

Today is Fauna or Animal Sunday, but I'm not going to talk about polar bears or about cats or coyotes. Instead I want to talk about pain.

Last week, several of you spoke to me about the pain of seeing the oceans heating up and the water rising; the pain of knowing about the plight of sea mammals hurt by our trash. This is painful stuff. And it is right for us to feel the pain and difficulty that human behavior has brought to the planet. It is right for us to feel the pain that our children and grandchildren will inhabit a very different world from us and that even today people are suffering as a result of global warming. This pain is real.

For some of us, it is the spur to increased action, it is the reason to carpool even when it's not convenient or to buy organic food or even to work towards being completely trash free. For others of us it is a paralyzing feeling – we so don't want to feel it that we turn away and close our eyes to the agony of the planet.

We tend to want things to be inspiring and uplifting and generally joyful, so we don't talk very much or very often about the pain which is at the heart of the Christian narrative. Yet this is an important contribution that we can make to the global conversation.

At the very heart of our faith is the crucifixion. A painful, horrible defeat. The Son of God pinned to a cross and bleeding, suffocating to death. The hope of the world dying in front of our very eyes. A spirituality which has this suffering at its heart must surely have something important to say about the pain of creation in our time.

Although we talk about the birth of Jesus Christ as the incarnation, it is arguable that the incarnation happened 14.5 billion years ago as God created the universe and gave form to the Cosmic Christ. John Duns Scotus, the 13<sup>th</sup> Century Franciscan theologian, said that Christ was “the very first idea in the mind of God.”<sup>1</sup> Creation is not something separate from God, but comes out of the very being of who God is.

Love.

“God has never stopped thinking, dreaming and creating the Eternal Christ Mystery.”<sup>2</sup>

From this perspective, salvation is nothing less than the healing of creation in the fullness of Christ. Salvation is not about whether you or I go to heaven when we die; it is about the whole of Creation, yes the whole of creation, being perfected and shining with the glory of God. That is God's plan. And therein lies our hope.

Ephesians 1 says, “With all wisdom and insight [God] has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.” If that is true, if God intends to gather up all things in Christ in the fullness of time then Creation is not going to hell in a handbasket. Creation is actually going to fully reveal the glory of the Christ.

So when we worry about where this is all going, we are almost insulting God by not trusting that in the end all will be revealed and all will be well. As the gospel reading says, we do not need to worry but instead to focus on working for the reign of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Richard Rohr, “Creation as the Body of God” in *Spiritual Ecology* ed. Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee pp235- 241

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p 237

But in the meantime we are left with witnessing and sometimes experiencing the suffering and pain caused by human recklessness. And of course today we remember the pain and horror caused by terrorism in this country 15 years ago, and the heroism of all those who responded to the cried for help. And we are witnessing Syria being flattened by bombing everyday with millions of people fleeing for their lives. Human recklessness causes unnecessary pain and suffering and for that we need to repent and work constantly for a peaceful future.

But there is pain and suffering which is just part of life on this planet. Accidents happen. Illness happens. Death happens. If we think of Creation, which came out of God's love, and in some way that I can't quite wrap my mind around, the Christ who also was begotten out of God's love, being deeply intertwined, then we can think of this suffering as being part of the crucifixion. Perhaps cosmic crucifixion. The suffering that Jesus Christ experienced is a microcosm of the suffering of the planet, and the universe beyond.

On the cross, Jesus the Christ experienced the pain, suffering and death that are the trademarks of being mortal. On the cross, God entered fully into the experience of creation. And came out the other side. Jesus shows us that pain and death are not the end. Resurrection happens.

From an evolutionary perspective, each individual life form perishes but the life that is being lived through them continues and is changed because they existed. And the life that is being lived is the life of the Christ who is immortal. And that life is a life of joy and beauty but also a life of suffering and death.

I suspect the difficulty that we have with bearing the pain of the great sea mammals and the suffering of the orangutans as we take their homes to grow palm oil, is because we believe that ALL suffering is wrong and should be stopped. No being should have to suffer. And our hope is that there will be a day when there will be no suffering, when predators will cease to be predators, and as Isaiah says

The wolf shall live with the lamb,  
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
and a little child shall lead them.  
The cow and the bear shall graze,  
their young shall lie down together;  
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. (Is. 11: 5, 6)

Yet, until that day, pain and suffering are part of life. We can romanticize Creation as all beautiful and harmonious but it isn't, yet. Last year Jill and I had planned the trip of our lifetime to the Galapagos Islands, but then we discovered that in an El Nino year, the ocean turns warm and the fish that the sea lions and others depend on don't come – they stay in the colder water. So we would have been seeing wildlife that was literally starving and dying. We cancelled our trip.

There is nothing that we can do about the suffering of those sea lions, there is nothing we can do about the suffering of the cosmic Christ in creation. As Buddhism teaches, life is suffering and change. We don't get anywhere by fighting that basic pattern. Life is also beautiful and glorious and affirming, but that too changes. There's not much that's permanent apart from the love of God. God's love upholds and supports us even when we suffer. Even when there isn't enough food to go around, even when whales are dying on the beaches, even when towers are falling, even when bombs are raining down from heaven.

God's plan is that all of this will be redeemed; that all of it will be made new.

But we live in the not-yet. We live in the time when we are called to do all we can to work for fairness and flourishing for all beings, regardless of who or what they are. We live in the time when we are called to witness the suffering and hold that truth together with the truth that God's love is working its purpose out, that no suffering, no pain can ever separate us from that love AND that God's love for us was expressed most fully in the painful death of Jesus the Christ.

It is our faith in God's love that enables us to respond to pain not with apathy nor with paralysis but with gentleness and solidarity, and where possible with action to alleviate it. It is our faith in God that helps us not to worry but to continue to work bravely for the reign of God. It is our faith in God that enables us to meet our pain with courage and compassion.

Let us pray.

Lord give us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change; the courage to change the things we can; and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.