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Trinity Episcopal Church

Ezekiel 37: 1 – 14
Romans 8: 6 – 11

Psalm 130
John 11: 1 – 45

Don't it always seem to go
That you don't know what you've got
'Til its gone
They paved paradise
And put up a parking lot

They paved paradise
And put up a parking lot
With a pink hotel, a boutique
And a swinging hot spot

They took all the trees
And put 'em in a tree museum
And they charged the people
A dollar and a half just to seem 'em

Hey farmer, farmer
Put away the DDT
I don't care about spots on my apples
Leave me the birds and the bees

Don't it always seem to go
That you don't know what you've got
'Til it's gone
They paved paradise
And put up a parking lot

Those of us of a certain age will remember this pop song from Joni Mitchell that debuted in April 1970. In the intervening 47 years, how much has changed? A recent National Geographic article noted that sprawl – hotels, boutiques and parking lots – are claiming 1.2 million acres of farmland per year. DDT may have been banned, but other pesticides and chemicals, oil, coal and gas, and so many other toxic substances are still polluting the water we drink, the air we breathe and the ground in which we plant our food and upon which we feed our livestock. And every one of us contributes to this death of Creation more than we know by how we live and move and have our being.

Death is a major theme in our lessons today, as we move towards Holy Week and Good Friday. Death has also been a major theme this Lent in our life together as a congregation with our loss of Ebenezer, Caroline, Nanette's father, Wendell, and now Edith. Death, the end of life as we know it, is what Lent challenges us to come to terms with. *Memento mori*. Remember that you will die. That is how we began this church season as we were anointed with ashes, the very poignant reminder of our own mortality. So what do our lessons have to say about death?

In a vision, Ezekiel is placed by God in the middle of a desolate valley, filled with dry bones. Very dry bones. Why the emphasis on *very* dry? Because the writer wants us to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that there is absolutely no possibility of life within this place. The bones are without breath – or perhaps without Spirit – and without flesh. The very dry bones represent Israel, utterly dead, hopeless, and completely cut off from God.

Ezekiel is writing nearly six centuries before Jesus. Catastrophe has struck the Israelites in the form of invasion and devastation by the Babylonians, and the subsequent exile of all the brightest and best of the Jews – including Ezekiel – to Babylon. Eugene Peterson, author of the Bible paraphrase, *The Message*, writes that “Catastrophe strikes and a person’s world falls apart. People respond variously, but two of the more common responses are denial or despair.” Denial refuses to acknowledge the reality of the catastrophe while despair is paralyzed by the catastrophe. Denial shuts its eyes and looks the other way; despair accepts it as the end of the world.

When Babylon invades, denial is the primary response among the Israelites. Peterson notes that Ezekiel is living among people who, astonishingly like us, stubbornly refuse to see what is right in front of their eyes (deniers). There are also some who are unwilling to see anything other than what is right in front of their eyes (despairers). But Ezekiel, in fantastic and wild visions, DOES see. And what Ezekiel sees is God at work in the midst of the catastrophe. The deniers can’t see the catastrophe because they can’t believe that God would let anything like that happen to them. The despairers, overwhelmed by the catastrophe, cannot see that life is worth living; they cannot see that anything good can come out of it because so very much – Temple, land, freedom, nation, people – has been lost. Ezekiel, with the vision of the very dry bones, shows the deniers *and* despairers that God’s sovereignty is greater than the catastrophe, that the people of God can embrace God in the worst of times, and that out of the mess, out of that death, God will create a *new* people of God, God will bring life.

In the Gospel of John, we have the familiar story of Jesus raising his good friend, Lazarus, from the dead. Lazarus’ death is also a catastrophe, albeit a more personal one. But it is God, once again, working in the midst of deniers and despairers – and, this time at least, a few believers. The deniers, the ones who stubbornly refuse to believe what is right in front of their eyes, are the folks who seem to think that Jesus is somehow grandstanding, that if he had REALLY cared, he would have been there before Lazarus died, and there would have been no need for all the drama. The despairers are the high priests and Pharisees, the ones who don’t see the wondrous hand of God at work right in front of them and are only concerned about how the ramifications of people believing in Jesus might affect their own safety and security with Rome. While Ezekiel merely *sees* and *prophesies* God’s sovereignty, Jesus IS God’s sovereignty. Jesus, in raising Lazarus to new life, is greater than the catastrophe, conquering even death. For those who will believe, Jesus shows that they can indeed embrace God in the worst possible times, and that God cannot only create a new people, God *can* create new life.

So what are we to understand from these lessons in light of our theme of Lent as Creation Care? As we face dying oceans, melting polar ice caps and rising sea levels, deforestation, nuclear waste, decreasing diversity in the biosphere and particularly in our crops, and increasing populations with greater demands for the earth’s limited resources, we are facing a devastating, life-threatening catastrophe for all of Creation. Will we, as people of faith, be deniers? Or despairers? Or will we take the path that Ezekiel and Jesus show us – a path that points us to God at work in the midst of catastrophes large and small, a path of hope and trust, but also a path of action?

How do we, as people of faith, look at the bigger picture, beyond merely humanity, and work to promote the health and well-being of ALL of Creation? A wise man, a person of faith, though not of Christianity, Mahatma Gandhi, once said, "If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a [person] changes his[/or her] own nature, so does the attitude of the world change toward him [or her]...we need not wait to see what others do." [It's been shortened and paraphrased to "Be the change you want to see in the world."] Gandhi's point is that our individual and our corporate transformations go hand in hand, that there cannot be one without the other. For Gandhi, the struggle to bring about a better world involves stringent self-denial and rigorous adherence to non-violence, as well as a constant awareness that our individual change is the way to effect change in the world. He also tells us that any systemic change – the Church, governmental policies, and the like – only get changed by the effort of many people working together with persistence.

For far too long, the Church has contributed to the raping, pillaging and plundering of Creation simply by remaining silent. But slowly, more and more of Christendom is rekindling an awareness of our role as Stewards. In the first version of the Creation story in Genesis, God gives humanity 'dominion' over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air and over every living thing. What we need to remember is that the word 'dominion' comes from 'dominus,' God. We are to have the same loving care for all of Creation as God does. We're not here to exploit Creation for everything it's worth, we're here to tend it, nurture it, and be in relationship with it.

So what? Where does the rubber really meet the road when it comes to Creation Care? Knowing the account that we must one day give, everything we do – or sometimes refrain from doing – matters. Here we are on the fifth and final Sunday of Lent before we begin Palm Sunday and Holy Week, and as we focus on Lent as Creation Care, I'd like us to close with this litany from the United Nations Environmental Sabbath. (handout)

*We have forgotten who we are.
We have become separate from the movements of the earth.
We have turned our backs on the cycles of life.
We have forgotten who we are.*

*We have sought only our own security.
We have exploited simply for our own ends.
We have distorted our knowledge.
We have abused our power.
We have forgotten who we are.*

*Now the land is barren,
And the waters are poisoned,
And the air is polluted.
We have forgotten who we are.*

*Now the forests are dying,
And the creatures disappearing,
And the humans despairing.
We have forgotten who we are.*

We ask forgiveness.

We ask for the gift of remembering.
We ask for the strength to change,
All for the love of our Creator.

*Creator God, give us the grace to accept the gracious invitation of the Incarnate Word to live in, with and through him a life of grace for the whole world, that thereby all the earth may be restored and humanity filled with hope. Rejoicing in your works, O Lord, send us forth with your Spirit to renew the face of the earth, that the world may once again be filled with your good things: the trees watered abundantly, springs rushing between the hills in verdant valleys, all the earth made fruitful, your manifold creatures – in the waters, in the air and on the land – quenching their thirst and receiving their nourishment from you once again in due season. **Amen.** (House of Bishops) +*