us today is how are we contributing to that praise?

Where is our piece in this work of tending, feeding, and flourishing?

“We are holy creatures living among other holy creatures in a world that is holy.<sup>8</sup>”

This is God’s World: Praise be to God!

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<sup>7</sup> Wendell Berry, pg. 315

<sup>8</sup> Wendell Berry, pg. 308