

“Faithfulness in Fragile Times: All the Earth Is Groaning”

Psalm 8; Luke 19:29-40 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – March 24, 2024

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might share your
sacrificial love for your world. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

Things are starting to get real. All through Lent, we've been talking about the values and convictions of our faith that help us get through difficult times. Because, let's face it: these times are difficult. Society is shifting; institutions and traditions we've relied on seem to be crumbling. It's gotten harder and harder to know who to trust. The “wars and rumors of wars” that the Bible warned us about have broken out all over. As we enter into this holiest of weeks, it is no time to turn away. So today, we're turning our attention to what is perhaps the scariest of the fragile things that shape our lives: the reality that the very earth we live on seems to be teetering on the verge of collapse.

Oh, but Pastor Rebecca, you say, it's Palm Sunday! Aren't we just supposed to have an inspiring pep rally for Jesus today? That depends. If Jesus is your mascot, then sure. But if we want to worship Jesus as Savior and Lord, then no, a pep rally is not what he is asking of us. A pep rally was never what he was asking of us.

There are lots of reasons we might talk about climate collapse in worship. But the story that inspired this particular conversation, and indeed our Lenten theme as a whole, came from a mom. This mother was telling me, with a sense of resigned

sadness, that her child, who is a teenager at the moment, has made clear that they probably won't have any kids because they don't really expect the world to remain livable long enough for that to be a good idea.

Now, I'm sure some of you remember that there were people saying such things in the 70s. You know, back in the mid-1900s. But such an attitude was a fringe position two generations ago. What sounded like the melodramatic rantings of overgrown adolescents then has become mainstream among our current generation of young people, and the rest of us have lost our hold on any reasonable counter-argument. It's hard to argue when the science is on their side. It's hard to even look them in the eye when they know how thoroughly we've failed them, that we could have done things differently, to give them a better chance at a sustainable world, but we didn't. This is a crisis, and like any crisis impacting people of faith, it is a faith crisis. We are compelled to respond, and it is my hope that our response will be grounded in our faith.

But it's not just the depth of the crisis that makes it necessary for us to talk about this in worship. It's Jesus himself. More precisely, it's an aspect of Jesus we don't talk about that often, what it sometimes called the Cosmic Christ. The Cosmic Christ is the aspect of Jesus that goes beyond us, the idea that what happened in Jesus' life and death and resurrection was a cosmic event, rather than just something for and about humans. We see a hint of this in today's reading from Luke telling the story of Palm Sunday. The local religious leaders are grumpy, as they sense they're losing

control over Jesus' followers. They tell him to make them hush. And Jesus cryptically replies, "If they weren't crying out, the stones would be." It's as if he's saying, "Which would you prefer? That we keep this on a human scale, or that the forces making the universe spin get involved?"

These hints of Jesus' Cosmic Christ-ness are scattered throughout his story, whenever significant moments arrive. The star over Bethlehem, the wild beasts in the wilderness, the storm that is stilled. Some of the most powerful are yet to come later this week: the darkness that comes over the land as Jesus dies and the earthquakes that erupt as he takes his final breaths. At some level, our Creator God taking on fragile, human form could only result in a cosmic event. But humans that we are, we don't tend to look beyond the implications for our own lives that often. On this Palm Sunday, it turns out that we humans may not have been crying out loud enough though, because we are starting to hear the rocks and stones cry out. We are starting to hear the cries of the air and the water and the fields, the islands filling up with sea water and the polar bears losing their icy homes.

Like the Pharisees, we would have preferred that what God is doing in the world was just about us, even if it sometimes makes us uncomfortable. But it turns out that's not the case. And so as we celebrate Palm Sunday 2024, we are facing a reckoning with the rest of God's creation. And the Great Lesson of this week is perhaps our most useful tool as we try to address the despair and resignation of our children.

Psalm 8 is such a conundrum. It glories in the wonders of creation and recognizes the humble position of humanity. And yet, it still seems stuck in this idea of “dominion,” which is one of the roots of our current problem. Scripture often uses this word to describe the relationship humanity has to nature. And it’s a problem. Far too often, throughout our history, humanity has interpreted “dominion” as “domination” rather than “responsibility.” We have aimed to conquer nature, to bring it under our control and exploit its many wonders for our own gain and pleasure. The problem is that we didn’t really know what we were doing or how our abusive extraction would come back to haunt us with rising ocean temperatures, falling water tables, polluted water and air, and more. It is no wonder our kids assume it’s too late.

Just as the Cosmic Christ prods us to look beyond our own human lives to see where our faith must be lived out, we must also look beyond our own tradition and scripture for guidance. Gus Spleth, a renowned environmental scientist, offers these principles¹ for how we must proceed. I’m quoting them here in their entirety because they are that important.

1. Stay abreast of climate science. Accept its difficult conclusions as the best understanding we have. Expect to be alarmed on a regular basis, inescapably.

Learn.

¹ https://www.resilience.org/stories/2023-10-25/five-steps-to-climate-sanity-beyond-both-despair-and-hopium/?fbclid=IwAR1SYPsTXvnOOA_mpXjftVkFaQahid1u5iZRMKEeCNsEGm0poRkhnX-V-0

2. Accept also that both societies and natural systems are already fated to devastating developments. Terrible losses lie ahead. Almost everything will be changing. The future isn't what it used to be. A great sadness is normal. Cry.
3. Recognize that warnings about climate change and forceful proposals for national action to address the threats go back almost five decades. The failure to act over these years may be the greatest failure of civic responsibility in the history of the republic. Get mad.
4. Appreciate that no matter how tearful the future, every fraction of a degree makes a difference. Every bit of warming we prevent is important. Learn well what must be done to head off future devastations, including both the immediate steps and the deep societal and economic transformations. Dream.
5. Know that the fight for the future requires all of us, each bringing what we can to the effort. Find ways to get involved, seriously involved. Know too that in the end our efforts do not depend on our odds of success. We must act even in the face of hopelessness, warriors defending a sacred place, simply because it is the right thing to do, rebelling beyond hope because the human spirit tells us with insistence that what is unacceptable—all the suffering, all the loss, all the tears—must not be accepted. Fight.

This is good advice. Learn. Cry. Get mad. Dream. Fight. But it is not all we have to rely on as Christians. Because we do have a Savior, Jesus the Cosmic Christ, and he also shows us the way. This entire week is our lesson. The psalm talks of

having “dominion over the works of God’s hands,” as if we’ve been made kings. But Jesus, heralded as the King of Glory as he rode that donkey into Jerusalem, showed us a very different way of exercising power. It is not the power of domination that Jesus is inviting us into, but the power of communion. Perhaps the most important lesson to learn from the Cosmic Christ is our unity of all the rest of creation. We are not here to dominate it, extracting whatever we can for our use and moving on to new territory once we’ve depleted the first. We are here to follow the way of Jesus, living in communion through the power of sacrificial love.

What is it that we are called to sacrifice so that our children’s children can flourish? What is it that we are asked to break open so that new hopes can emerge? How can we embrace the idea that saving ourselves is bound up and inextricable from saving the planet? How do we bring the teachings of the Cosmic Christ to a world awash in despair and cynicism, in ways that reflect the gentle and gracious love of Jesus rather than the arrogance of an imperial imposition of our values and convictions onto a world from which we still have much to learn?

This week, this holiest of weeks, is such an important part of our formation as Christians. We do not gather here each week for a pep rally. We gather here to be reminded of our oneness with all Creation. We gather here to remind ourselves that God offered Godself up to brokenness so that we might find wholeness. We gather here to remind one another of the light and truths of our faith: that God so loves the world. May we journey forward with Christ, with hope and courage. Amen.