

Feb. 24, 2008

3rd Sunday in Lent

Title: The Lenten Path of Awareness: Who is my neighbor? - Psalm 104

Scripture: In Praise of Creation: Psalm 104:1-24, 31
Jesus and the Samaritan Woman at the Well: John 4:7-14

Prayer: Great Spirit, may the earth continue to live, may the rains continue to dampen the land, may the wet forests continue to grow; then the flowers shall bloom and we people shall live again. Amen.
Hawaiian Prayer

This is the beginning of the third week of Lent. First we talked about the Lenten path of obedience to care for God's green earth. Last week we talked about the Lenten path of disobedience when we are tempted to lord over and use up the natural resources God has given. This week we follow the path of awareness - asking: who are our neighbors in need. Right now, the trees, the flowers, the sky, the waters, the land are our neighbors calling out asking for our help.

One day a group of scientists got together and decided that humanity had come a long way and no longer needed God. So one of them walked up to God and said, "God, we've decided that we no longer need you. We're to the point that we can clone people and do many miraculous things, so why don't you just go away."

God listened very patiently. After the scientist was done talking, God said, "Very well, how about this? Let's say we have a people-making contest." To which the scientist replied, "Okay, great!"

But God added, "Now we're going to do this just like I did back in the old days with Adam." "Sure, no problem." The scientist said as she bent down and grabbed a handful of dirt. God look at her and said, "No, no, no. You, my friend, must find your own dirt!"

Well folks, the Bible is not a scientific document. But it is a powerful witness to the compassion and creativity of God - the Holy One who is the source of all life, including the dirt.

The book of Psalms comes to us as poetry. It is said that King David wrote some of the psalms, but most were written over a long period of time by many different people. Originally, they were put to music proclaiming: "Sing a new song to the Lord." "Sing praise to the Lord." "Sing with a joyful heart." Filled with emotions and deep feelings, they spoke to the heart of the people and treasured today as beautiful poetry prayers.

Each psalm tells a story - some of fear and sorrow asking for God's help, calling for God's attention. These are called laments. Others burst with joyful gratitude or whisper loving thankfulness for the gifts of life, food, community, justice, and the unending love of God's care and compassion. These are the psalms of thanksgiving.

Psalm 104 is one of the most famous Thanksgiving Psalms. With colorful descriptions, it presents a God who is captivated by the thrill of creating something new and marvelous every day. This is a God who delights in the beauty and harmony of the earth, the stars, the moon, the sun; the trees, the animals, the birds, the flowers and human beings too. We are all held tightly together, connected and interwoven as one living organism.

But, when we humans looked out on creation we saw ourselves as the subject and everything else as objects. This dualistic concept of reality placed the earth, animals and plants as the background for economic growth and our own pleasures. Yet, from the beginning of creation these 'other things' have been our neighbors - neighbors who seek our friendship, companionship and partnership on this planet earth.

Did you see the eclipse of the moon Wednesday night? It was amazing to see the way the earth shadow slowly covers the moon and the moon goes black as the total eclipse takes place. When this happens the stars around the moon glow ever brighter. Then the dark shadow slowly slides off the opposite edge of the moon.

There, right before our eyes we see first hand the continuous, never ending movement of the heavens, we witness to the harmonious coordination of the moon-sun-and earth, we are in awe of the beauty and wonder of the night skies, of creation itself.

The whole event is like a mini-spiritual experience. First comes the possibility of something strange and unusual to take place. Then, when the first shadow of darkness begins to cover the moon fear covers our own hearts. Will the moon disappear? Will we be left in the dark, forever?

As the moonlight is totally blocked out, we instinctively hold our breathe - waiting, waiting to see if the first signs of light will appear. Will we see something new? Will there be rebirth? From fear - to darkness - to hope - to new light. The eclipse of the moon becomes a powerful, poetic statement of God's ongoing presence in our lives even when we live in darkness. And, for us living in the 21st century, it is also a scientific statement of God's carefully calculated creation.

This coming together of the scientific community and religious community is one of the great marvels of the present environmental movement. To understand the trees and animals, flowers and birds, sky, the moon and waters as our neighbors is a theological statement. For us 'neighbor' means 'love your neighbor as yourself.' To care for them, to heal their wounds, to hold them when they are weeping, to feed them when they are hungry.

And the scientists are telling us that these 'neighbors' of ours are in trouble and need our help, telling us that global warming is a great big sign which reads: current trends in growth and consumption simply cannot be sustained forever. Something must be done.

I recently went on a carbon footprint web site that Matt Cote recommended. (You can see the questions and results on the bulletin board down stairs.) The questions are quick and easy to use. I found out that our family has a score of 21 compared to the US average score of 24. Translated to the use of energy and natural resources, our family requires 21 acres to sustain our present live style. If everyone in the world lived the way we do it would require five planet earths to sustain everyone. In other words, many of us are living beyond what the world's resources can possibly produce.

Some of us may say, What can I do? The problems are too big. The solutions are out of my control. I'm just one little person. I can't make a different.

Some may say, I will be long gone before the glaciers melt, the waters rise, the oil is gone. Others may say, Things aren't that bad. Look around us here in Maine. We have plenty of trees. More deer, moose and bears then ever before. The air isn't polluted like it is in Los Angeles or Beijing. So, what's the problem?

The problem - God's creation is hurting, the heavens weep and the earth cries out for help.
The problem - our neighbors the trees and animals, the sky and waters are in pain.

The God of Psalm 104 is not a distant God ruling from afar. Instead, this God is the Great Spirit, connecting all of creation, forming the interwoven, web of life. This biblical truth of the utter dependance we humans have upon nature and all of creation comes to us in poetry form, as a song written thousands of years ago.

Sit back, close your eyes, and create your own pictures of creation with these words from the psalm:

You have spread out the heavens like a tent and build your home on the waters above.
You use the clouds as your chariot and ride on the wings of the wind.

You set the earth firmly on its foundation, and it will never be moved.
You placed the ocean over it like a robe, and the water covered the mountains.

You make springs flow in the valley, and rivers run between the hills.
They provide water for the wild animals; there the wild donkeys quench their thirst.
In the trees nearby, the birds make their nests and sing.

From the sky you send rain on the hills, and the earth is filled with your blessings.
You make grass grow for the cattle and plants for us to use.

You created the moon to mark the months; the sun knows the time to set.
You made the night and in the darkness all the wild animals come out.
When the sun rises, they go back and lie down in their dens.
Then people go out to their fields, safe from harm and keep working until evening.

Lord, you have made so many things. The earth is filled with your creatures.
I will sing to the Lord all my life; as long as I live I will sing praise to God.

This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and give thanks. Amen.