

Creation Care Amidst Crises *Romans 8:19-27*

When was a time you felt connected to creation? When you hear the word nature, or wilderness, what comes to mind? What mental pictures do you paint?

Most thoughts probably include grand, sweeping vistas of mountains or canyons, or maybe the thick greenery of Wisconsin's woodlands. Maybe you thought of a raging river or the shore of one of the Great Lakes. I know for myself, my most profound moments where I have felt the greatest proximity to God have been when I am surrounded by natural beauty, often even more so than within the four walls of a church. After all, a Christian life in line with the teachings of our holy text and teachers should be one lived out beyond the confines of a building, filled with action and radical love. In the whispers of the wind or rushing of a stream I hear something akin to God's voice most audibly. Folk singer and civil rights activist Pete Seeger wisely stated, "everytime I'm in the woods, I feel like I'm in church." To me, seeing such sights in the outdoors is enough to convince me of the splendor of a higher power. Beyond general geological and biological knowledge, I don't know exactly how the creation of God was manifested, but witnessing it is enough for me. Part of the wonder lies in the mystery. There are times like when my best friend burst into tears on top of a peak in far western Texas that we had backpacked up, a trip I took right after the BWAP 2019 journey to San Antonio. We could see for miles and miles across an impressive, sweeping swath of the Chihuahuan Desert. When faced with such size and magnificence, it's hard not to get emotional, to not to be filled with awe. For those of us who have the privilege of access to such experiences, the result can be deeply spiritually enriching, a simultaneous feeling of being moved and grounded by God.

I'm guessing most of us described scenes in Two + that were pretty lacking in one key component. Ourselves. Myself included, most people when asked to draw upon experiences with the natural world skip right over their own human body. We might think of our role as an observer, or a temporary interloper, like when on a hike. Rarely do we stop to consider how we are a fully integrated member in the environment. This is a kind of detachment that is particularly pronounced right now, when most of us are spending a lot more time indoors than we may have previously, and it has serious consequences when it comes to our mindset in addressing the climate crisis.

If you're anything like me in quarantine, you've spent some time staring out the windows of your apartment or house, looking outside and letting your mind wander back to the days when stepping out the front door wasn't such a rarity. It's a normal reaction to turn our heads to the world beyond the four walls that have made up the majority of our immediate surroundings for the past few weeks. This awareness for the world outside our own homes, when approached through love, can lead to thoughts, prayers, and care for others. It is the stepping stone for

embodying justice. It's a mentality that needs to be further encouraged, especially on environmental issues.

In my case, I am at my parent's home in the suburbs of Milwaukee, wishing I was outside more. This of course is a privilege. I am grateful to even have a house to be stuck in, but nevertheless I have moments where I long to be elsewhere. And I am acutely aware that this desire is only going to deepen as the weather improves and spring takes fuller shape. Now, I have been able to go for runs and walks around my neighborhood, as I hope you have been able to do as well, but with the closure of most natural spaces and public land lately, the recreational opportunities for many are limited to the same well-worn sidewalks. Certainly this familiarity amidst a pandemic can be a blessing to those privileged enough to avoid major disruptions to their health or livelihood. It gives time to slow down and reflect, through a form of Sabbath that can be sacred and sustaining. Maybe you have had the time to develop a new skill or reach out to old friends you haven't heard from in a while. But there are also less helpful outcomes of the proximity that quarantine necessitates. Perhaps due to a sense of being rightfully overwhelmed, or numbed, we can grow forgetful of the world outside our windows. We might, as a type of defense mechanism, turn inwards and neglect to consider those suffering directly because of COVID-19, or because of inequities amplified by COVID-19. We are probably even less likely to consider other problems facing the world, at a time when this pandemic is our main and most grave concern.

All of this is totally understandable, and a completely valid reaction. We are living through unprecedented times, and no one really knows fully how to cope. But when we look to what God teaches us, we are reminded that it is our calling as the faithful to help each other out. God implores us to love and care for our neighbor, even in moments when that is undeniably hard and when we seem isolated, quarantined from one another physically.

God also calls on us to extend that compassion to our nonhuman neighbors. The Bible is full of reminders to care for creation; our only home, and God's gift to God's people. One is found in Paul's letter to the Romans, part of which was read as our passage today by Theresa. Here, our world is presented in stark colors, as "groaning in labor pains" and "subjected to futility." Who is the culprit behind this? Scripture reveals it is indeed us, God's children, who have damaged creation. We've set fire to the foundation of our own dwelling. We too need redemption and salvation, because we have forgotten our spiritual duty by betraying Earth. Despite being those who God has entrusted as caretakers, we have frankly let God down. We are lacking awareness, blind by our own devices, and unable to hear our inward groans.

In the process we have also victimized ourselves, because we are inherently a part of nature. There is no difference here, nothing that really can detach us from our place in God's larger wonders. And while admittedly, Paul was not writing amidst multiple global crises, but rather as

an early Christian persecuted for speaking truth to the Roman Empire, his words are increasingly relevant in the age of climate catastrophe.

I should clarify what I mean by climate crisis. Indeed, acceptance and comprehensive understanding of a problem are always the first steps to remedying it. The climate crisis is the human-caused environmental destruction that is rapidly accelerating around the planet. This includes global warming and climate change, but rightfully elevates the severity of language by recognizing that what is happening to Earth is not an arbitrary change, but a perilous crisis. This includes biodiversity collapse known as a sixth mass extinction. This includes rising sea levels, displacement of millions of climate refugees, desertification, deforestation, political instability and resulting xenophobia, competition over basic resources and human rights like water and food, and on and on and terribly on.

Clearly, the climate crisis is a whole lot of bad things. It's really, really scary. According to the internationally trusted scientists, we have less than 10 years to dramatically cut down emissions to reach a level of below 1.5 degrees Celsius rise in temperature. If we fail to do this, cataclysmic and in many cases irreversible impacts will follow. These will disproportionately affect the segments of society already most marginalized.

Let's take a collective breath. That was a lot. Rather than incite alarmism, I lay out these components of the climate crisis to inspire the kind of bold change needed. Sometimes, fear can be the best antidote to a problem, when accompanied by committed change.

The field of Christian environmental ethics is rich and storied, particularly in the realm of the American conservation movement. But when it comes to confronting a threat with no precedent, our worldview inevitably needs to shift and expand as well. We need to decenter ourselves, and yet, as Paul puts it, reveal ourselves as the children of God in allegiance with the climate. This is a fine line to walk, but it's one that can be done when this mentality is reordered. And given that Wednesday is the 50th anniversary of Earth Day, I can't think of a better time to do so.

The only logical next step, then, becomes action for self-preservation through deep love and concern. As grandiose as it may sound, the climate crisis enacts spiritual self-deprivation, that is allowed to fester because of our fabricated, false separation from nature. We ignore God's lesson, and Paul's writing, that reminds how we are all part of the same, we are all one.

I don't worry so much anymore about climate denial as the main threat delaying the climate justice movement, but rather, climate apathy. Besides for a few extremists, including the occupant of the White House and his administration, the average person around the world has a decent grasp of the climate crisis and how we humans are causing it. But despite this, the destruction of the planet wages onwards. Why? One reason is that a small collection of

ridiculously rich and powerful corporations and their ears in politics choose to prioritize profit over planet and people. About 100 companies are responsible for 71% of global emissions. Another reason is that most of us feel powerless and slip into complacency.

So where is this decaying mindset originating from? There are many sources. One is our economic system, that many in the climate justice field argue is incompatible with the earth. Greed, corporate control, unrelinquished capitalism. Everywhere we see these forces. Some also point to the interlocking webs of colonization, patriarchy, and racism, all systems that create hierarchies and exploit people of certain identities just as they exploit the land. These are all causes of the illness ravaging the world.

As terrifying as it is, humanity is not going to emerge from this pandemic never to face another massive threat. The science shows that the climate crisis will rapidly challenge our very existence as a species. So in a way, I think we need to use this time as a trial run for transformation we need. In the West, in colonizer nations, violence has been enacted for centuries. Powerful corporations and the governments that either idly or explicitly support them have been exporting the impacts of planetary destruction throughout history. At times, Christianity has had a damaging relationship with the Earth and with the lives of Indigenous peoples who live most intimately with the natural world. This is why it is so healing to selflessly realize that we belong to God's land and waters, not the other way around. It is our responsibility to protect and care for creation, not from a patronizing, anthropocentric viewpoint of dominion and domination, but from a worldview that takes a step back and realizes this is self-care. We must be caretakers, not conquerors. We must value man and beast, not man over beast. We are a part of God's creation, just like any endangered plant or animal species.

Unfortunately, not all take this approach. Headlines in late March reported that an American missionary group was using the cover of the pandemic to ramp up their neo-colonial efforts in interacting with uncontacted tribes of the Amazon. This is reckless, racist, and dangerous. I view it as inherently opposed to what God calls us to do. It is not looking out for our neighbor to violently arrive without invitation. You can imagine my dismay when I learned that the group responsible is the long-running Bible institute, [called Ethnos360](#), that is located literally down the street from my own home here in Waukesha.

In a way, many of us have quarantined ourselves off from the inequities of the climate crisis; we've socially distanced from its most immediate calamities that are centralized in poor communities of color across the Global South. We must reconcile with the gravity of the issues if we are to move forward. This can lead to climate grief, a growing psychological ailment experienced by those who feel depressed at the size of the issues. Here too, is clear proof that the climate crisis is a spiritual and moral crisis all the same. So then, it makes perfect sense that climate justice is spiritual justice, and by answering God's call we are healing.

How do we respond to that call when creation is in peril? Rev. Jim Andal is a leading Christian climate activist and author. He asks us to fall in love with a world that is dying.

Our response, then, must be radiant, revolutionary hope, emboldened with the knowledge that God is on our side. It's comforting to be reminded by our passage today that in the face of any crisis, the Spirit is interceding alongside and within us. It's holy to pursue the path of climate justice, because it is in these movements that we are rejuvenated and move closer to redeeming God's true vision. In the letter to the Romans, Paul writes that hope is an unseen force of change. No one hopes for things they can already see. This takes great courage, but it is what we need to do. Many climate activists have pointed out that the rapid transformation of society to combat the coronavirus proves we have the capability to change in the face of a huge threat like the climate crisis. We just have to harness the political willpower to actually do it.

When Earth Day started fifty years ago, the world was in turmoil, rocked by exorbitant pollution, the Vietnam War, and other global injustices. Young people, organized by Senator Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin, coalesced to channel their justified rage into calls for a better tomorrow. Youth climate strikes of today recall that energy. Indeed, to imagine what seems politically impossible right now is what activists and those on the margins of society have always done, a fierce urgency that is hastened by God.

When crises compound together, tyrants use them as an opportunity to further perpetuate injustice. Under the cover of a public health crisis that already disproportionately afflicts people of color, environmental protections are being rolled back and pipelines projects are being pushed forward on Indigenous lands from Montana to Minnesota. Personally, I have found it inspiring to learn from the ongoing resistance of Indigenous religions that hold holistic views of the sacred as present in all beings, and thus worthy of intense protection. Famed Lakota elder Black Elk described this collective ethic when he stated, quite simply, that "the holy land is everywhere."

I would be remiss if I didn't talk about actions we can take today. If you want to help Native communities on the frontlines of the climate crisis and coronavirus, you can support the [Indigenous Environmental Network](#). Another place to make an impact is Interfaith Power and Light, a long-running organization that each year leads a Faith Climate Action Week. They have put out a request for congregations to [digitally march](#) and take a pledge committing [to be a faith climate voter](#) and pass bills like the Green New Deal. Every day this week, they are leading a live-streamed interfaith [Earth Day climate prayer](#). And if you want to spend some more time delving into ecological reflections for the big anniversary, you can tune in the whole day tomorrow to the [conference offered by UW's Nelson Institute](#). These links will all be available in the chat box if you want to check them out.

There are countless other groups to express solidarity with, and some likely exist in all the places that we are scattered around in right now. So I challenge you to seek them out, and become part of spiritual cleansing and climate solutions by changing parts of your life where you could practice greater sustainability. Then most importantly, demand that the rich and powerful do so too.

It is an act of divine devotion then, to hope for a more sustainable world and livable planet when forces that seek otherwise are so monstrous. Last week, we were reminded of the sacrifice Jesus made for our salvation. This required intense, radical hope for a better future, and the resolve to foresee it. And how beautiful it is, that days later, hope was manifested in the resurrection. In a similar manner, it is difficult to envision a world without the climate crisis. That doesn't mean we should lose all hope. Instead, we must act to make the unseen a reality. This moment of so many crises compels sacred change at both the individual and systems level. Earth is waiting with eager longing, waiting patiently, and probably too patiently, for God's people to come forward and care as they are called by their Creator to do.

Amen.

Blessing

So as we go out into another week where the world seems very topsy-turvy, and we are confronted by multiple crises - threats to the health of ourselves and our planet, know that God is with us. God is encouraging us to hope, to resist, and to mobilize for climate justice. As is our tradition as Pres House, I ask you to hold out your hands in a sign of peace and gratitude. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and forever.