

St James United Church

Message for September 18, 2022
Third Sunday in the Season of Creation



“Animated into Action”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-27; 1 Tim. 2:1-7; “Chinook Sanctuary” by Mícheál Moley Ó Súilleabháin

This year’s Season of Creation ends today. It’s been shorter than typical, three rather than four or five, weeks. This was intentional on my part. I wanted to frame these days on a threefold process, inspired by the Trinity. The first week we paused in praise of all God has made, the earth, plants, animals, us, called as co-creators. Last week we moved to lament, recognizing how we have often failed to co-create, but there is hope, because despite our failings, Christ is with us, in relationship through baptism and communion, forgiving and strengthening us. Today, I want to explore the last stage, where animated by the Spirit, we’re called to action in our world.

Now we often think of the Spirit as coming either as wind or fire, but as we begin our Jeremiah reading, we hear how these qualities combine into a scorching blast of divine judgement. Sadly, the lectionary jumps over a key part of the text where the wind is equated with an invading army, the billowing storm-clouds akin to sand kicked up by galloping horses. We need this image, as it helps mitigate against the idea that natural disasters are God’s judgement. That’s an easy out. The prophet makes clear that the ecological crisis at hand was brought on by human action. The desolation described at the end of our passage reminded me of pictures of the dustbowl in the ‘30s, caused not just by drought but a failure of farmers to shift from practices appropriate to less arid conditions when the prairies were settled. We’re still reluctant to change behaviour, so this and other types of ecological crisis multiply across the globe. And in our case, the judgement is more earthly than divine, the interrelated systems of our planet thrown off balance by our impact. But we can turn it around. After all, today’s Jeremiah passage concludes: “God proclaims: / The whole earth will become a desolation, / but it will not be the end.”

There’s a saying popularly attributed to Augustine: “Without God, we cannot; without us, God will not.” It’s pithy but what he wrote more accurately reads: “God, who created us without our help, will not save us without our consent.” While a statement on justification through grace, I find that both versions help rebut a commonly held notion among some Christians that God won’t let the world be destroyed, pointing to God’s promise in Genesis 9 to not destroy the world with a flood again. It strikes me as an excuse not to curb our carbon output or otherwise change how we behave, suggesting we can do what we like, and God will swoop in to save us from our stupidity. The Jeremiah text clearly says the people’s downfall was brought on by stupidity, not that God would rescue them from it. In fact, scripture repeatedly suggests a more collaborative view. God

gives us freedom to make mistakes, freedom to face their consequences, and thankfully sends the Spirit not just as wind but as breath, part of us, to help us grow and learn from them.

For me, the Spirit does this best when we cultivate a listening relationship, much as I suggested in our first week, taking time in the moment, to become aware of what we see, hear, experience around us, especially when in nature, be it tending a vegetable patch, walking in a park, out on the water. I hear this call in Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin's "Chinook Sanctuary" as he ventures into a forest, a cathedral of wood, not stone. There he breathes deeply, his breath a prayer, joined to the breath of the trees, wild prayers offered in a wild church. He is called into this place, drawn in by the Spirit, as so many of us, perhaps not to a forest, instead to the shore, each inhaled breath matching waves lapping onto the beach, or a meadow, each breath filled with the must of grass. It doesn't matter where we go, it could be close as a flower bed at your home, but I encourage you to find somewhere, ideally going to the same spot each day, so you become familiar with it, notice changes over time. When you go, just sit, breathe, be still, part of the landscape. Not only will you appreciate the birds, ants, roses, whatever is there, but they will come to appreciate you.

And as you sit there, falling more in love with this spot with each breath, the Spirit is there too. In 1 Timothy we read how Christ is our mediator, one of us and as such healing our relationship with God, not apart from our experiences but through them. In this, the Spirit is mediating too, present in and through, among other things, our experiences with nature in our special spot, and through that, reconciling us with creation as much as with God. She does this by calling us into action. It's easy to get stuck in lament, paralyzed by all that needs our attention: rising temperature, loss of habitat, plastic in our waterways, coal mining, urban sprawl.... and because I can't tackle them all, I end up not doing anything. The alternative is choosing an issue and doing it well. The best action for you grows out of affinity, out of love, including for a place. If a forest grove feels like a cathedral to me, I'll protect my sanctuary from clear-cutting. If I fall in love with bees buzzing in a meadow, I'll shield them from neonicotinoids and other pesticides. We protect the ones that we love.

This is where the magic happens, the Spirit breathing in each and every one of us. Again in 1 Timothy, the author advises his readers to pray for their political leaders. A practical response in a time of occasional persecution, it also speaks to how we're part of a wider network. The Spirit works through each of us in our particular concerns, and works collectively, so that when pooled together, all our efforts make a big difference. This is where I can hope, not stuck in lament, just overwhelmed, but can focus on my one or two causes, trusting that others are doing the same.

This Sunday ends our focused celebration of creation for the year, but by no means can we lose focus. Every day we're called to stop and praise God for the gift of creation. As we do, noticing not just the gift but our impact on it, we need to lament. I pray we don't stop there but take the next step into action. As we do, the Spirit breathing within us, animating all of our actions for the corners of the planet we love, together we'll help the world to heal, and us as well. Amen.