

GARDEN SPIRITUALITY

Rev. 21.1-6

Earth Sunday, April 24, 2016

Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church

[from the anthem *Come Forth into the Light*, H. Mollicone]

I cannot do everything: but still I can do something ...

I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.

Well, here we are on Earth Sunday, and forgive me if I say that I feel a little helpless – a little overwhelmed -- about what we are supposed to do.

I have been searching environmental statistics this week – not a particularly inspiring project especially when I think about the quality of life projected for our children and grandchildren.

Here are some highlights from various scientific resources, including NASA and Yale University:

- In the past 50 years (that's my lifetime – and then some) humans have consumed more resources than in all previous history.
- Since the first Earth Day, 46 years ago, Americans alone have thrown away 910 billion cans. And a fun fact for us here in Seattle, the number of aluminum cans wasted in the decade between 1990 and 2000 was enough to manufacture 316,000 Boeing 737s or enough to reproduce the world's entire commercial airfleet 25 times.
- 27,000 trees are cut down each day so we can have Toilet Paper. I'm not exactly sure what we are supposed to do about that.
- Rainforests are cut down at a rate of 100 acres per minute and an estimated 50,000 species living in those forests become extinct annually – that's an average of 137 species a day.
- And then there is the controversy over climate change. What we do know is that there is a documented rise in global temperature –

both on land and in the sea. Projections about the rise in sea levels – remember those whopping storms that lashed the East Coast – have a wide array of issues and arguments. But the folks at Yale suggest that the best estimates of the rise in sea levels are higher now than they were 5 years ago. If I were a real estate agent in Manhattan, I think I might be looking for another line of work.

And if all this bad news is more than a little disturbing to me, imagine the lives of our sisters and brothers who live in places where they cannot so easily or quickly insulate themselves from the realities of drought and famine and storm and the toxic byproducts our way of life inflicts on them.

The situation is acute enough that one of my friends with connections in the environmental community told me that some of the people doing that work are losing hope. They wonder if it's too late to really do anything meaningful – if we should just give up.

Now before you think I have totally forgotten the text for today, let me say that this strange, weird metaphorical poem we call Revelation is, I think, a response to the completely rational suggestion that we should just give up on planet earth. While this book has been misunderstood and misused, I think it has something to say to us on this Earth Day 2016.

First, a little background. All those violent destructive images in this book should be disturbing to us not just because they are a metaphor about the struggle between good and evil in the last days. They are disturbing because they describe a reality out of which they were written in their day.

Rebecca Ann Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock suggest that this book was written about the time of the second Jewish revolt – about 139 CE.

If the first revolt in 70 CE was a disaster because it brought about the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the Roman Legion's defeat of the second rebellion was ... apocalyptic – nothing less than the end of the world as they knew it.

As the Legion marched through the land it destroyed 985 villages and took the lives of more than half a million Jewish men in battle alone. That's not including the "collateral damage" that is always part of battle.

Perhaps now you get the picture of where that image of "blood running in the streets" comes from.

And not only did the Legion burn Jerusalem to the ground, it cut down every tree in the forests surrounding the city.

The devastation was total and complete. And the intention was to make this place completely uninhabitable both humanly and environmentally. And if any Jews did try to come back to the ruins, that was a crime punishable by death.

So if the language in the book of Revelation is a little extreme, perhaps you understand why. That world had come to a devastating end. And the readers of that message must have been convinced that it was too late -- too late to do anything; too late to build anything; too late to hope for anything.

And then, against the backdrop of all that data and all that loss and all that despair, the writer says:

Lesson: Revelation 21.1-6

21 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

‘See, the home of God is among mortals.
God will dwell with them;
they will be God’s people,
and God will be with them;
⁴ and will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.’

5 And the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘See, I am making all things new.’ Also he said, ‘Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.’ ⁶Then he said to me, ‘It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.’

It’s true, the writer says, you can’t go back to the world that was. That world has been destroyed.

Much though I am drawn to those stories about the good old days and going back to nature and re-living those times before this planet was in danger, there is no going back. There are plenty of things we can learn from our ancestors. But how to recreate the world they knew is not one of them.

If there is anything to do now, it is to imagine a new world – one that rises out of this one.

It makes sense that Earth Day falls in this Easter season because this vision is a resurrection story on a global scale – a new world rising out of the ashes of a world that has passed away.

It is that wisdom attributed to Martin Luther 500 years ago -- facing the destruction of his own world -- “Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree.”

“I cannot do everything,” our anthem says, “but still I can do something ... I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.”

And so, what we are going to do today – or some of us are going to do on behalf of all of us – is to plant a garden.

Maybe, in the face of over-consumption and climate change that doesn't sound like very much. But still, it is something. And I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.

And I want to suggest that planting a garden is not just doing anything. It is something that is deeply rooted – yes, pun intended – deeply rooted in the psyche of our spirituality. It is about our souls.

It is Luther saying that “even if he knew the world was going to pieces, he would still plant his apple tree.”

It is, as Rebecca Ann Parker says, the way our biblical story “opens and closes.” It starts in Genesis with God planting a garden for human beings and animals and ends with this vision in Revelation of a “verdant city” – an urban garden -- with a river running through it and trees planted that are the trees of life and healing and peace.

It's a story that is re-imagined in the gardens around mosques and Buddhist monasteries and in this city block of brick and concrete and power lines with those beautiful little gardens at one end tended by Carol and Conrad and Arthur and Paul and the new garden at the other end of the street being planted today with our partners from the Bet Alef Meditative Synagogue.

Maybe it doesn't seem like much when the world seems like it is going to hell. But when you come up that street and see a garden rising up out of the sidewalk, maybe it opens up some place in our hearts to give beauty and hope another chance.

Admittedly, I am not much of a gardener. In my youth I was a lawn-mower and a weed-wacker and a shrub-trimmer. It seemed like I spent most of my life beating back the growth that other people worked so hard to cultivate.

In these later years, I've tried not to let that be the spiritual metaphor for my life because, while I don't know much about gardening, I know enough to know that gardens don't just happen.

The beauty of the wilderness just happens so long as we can keep our hands off of it. The wilderness has its own spirit.

But gardens take getting your hands dirty.
Gardens invite us to be partners with the Earth.
Gardens teach us the rhythms of the Earth and they feed us and delight us and remind us where we come from and where we are going.

Gardens are an exercise in resurrection. Plants die. And life gets born out of that death.

I have always said that the most fortunate case of mistaken identity is in the resurrection story in John's gospel when Mary is in the garden grieving her beloved one and mistakes Jesus for the gardener. Of course! That's perfect because any gardener knows the mystery of resurrection.

Why is it that one of the most requested songs at memorial services is, "I come to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses?" Perhaps it is because gardens signal the life that comes out of death.

There is a story Linda Hogan tells about the homes and shops that were built in Hiroshima before the bomb. They were made from clay in the distant mountains where wildflowers grew. So the walls of those buildings were filled with the seeds of trumpet flowers. When the bomb hit, almost every structure was destroyed.

But those mountain flowers sprouted and began to grow in the cracks and out of the rubble and out of nowhere life was in bloom again. It was a “horrible beauty ... of hope beyond our time,” she says.

If you go to the center of urban Hiroshima today there is a beautiful park growing there. They call it the Peace Memorial Park and every year they remember the dead and imagine a new world of harmony and peace.

Perhaps, given the state of the world and our planet, it feels a little naïve to think there is much we can do.

But we can do some things. And I, for one, will not refuse to do the something that I can do.

So today we plant a garden because:

Gardens invite us to be partners with the Earth.

Gardens are an exercise in resurrection.

Gardens are the promise we make that we have not given up on the world and the promise creation makes that it has not given up on us.

So, as the old hymn says, if you come to a garden alone, and the dew is still on the roses, and in that garden a voice calls you by name; well, if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts ... because that is exactly the garden we have come to tend.

NOTES

Environmental statistics are gathered from www.theworldcounts.com which references Earth Echo and the Huffington Post; www.ecocycle.org/ecofacts; www.climate.nasa.gov; and www.yaleclimateconnections.org. Rebecca Ann Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock, *Saving Paradise* (Beacon Press, 2008), pp.73-81; see description of Roman devastation on p.75. Rebecca Ann Parker, “This Holy Ground” (with John A. Buehrens), in *A House for Hope* (Beacon Press, 2010), pp.3-17. Linda Hogan from *Dwellings* included in the anthology, *Spiritual Literacy* by Frederick and Mary Ann Brussat (Scribner, 1996), p.162.