

St James United Church



Message for September 10, 2023 The First Sunday of Creation (Camping Sunday)

“Freed to Reconnection” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Exodus 12:1-14; Romans 13:8-14; Excerpt from Ilia Delio, *The Hours of the Universe: Reflections on God, Science and the Human Journey* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2021), 51.

As I shared earlier, today we begin the Season of Creation, a time to ponder the gift of nature and the impact humans have had on this gift. You'd think then we would have diverged from the readings in the lectionary and chosen texts more conducive to reflecting on our relationship with nature. I wondered that myself this week, questioning my decision-making as I prepared my reflection. But I realized that was falling into the trap that caused our out-sized impact on creation, the tendency to see nature and humans as separate. We need freeing from that.

As it turns out, we don't need different readings to ponder such a freedom. The opposite, in fact, especially our reading from Exodus which is all about freedom. That's the point of the Passover meal we heard about, the first of an annual recollection of how God led the Jewish people out of slavery in Imperial Egypt. We think of their enslavement in human terms but the injustices which empires inflict on people doesn't start there but with treating nature as a thing that one can control or even own. It doesn't take long for you to treat people the same way. If we're attentive, we see the result of this unhealthy relationship with nature in the plagues that lead up to today's portion of the story.

Some scientists speculate the plagues were a series of ecological disasters, beginning with a time of warming. The Nile would have dried up and as it slowed it was prone to a toxic algal bloom that turned the water red. This forced frogs onto land, which caused a livestock outbreak, and so on. These conditions also may have caused a fungus in the grain stocks, resulting in higher rates of disease in the firstborn because they'd get larger helpings of food, hence the last plague referred to in the reading. It's speculation, but suggests their relationship with the environment was out of balance. They may not have seen their connection to nature, but it is connected just the same, with one ecological disaster leading to another like dominos.

If we are honest, our own culture is in a similar situation, and we're paying the price for our need to be in control of nature rather than appreciate our connection to it, especially this year with so many wildfires, powerful storms, along with pollution, biodiversity loss, and so on. Paul offers a solution - to ground everything we do in terms of love for our neighbour – but sadly, we haven't done that when it comes to our economy. First, for the longest time we didn't factor in what are called externalities, the impacts of economic activities on others. For example, industries often treated the sky or a river as a commons that could be polluted at will and then leave the cost of clean up to government, or the cost to people's health to individual families,

both those working nearby and living downwind or downstream. This has started to change with businesses now legislated to pay for their impact, but previously impacted externalities were just considered the cost of prosperity, even if that prosperity wasn't shared by everyone.

And the impact has been larger than just on human neighbours. A failure of modern economics is that we don't place value on what is called natural capital – soil, water, plants, animals, air – the ecosystem which makes the economy possible. We see a tree as having worth only when it is cut down but not in its own right, even though it's alive, home to birds, bugs, other critters, creates organic matter that enriches the soil, produces oxygen, sequesters carbon, prevents erosion. We see only what generates wealth and so we buy a forest without factoring in the replacement not just of the trees but the interconnected ecosystem, the natural capital, that will take thousands of years to return. Our economic story ends up being a lie as we omit the true cost of perpetual growth, what Paul would call our need to indulge our selfish desires.

What if instead we sought to live in balance with nature? This call is in the Exodus story too, the people told they can't overconsume by preparing more lamb than they needed. This may have been the approach they experienced in Imperial Egypt as they built the supply cities of Pithom and Rameses but that was going to change as God led them into the wilderness where Moses had experienced God in nature, seeing a bush ablaze yet not burned. As we'll discover over these next weeks, that time in the wilderness gave them a new perspective of who they were, no longer slaves in an unbalanced relationship with each other and the natural world, but reconnected to it as they forged new ways to be in community, relying on God, on each other, and ultimately relying on their environment.

We too are invited to nurture that reconnection, to remember that despite what we may think, or how our economy operates, we are actually part of an interconnected community, which as Ilia Delio reminds us, is centred on God. God she writes is “the fountain fullness of creative energy, ... a creative and dynamic Source of Love, relational, personal, generative” and we are invited to not only listen to the great song of creation but to join in it too. Thankfully, we have places like Burry Heights Camp where the next generation can do just that, to fall in love with creation and learn to see past the narratives of our culture. And we have faith communities like this one where we have outdoor gatherings like our annual beach communion where we connect with our neighbours, human and nonhuman alike. And we connect right here too because as we gather around the table, we encounter God's grace not only in the human but in and through creation, in bread and wine, and beyond that in wheat, grapes, soil, sun, and all that contributes to the sacred meal we share.

It's such a gift. And this season is too, a time to ponder our connection with creation. We may live in an economy that ignores it, reinforces a false separation between us and the natural world, but we don't need to feed into it. Instead, here in this place, around the table, in our homes, around the bay, wherever we are, we can we nurture our relationship with creation. When we do, we nurture our relationship with each other, and with God, the source of our deep connection, the one who sets us free through that connection. Amen.