

“WHAT CAN BE RESTORED”

Psalm 104:1-2a, 13-30; Psalm 23

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These two Psalms we heard this morning are part of our scriptural grounding in creation care. They are theology expressed as wonder, gratitude, and praise. They celebrate our interaction with the earth - as an experience of God's love: God provides. God gives us a place in the universe and a part to play in the scheme of things. God restores us. God does all this by means of the good earth – its bounty and beauty, its interconnected and interdependent cycles and systems. No matter how hard we work, we know we didn't make any of the land, the water, the plants and all the things we depend on to live. Ultimately, God is the source of it all – and it's amazing.

I'm sure that the ancient Israelite people who wrote and sang these psalms were similarly grounded in gratitude and appreciation for the earth's "ordinary" miracles: sunrise and moonrise, birth, sprouting seeds, birdsong, seasons, rivers and rain, harvests of good things to eat. They also, it seems, had an appreciation of the way the earth renews itself – after winter, after drought or flood, perhaps even after human-caused disaster like war or fire; this too, they certainly understood as God's design and blessing.

But those ancient people who sang and prayed these Psalms could not have envisioned the realities of our world today. We read their confident words about God "renewing the face of the earth," and we don't know quite how they relate to us and the environmentally devastated planet we are living on today. Those flowing streams ... a lot of them have dried up or are choked with trash. The habitations of the birds ... have been destroyed, and so have the refuges of other animals. The innumerable creatures are not quite as numerous as they were. As we read Psalm 104, we can't help but recall that the connections it celebrates have been disrupted in many ways. When we read Psalm 23, we know we have reasons to fear evil – evils of our own making.

Our skepticism isn't about God's ability to work miracles of renewal, or about the natural ability of the earth's ecosystems to restore a balance. But we know that scripture envisions care for creation as a cooperative project God shares with us, so we know that it won't do to simply shrug and tell ourselves God will fix it. And we also know the words of scripture always have to be heard in a context.

And our context is a planet whose health and ecosystems and natural processes have been greatly compromised, in a way that makes our hearts hurt a little bit when we read these psalms, which hold no hint of the threats to come.

There's been a lot of controversy recently about Nestle being granted permission to pump billions of gallons from Michigan's aquifers to put in bottles and sell. A lot of

people have rightly raised questions about the wisdom of turning over a resource no one “owns” to a corporation so they can make money from something wasteful, environmentally irresponsible, and mostly unnecessary. Defenders argue that there is plenty of water there, so much that they could pump it out even faster and it would still not run out for a very long time. Who knows if they are right in those projections? But I could only think: “That’s more or less what people said about passenger pigeons, and whales, and rainforests, and fisheries, and wetlands. That’s what they said about the old growth forests that once covered this part of the world and the vast herds of buffalo that roamed the plains.” That’s what we said about a lot of things, and we were wrong.

Maybe no one could have predicted how it would go. You could argue that we just didn’t know any better. I’m sure it looked like those big old trees would go on forever. Or maybe we just told ourselves that. I don’t know. But surely we don’t have any excuses any more for not learning from those mistakes of the past.

I enjoyed reading, recently, a couple of books by Loreen Niewenhuis, about her hikes around the perimeter of Lake Michigan and the other Great Lakes. We all revel proudly in the beauty of our Lakes (especially of course in our own state of Michigan!), and she described a lot of that diverse beauty. But she also walked through (or past, or around) *numerous* industrial and former industrial sites on the shores of the lakes, the sources of massive amounts of toxic waste put into the lakes from steel mills, oil refineries, logging, mining, chemical manufacture, and more. Many of those sites remain dangerously contaminated decades after all operations have been closed.

There’ve been many efforts to clean up and restore such sites, of course, and some of them have been quite successful – up to a point. I can’t get out of my mind, though, the description of the former Hooker Chemical site at White Lake. Chemicals too dangerous to move, impossible to clean up... so they were essentially sealed in a pyramid-like vault that covers 10 acres. The area has become grown over with plants and is called a “nature reserve” but it’s permanently off-limits to human beings because it’s still unsafe. There are many such sites ... the best we can do with the history we have perhaps, but you can’t quite say that it’s *restored*. And, unfortunately, there are many more sites – smaller, not all quite that dangerous, but literally *thousands* in Michigan alone – for which there are no resources or plans for cleanup.

Our reality now may be – and probably is – that some things are beyond restoration.

Many toxic substances never go away, so there is land all over the world that is simply poisoned.

You can’t put back a mountaintop once it’s been removed to get at the coal inside it.

Once the ice caps melt, they will be gone (and probably the polar bears with them).

Once a species is extinct, it’s gone.

When habitat is destroyed the living things that depended on it disappear.

The Great Lakes can never go back to being the ecosystem they were before sewage dumping and industrial waste and zebra mussels and overfishing.

Where does our faith leave us? Where can we stand? What do we do when we believe in a God of renewal and restoration, even at the same time as we have to acknowledge that some things cannot be undone, some losses that cannot be restored?

We could easily be overwhelmed and give in to despair, but I believe our faith and our scriptures offer us better than that. We might begin by asking ourselves “What *can* be restored?”

And the psalms suggest ways we might begin to answer that question.

First and most basic of all: our souls.

Psalm 23 states it with quiet confidence: “He restores my soul.” Those words are accompanied by the image of quiet water... and we are reminded that one of God’s greatest healing gifts is nature. Recent studies confirm that being in nature is good for physical and mental health, for improving creativity and memory, for stress relief and reenergizing. But the psalm suggests, and I think many of us would agree, that there are spiritual benefits as well. We find healing for our *souls*. We feel God’s presence and put our lives in perspective. Our spirit revives.

It’s not only in nature this happens, of course. We find that God meets us and restores our souls in prayer, in community, in relationships, in service to others, ...and in other ways we don’t always expect.

Now, some progressive Christians might object to a concern with the state of our souls, as too individualistic, pietistic, and private – especially in the context of thinking about earth care. They’d likely say we need to concern ourselves with our social responsibilities and the needs of communities, with justice and advocacy and action to protect the environment, rather than personal faith or the state of our souls.

I don’t agree.

It is, I think, the restoration of our souls that enables us to engage in the restoration of whatever else in our lives or our community or our world can be restored. It is the restoration of our souls that allows us to *ask* what can be restored.

What can be restored?

Our hope
Our sense of wonder

Our relationship with the earth
Our awareness of God's call to good stewardship
A sense of perspective
Humility
Simplicity
Contentment with "enough" instead of more
Our sense of connection to each other

Some of what might be restored will likely be hard to accept because it means sacrifice, and even more, it means relinquishing ideas and ways of thinking we've held on to a long time. But it could be possible to restore

... A concern for the use the earth's resources to benefit all, not just a few;
... Values that have nothing to do with dollars and profit;
... Devotion to sustainability rather than endless growth.

That would require a restoration of enough
Honesty to acknowledge the brokenness of our situation
And the willingness to repent instead of excuse.

I'm absolutely convinced that we need deep, heart-and-soul change over this. Nothing less will be enough to turn us in a new way. Nothing else will be thorough enough or sustainable enough to restore very much of what can be restored. Recycling a few more cans, a green purchase now and then, driving a little less, all those "simple things you can do to save the earth" – though good to do – just don't cut far enough to the heart of our environmental crisis, which is ultimately about what our hearts value.

On this Earth Day, let us pray for our earth, but let's also pray that God will change *us*.

As we try to find again our proper place in the created world, let me suggest a couple of restorative directions in which we might go:

Go outside. Breathe deeply. Slow down. Look closely at things. Do this often. Observe the changes from day to day. Listen to the birds and the trees. Learn the names of plants. Notice the diversity. Be grateful. Remember this is God's handiwork. How are you going to love it and take care of it?

Cultivate a desire to understand the issues that impact the environment, to the extent of making an effort to inform yourself about even some part of this big topic. Maybe it's fisheries or renewable energy or the rainforest or the endangered species or pollution in the Great Lakes that interests or concerns you. Read. Learn. Go deeper. Notice how things are connected. Share what you learn.

Make connection with of groups and people who are working on those issues, consider advocacy for better public policy, look for opportunities to be part of these work – locally, nationally, in the community, in the church.

Keep alert to examples of restoration that demonstrate a love for the earth, hope for its healing and its future, and the ongoing earth care and creation-nurture work God calls us to. The examples are out there.

Let me tell you about Sebastio Salgado. He's an internationally known photojournalist, who returned home to his family's ranch in Brazil about 20 years ago. The once-beautiful ranch in the Atlantic Rainforest was a wasteland – deforested, overgrazed, infertile, dry, eroded; there were hardly any animals because there was nothing to support them. He and his wife Lelia determined to heal that land, to restore life to it. They formed an organization, got some support from the Brazilian government, found volunteers, and started a plant nursery. They began plantings in 1999. They figured out which plants native to the area did best on their land. They planted more plants every year. In 15 years 500 acres of wasteland became a forest again, home now to about 100 species of plants and nearly 200 species of animals, including some that are endangered. Most amazing of all, streams that had dried up started to flow again. Look up Instituto Terra or see the film "Salt of the Earth," and you'll be inspired as I was.

It's a huge project. And it's only a drop in the bucket. Only about 10 per cent of Brazil's richly diverse Atlantic rainforest still remains. Nothing is "solved."

But to know that here and there God is renewing the face of the earth, in spite of everything, is a reason to rejoice. To know that people are doing that hard and hopeful work is deeply encouraging. To be reminded that we are invited to be, with our Creator, both restored and agents of restoration is humbling, challenging,... and necessary.

Amen.

Resources:

Bill McKibben, *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet*

Loreen Niewenhuis, *A 1000-Mile Walk on the Beach*

institutoterra.org

Film: "The Salt of the Earth"