

Stones

Psalm 31:1-5, Acts 7:51-60, Luke 19:36-40

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Well here we all are this morning, despite the dire predictions of a radio evangelist in California that yesterday would be judgment day and that those judged unworthy of heaven would be subject to tortures set to begin last night. Harold Camping crunched the numbers and decided yesterday was the Rapture, when Christians would be whisked to heaven, and then months of Hell on earth would follow with the whole thing being destroyed this October 21. He was completely convinced, and convinced many others as the billboard many of us have seen on I-95 in Bridgeport attests, that the Apocalypse would begin this weekend.

While I fear Mr. Camping somehow got the math wrong, and I believe firmly we can't do cosmic math, I have to say (to your great surprise I am sure) that I think using the word "Apocalypse" may have some merit for these times. I had been thinking along these lines for this sermon on our relationship to the earth, when I heard an amazing interview on NPR's program "On Point" this past week with a writer named Junot Diaz who published an article in the May/June *Boston Review* called "Apocalypse: What Disasters Reveal." I heartily commend this article to you. Though not everyone uses this freighted religious word, a number of writers of varying scientific and political viewpoints (beginning with Rachel Carson in her groundbreaking book *Silent Spring*) have been talking about the same thing for decades. I want to talk with you about earth and apocalypse.

"Apocalypse" is from a Greek word which means "reveal" or "uncover." That's important, because in popular usage it means a big disaster at the end of the world. But let's sit with the Greek meaning this morning.

We commonly think and sing and preach about how nature reveals or uncovers for us something about God. The Psalmist in

today's reading talks about God as a Rock, strong and sheltering. We understand something about God by understanding something about rocks. Many other natural images which reveal something about God occur in the Bible: light, lion, branch, morning star, fire, cloud, lamb, eagle, vine, and in last week's anthem, rose and lily.

Jesus took this revelation yet a step further in his words to the disgruntled Pharisees on Palm Sunday. He said that if the crowds shouting "Hosanna!" were silent, the rocks and stones would sing the same song. Each in its own way, Jesus implies, all parts of creation bear witness to the Creator, like the wonderful poem by Christopher Smart about his cat Jeoffry that says "For he is the image of the living God duly and daily serving him. For at the first glance of the glory of God in the east, he worships in his way...For he knows that God is his Savior." In the Bible and religious tradition, then, we are taught that the earth both reveals something about the nature of God and the natural world is in relationship with God independent of humankind.

But earth does not exist independent of humankind. What writers like Carson and Diaz consider are what changes in nature and natural disasters "reveal" to us about the relationship of human beings with the rest of creation and with other human beings, nature as the vehicle of revelation to us **about** us. Apocalypse. Too often, what is revealed casts judgment upon the job we have been doing as stewards of this earth God created and placed in our care. So in a way, we are indeed dwelling in a perpetual "judgment day," and the natural disasters around us relate to that, but not in the way most people define it. I don't mean that I believe God is sending these natural disasters like earthquakes and floods and storms as some kind of punishment, but that when these natural disasters happen, as they always have, something is revealed or uncovered that judges how we relate to one another and the earth.

David Brooks in a New York Times column (Sept. 1, 2005) after Hurricane Katrina, wrote that natural disasters "expose the underlying power structures, the injustices, the patterns of corruption and the unacknowledged inequalities" of our society. So much was

uncovered after Katrina. We learned the damage was worse than it might have been partly due to decades of engineering of the Mississippi Delta that removed natural wetlands in order to provide shipping channels and land to build on, wetlands that would have borne more of the brunt of the storm had they been there. By the way similar removal of coral reefs to free shipping channels in southern Asia resulted in much worse damage from the '04 Tsunami than otherwise would have occurred. Also uncovered in Katrina was that the poorest people had housing on the most vulnerable land while the wealthy were on higher ground. Government corruption and incompetence from the local to the national level resulted in more suffering and death and more damage to fragile environments. In the years since Katrina, the more that is revealed about that "natural" disaster, the more we understand human complicity in making it worse; we are judged.

It's time to stop blaming God for how we create bigger disasters when we mess with the natural patterns of the earth. The death and destruction of Katrina or the Haiti earthquake or the still unfolding nuclear disaster in Japan are not "acts of God," despite what insurance policies may say. It's time we admitted that, as Junot Diaz writes, the more demands we make on the environment, the greater the risk of rebound from natural disasters that make things much, much worse. In natural disasters, the apocalypse and judgment are not the punishment of God, but the revelation of how we are punishing ourselves and this earth, our island home, by our greed and insatiable consumption and injustice.

Global climate change is a good example of this sort of revelation. Politicians and scientists argue at some length over the causes of climate change and I'm not going to get into that. The reality of climate change, however, is not up for debate for we see it in changing weather patterns and in the measurable rise of the ocean and shrinking of the polar ice cap. At this point even the most optimistic of environmentalists see a very short timespan for human intervention (as in decreasing our emissions of carbon) mitigating changes already underway. So arguing about causes is wasting our

time. How we will respond to climate change, however, has a faith component. Those who believe that God is soon going to destroy the earth, those who understand “apocalypse” to mean God-imposed disaster rather than revelation, tell us it doesn’t matter what we do to the earth because God’s going to destroy it anyway. They say creation was put here for us to rule and use and is subject to whatever we want to do to it. There are people in power on all levels across this nation today who publically believe this.

To say I think they are reading it wrong would be an understatement. I believe our task is to work very hard to discern how we can learn from what our relationship with nature has revealed over the millennia of human existence on this planet. I believe our attitude toward the natural world must not be one of superiority or of wrestling control, of fighting the earth which has too often been the case in the past. And I believe if we change our attitudes, not only the earth but all life on it, including human life, will benefit.

So as the climate changes, how can we undo some of the damage we have done by taking away natural protections built into earth for our benefit? How can we discern vulnerable populations, especially those vulnerable as the ocean rises, and work to ensure human corruption and inequality does not condemn the poorest to the most harm? These are global policy issues, but sometimes they have local implications in, for example, zoning laws.

But there’s more. How can each of us as individuals consider how we live with the natural world and our attitude toward it and what we teach our children/grandchildren/nieces and nephews? Redeemer’s “Green Team” from time to time writes articles in the newsletter with suggestions or sponsors adult forums with more information. There is so much information out there if we have the will to learn about it. Lack of information isn’t the issue; lack of motivation may be. We can’t do everything, but we can each do something. Long ago, the story is told, God put a rainbow in the sky to remind **God** never again to destroy life on earth, so we know we

have a willing partner in our mutual Creator who celebrates and loves life!

Perhaps the ultimate question is: How can we live by the creation steward's Hippocratic Oath to do no harm with or to the earth? The reading from Acts this morning tells one of the saddest stories in the early Christian church. Stephen, called to be one of the first deacons, gives a testimony about Jesus and is condemned as a blasphemer. Powerful people pick up stones and throw them at him until they kill him. Could these have been the very stones Jesus looked at as those which would sing God's praises if human voices were silenced? Could these be pieces of the rock of Mt. Zion which inspired the Psalmist to call God a rock and fortress? Stones of the earth which reveal something about God and praise God in their way, now used by human hands to bring about pain and death? It still happens in so many ways.

If only the stones could talk, we might say!

But the stones are talking. The stones broken in earthquake and pushed along in the floodwaters and hurled across the sky by tornadoes and hurricanes are all talking to us. It is past time for us again to learn the language of this earth and respond. Amen.