

The Web of Life - Oceans

I. The Season of Creation – The Web of Life

A. The Christian family has made a notable and historical shift in our liturgical calendar with a Season of Creation that invites our celebration of the gift of creation each year, Sept.1 to Oct.4.

1. Initiated in 1989 by *Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew* of the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Season has become a global observance now embraced by the wide ecumenical community.

a. There is a new recognition emerging slowly but surely in all religious communities of the bonds we share not only with each other but also with “*every living creature on earth*” (Genesis 9:10) and with all creation as a deeply interconnected living reality.

b. As a human species we have come to a time where we must recover this wisdom that is not new, but very old, for our very survival.

2. So, we are invited to pray, to reflect as individuals and as communities, on the astounding miracle of life that comes to us from God, as Christians say, through Christ in all creation.

a. We are challenged to read and discern the abundant divine presence all about us and within us, the Universal Christ, through whom all things were made.

b. Recognizing our intimate relationship to creation we ask a very practical question: how may we more sustainably inhabit our common home?

c. How can we together better lift up our voices in the public sphere? How can we take bold action necessary to preserve creation in all its complexity and specificity.

d. If ever there was a time that called for the wisdom, example and activism of faith communities, that time certainly is now.

B. The focus for our prayers this year is the **Web of Life**.

1. The Psalmist asserts, “*How many are your works, Lord! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures*” (Psalm 104:24).

2. I would like to offer a very brief summary glimpse of some of the intricacies of the web of life that we are learning more clearly in our day from the Book of Nature.
 - a. Our early church tradition calls this the first scriptures.
 - b. Today it is science that speaks in that language.
 - c. We are fools if we don't pay attention.
 - d. I've put supporting references in my written text for this sermon which you can find on the St. Ben's website.
3. To begin, prayer with the Psalmist is a way we offer our grief and lament.
 - a. Today we grieve God's creatures that are disappearing from the Earth at a rate we can scarcely comprehend.
 - b. "*From humble insects, to majestic animals, from microscopic plankton to towering trees, creatures across God's dominion are becoming extinct and may never be seen again...*" (Letter from faith leaders for Season of Creation, June 5, 2019)
 - c. The assessment of a recent UN sponsored report is that 1 million species risk extinction, many within decades; -- 40% of amphibian species, 1/3 of coral reefs, and one third of marine mammals are at risk of disappearing for ever. (Jason Mark, Sierra, Sept./Oct., 2019, p. 4)
 - d. The consensus among scientists is that we have moved into the 6th mass extinction of species since the Cambrian period; 560 million years of evolution of life on Earth.
 - (1. Climate change accelerates the crisis but the main culprit is reckless human land use, the loss of habitat.
 - e. People of faith recognize another tragedy in that loss, and our way of living that creates it.
 - (1. It's amplified by the injustice of our human made crisis to the most vulnerable populations of people and species that suffer most deeply as the web of life begins to unravel.
 - f. Our faith calls us to respond to this crisis with the urgency born of moral clarity." (Letter of faith leaders for Season of Creation, June 5, 2019)

II. Oceans

- A. Many of us over age 60 remember the stunning image sent by the *Apollo 8* astronauts orbiting the moon on Christmas eve 1968, --- the beauty of an *Earth-rise*. Never before had we seen such a vision of our *island home* against the blackness of space.
 1. The science fiction writer, *Arthur C. Clarke* noted the image shows how wrong it was to call this planet *Earth* when, clearly, it is *Ocean*.

- a. Nearly $\frac{3}{4}$'s of the surface of our planet is covered by water.
 - b. The futurist, *James Lovelock* says, "*The fact that we live on an ocean planet is only just beginning to penetrate the dusty science of geology,*" (the originator of the Gaia theory).
2. Today, biologists say that simple life as bacteria emerged in the ocean, ~3.8 billion years ago near the deep volcanic vents that pour heat and nutrients from the interior. (*Rare Earth*, Peter Ward & Donald Brownlee, 2000, p. 61)
- a. Perhaps such simple life is not so rare in the universe.
 - b. Complex life, however, evolved through an interplay of rare and seemingly random factors that preserved liquid water on the planet's surface for close to 4 billion years.
 - (1. Considering this, it may be that intelligent life is rare.
(The thesis of *Rare Earth*, *ibid.*)
 - (2. In that case, perhaps our biggest mistake as a species is to take life and this planet for granted, as a "*throw-away.*"
 - (3. And this is exactly the point of our spiritual traditions.
3. As we trace life's origins to the oceans, it is not surprising how human civilization has long been dependent on them.
- a. The oceans are one of humanity's most important natural resources;-- the greatest portion of all life on Earth is in the oceans.
 - b. Their vastness has made them appear to be limitless sources of food,\ transportation,\ recreation,\ and awe.
 - c. But the difficulty of fencing and policing them has left them largely as open access resources to be exploited by anyone with the means.
 - (1. We've seen this graphically in the images of trash in the oceans building up since the 1980's.
 - (2. The *Great Pacific Garbage* patch is twice the size of France, 600,000 square miles, 87,000 tons and growing by the day.
 - (3. Such garbage patches can also be found in the Atlantic and Indian Ocean.
 - (4. Unrestrained use of disposable and single use plastic items is the biggest cause of such huge amounts of plastic waste being generated. (Linda Stewart, July 7, 2018, www.haultail.com/fr/news/the-great-pacific-garbage-patch-twice-the-size-of-france-and-growing/)
 - d. Obviously, in our time we have begun to reach the limits of the oceans and must now begin to utilize and govern them in a more sustainable way.
- B. For decades, the ocean has served as our best defense against climate change,\ absorbing 90% of the atmosphere's excess heat.

1. But acting like a planetary sponge has taken a toll.
2. Since 1970, global sea temperature has increased by around 1 degree F.
 - a. That's warmer than at any time since record-keeping began in 1880. ("Feeling the Heat: How Fish Are Migrating from Warming Waters," by Ben Goldfarb, June 15, 2017, Yale E360)
4. Warming is the most immediate agent of the ocean's chaos as seen in the instance of increasingly large, slow moving, and destructive hurricanes, like *H. Dorian* this past week.
 - a. Not to mention the melting ice at the poles and glaciers, changing atmospheric and ocean currents and rising sea levels that increasingly threaten major coastal population centers around the world.
 - b. After the Sun, Earth's oceans are the primary driver of our climate.
 - (1. It is vital for our survival that they are kept cool,-- below 15°C.
 - (2. Whenever the surface temperature of the ocean rises above 15°C, they become a desert more bereft of life than the Sahara. (The Daily Galaxy via Lovelock, James. [Novacene](#) (The MIT Press) . Kindle Edition.)
4. But warming is just one of a three-pronged assault on marine life.
 - a. As oceans absorb CO₂, it becomes more acidic and less saturated with the calcium carbonate that support corals and shell fish that are integral to the food web.
 - b. Coral reefs occupy only about 1 percent of the world's oceans — from the Caribbean to the "*coral triangle*" centered on Indonesia in Southeast Asia — but they are home to about a quarter of all marine species.
 - (1. They have survived destructive fishing, pollution, mining for construction materials, the anchors of cruise ships, and even nuclear bomb tests. But climate change has proven to be their nemesis. ("As Oceans Warm, Tropical Corals Seek Refuge in Cooler Waters," Fred Pearce, August 22, 2019, Yale E360)
 - c. And fish are far from immune with the disruption of larval fish life.
5. A 3rd and more immediate threat is de-oxygenation. The ocean has been losing oxygen (2-5% in the past 50 years) likely because rising temperatures mean water holds less oxygen and warmer water impedes circulation.

- (1. “*When oxygen goes way down, it’s effectively habitat loss,*” says Lisa Levin, a professor at Scripps Institute of Oceanography. (Ben Goldfarb, *ibid*)

III. Only those who see take off their shoes.”

- A. Elizabeth Browning penned the famous and familiar words, “*Earth is crammed with heaven. Every bush is aflame with the fire of God, but only those who see take off their shoes.*”
1. Learning to listen to and nurture the presence of God in our hearts opens us to the whisper and grace of God in creation.
 - a. A discovery that we are part of a relationship much larger than we’ve seen in our culturally conditioned near-sightedness.
 - b. We take off the shoes of our soul with the enthusiasm of a child putting our feet into the sand.
 2. Browning adds, “*The rest of us just pick berries.*”
- B. The ecological crisis will not be resolved by merely switching energy sources though that is a necessary step.
1. The crisis invites us into a profoundly different relationship with the planet and the rest of life, a different sense of who we are and what is real.
 - a. Will we choose life? The question has become more pointed than ever for humanity.
 2. I said earlier, what is asked of us is not something new, but a recovery of something we’ve lost.
 - a. The spiritual traditions have been saying it for ages for those with ears to hear.
 - b. The Franciscan, *Richard Rohr* describes the new cosmology rooted in Christian teaching that we call “*incarnation.*”
 - (1. “*It’s a Christ-soaked world. Jesus—the Word made flesh --- comes out of the world rather than into the world. Christ was here all the time. In Christ all of history and all of us are held together. And you do not have to use the word Christ to experience this radical unity!*” (R.R. online meditations, Sept. 5, 2019)
- C. 16 years ago Harvard Medical School awarded the noted journalist, *Bill Moyers* with the *Global Environmental Citizen Award*.
- a. Moyers concluded his acceptance speech with a recognition we could amplify many times these short years since.

- b. He said, *“the news is not good these days. I can tell you, though, as a journalist I know the news is never the end of the story. ---*
- c. *The news can be the truth that sets us free - not only to feel but to fight for the future we want. And the will to fight is the antidote to despair, the cure for cynicism....*
- d. *What we need to match the science of human health is what the ancient Israelites called 'hocma' - the science of the heart.....the capacity to see.....to feel....and then to act...as if the future depended on you. Believe me, it does.”*
(“Bill Moyers hearts us, and we him,” Grist, Dec. 4, 2004)