

Sermon
St. Benedict's Episcopal Church, Los Osos
Restoration Sunday in Season of Creation
September 26, 2021
Romans 8:18-22

Environmental devastation is not new to humans. In the early settlements of what became Massachusetts, the forests were nearly demolished because of the conversion of trees toward building and fuel. Primarily fuel, I would think. Today they are replenished, very likely because fuel now comes from fossil sources and wood comes from other parts of the planet. It's a mixed story.

Those of us of a certain age might recall when the Cuyahoga River in Pennsylvania caught fire from all of the industrial pollutants that were channeled into it. I remember, growing up in South Pasadena and delivering newspapers in the afternoon, that there were times when the smog was so thick you couldn't see 50 yards away. Honestly. Both of these environmental degradations have been addressed. Interestingly, it is not what we did as a society that made the difference, but what we didn't do. We stopped adding certain kinds of pollutants, and lo and behold, things improved.

Creation, however we conceive it, is designed to renew itself. Without the addition of bad things, creeks and rivers will renew themselves. The Bikini Atoll, where 23 nuclear test blasts destroyed the entire reef system seventy years ago, now has 80% living reef coverage. The system is not as complex as it used to be, but it continues to be restored, naturally.

The power of the natural world, creation, to remake itself, to come back from devastation, is powerful. The areas of our country being destroyed by wildfires will

regenerate in time. Our own bodies, often debilitated by things we eat and drink, or infections or injury, can largely heal themselves, because that is what cells and systems want to do. Life is programmed into our very bodies. This is the glory of creation. Feedback, redundant systems, specialized healing cells are all features of it.

Here's another fact. A single hurricane, over the course of a few days, releases as much energy as is used by the entire world economy in a full year. Nature and the earth are much more powerful than human perturbation. So when we think of the world at peril, there is much that is true about it, especially in regard to a warming climate. But what is more at peril than the survival of the planet is the survival of its inhabitants.

With that prelude, I would like to take a deep dive into the short passage of Romans 8 which has been chosen for today, and which, in my sermon preparation, became illuminated beyond my expectations.

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now.

What does Paul mean by the sufferings of this present time? Well, it probably has to do with the inhumanity of humanity in various ways. Our tendencies to subjugate, to control, to abuse, to contend, to indulge our oversized desires, to cheat, to gain unfair advantage, to hoard and the like. The worst of our troubles are not physical disasters. When terrible things happen because of forces

outside of our communities, we tend to band together, working toward repair. But when they happen because of human cruelty, we receive moral injury, which is another, much worse, thing. It makes us think that the world as we know it is ending.

But this present suffering is nothing compared to the glory about to be revealed to us. What is that glory? I spoke of near-death experiences some weeks ago from this pulpit, and one of the things that people report after coming back is that their senses were heightened in an exquisite manner. They became acutely aware of the colors around them, and the beauty of things, and the interconnection of all of life, and the wonder of it all. They became elegantly sensitive to the power of love between all created beings. This, I believe, is what Paul means by “glory.” The elegance of life, the amazing fullness of creation. Its diversity, inventiveness, solidness, multitudinosity, overwhelming grace, easy pleasure and delight. These things, to Paul, were about to be revealed. Is it soon, really? Well, yes and no. Here’s why.

Paul writes, “For creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God.” Yes, I believe that creation can wait, in as much as it is being confounded in its cycle of life and life giving. But what is the “revealing of the children of God”? I do not believe that it is a revealing of who are the children of God, because I believe that all living beings are children of God. No, I believe that this verse means that creation is waiting for the children of God to get the revelation, the understanding, about the beauty of all that is, the glory of it, the gift of it, nature as God created it. The meaning of “revelation,” in Greek, *apocalypse*,

means “unveiling.” Would that all people have the equivalent of a near-death experience and see beyond the veil to the heart of reality. Creation is waiting with eager longing for that to happen. Less the revealing OF the children of God than the revelation TO them.

“...for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it...” The Greek word behind “futility,” *matataiotes*, also means corruption, decay or ruin. Who is subjecting creation to such a fate? The answer, “the subjector.” Some commentators suggest that the one subjecting creation to ruin is God. Doesn’t that sound false? It would seem that it would more likely be...us. For the purpose of exploiting the earth’s resources, the children of God are doing the subjection. Especially in the age of burning the fossilized carbon sources of the earth. Which has been accelerating since the Industrial Revolution took hold in the Severn Valley in England.

Greta Thunberg, at the 2019 UN Climate Action Summit, told those in attendance, in part, “People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction. And all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!” She is only echoing Paul in Romans. There is something deeply amiss with our relation to the earth’s ecosystem.

But, we read on, “[Creation is waiting...in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” In other words, when the children of God understand and are

transformed by the vision of true glory, then creation will be ennobled and enabled to be its best self.

There are those for whom the revelation of the children of God is their main job. They feel the urgency of the matter so keenly that they are often nearly monomaniacal about it. I heard the story of a man who was so dedicated to raising awareness and action about climate change that he took his children with him to rallies and speaking engagements, and knew of nothing else. And eventually, he became and remains estranged from his children and wife.

We are in an odd situation, civilization, when we are faced with the devastation of entire regions on earth, with attendant disasters for large populations. It is not entirely here yet, but we are already experiencing it in many places. And at the same time, we have our lives, which were constructed on the very foundations that are causing the trouble to our ecosphere. The relatively easy steps have been taken. Cleaner water, cleaner air. But now nations and corporations must go much further and change their ways of operating. Reducing carbon emissions, reducing styles of life, reducing travel, consumption, materialism, certain kinds of financial security. It requires the end of one age and the beginning of another. All creation is waiting with eager longing for the revelation of the children of God.

Funny that the results of the coronavirus, our sheltering in place, our reducing some kinds of consumption, our release from the frenetic futility of some of our work, has opened some eyes. I read in the Times the many things that people are not going to return to: the commutes, the ignoring of family needs, the pressure

to succeed in meeting goals, the inhumanity. Now, how will what we learned be applied to practice? How can this be done while not making living on the edges of the economy worse for the poor of the world?

The possibility of restoration requires not only a solution of knowledge, but also a solution of the heart. It will be a spiritual solution or it will not be a solution at all. It will be a spiritual understanding that the whole of creation has been groaning in labor pains until NOW. That when Paul wrote “until now” he meant that the presence of Jesus on earth had changed the equation. Jesus, the miracle worker, the deep healer, the Word of God, this master of creation, has made the difference, and continues to be the difference for those who follow him.

When will restoration take place? It is ongoing. As to its fulfillment, we shall see.