

The Anguish of the Earth

Isaiah 24: 4-6

Romans 8: 12-25

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“. . . we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him. . . (Romans 16b, 17a).

“To be a Christian means. . . to participate in the suffering of God in the life of the world” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer).

Perhaps you saw it too. It made an indelible impression on me. It was on television a few years ago - a picture of a bird standing on a rock on the shore of Alaska's Prince William Sound. Instead of fluffy, colorful feathers, it was covered with dark, sticky oil. Instead of gracefully soaring through the air, as birds are meant to do, its thick, heavy coat of oil kept it bound to the earth. Instead of singing, as God intended, it made not a sound. It just stood there looking forlorn. It was a tragic sight. I wanted to weep!

Of course, we could use other symbols if you prefer: dead fish in so many of our lakes because of acid rain; or dead trees in so many of our forests because of polluted air; or thick, grey smog over so many of our cities; or fires and bulldozers destroying the rain forests of Brazil; or the quiet, invisible but frightening depletion of the ozone layer in the upper atmosphere; or mountains and mountains of nonbiodegradable garbage; or toxic waste dumps; and the list goes on.

I use these images only as symbols that our precious and wonder-full earth is suffering today. Some would say it is dying. I recognize that I am using human categories to describe nonhuman realities, but I know of no better way to say it. In ways more literal than Isaiah could have imagined when he wrote of the judgment of God on Israel, “the earth (today) mourns and withers . . . the heavens and earth languish together, for the earth lies polluted under its inhabitants.” Can any sensitive person look at our world today without concluding that something is fundamentally wrong with our civilization? The world just isn't supposed to be this way. This is not what God intended for this beautiful, precious world of ours. Something is wrong, very wrong. There are signs of it all over.

Of course, most of us do not want to hear such bad news; we simply do not want to hear that something is seriously wrong. Many Christians go to church on Sundays to escape such a suggestion. They are quite literally seeking a sanctuary, a little island of calm where they can confirm their desperate determination to believe that “God is in heaven, and all is right with the world.”

I have profound sympathy with them. It is certainly understandable, and even Christian in a sense, that we should want everything to be right with the

world. But the trouble is, it just isn't so! There is something very wrong today. And when we close our eyes to what is going on and reassure ourselves that nothing is really wrong, we simply live a lie and deepen the crisis of our planet that will surely rob our children and all the children of the world of God's beautiful creation and perhaps even of life itself. Someone has put it this way: "Scientists now tell us that we face an apocalypse (an end to the world) that is based on data that can be fed into computers that is every bit as awesome as the ancient vision of the Last Things — and a great deal more convincing to the contemporary mind."

It is easy and tempting to dismiss such warnings as pessimistic doomsaying, but it may also be a fatal mistake. Those who issue such warnings may be the real prophets of our day, discerning the judgment of God in the events of our time. If we are truly people of the cross, then we can surely open our eyes to that horrible prospect and participate in the suffering of God for the sins of the world.

I believe God weeps for the earth today. God weeps for it because God loves it; God created it and looked upon it and said, "It is good; very, very good!" This beautiful and precious earth of ours is a witness to God's glory and a recipient of God's daily care. And therefore, when God looks at creation today and sees oil spills and toxic waste dumps and plastic garbage and burning forests and polluted air and depleting ozone and the demise of countless species of life, God must utter once more, not the joyous shout of creation "it is good!" but a loud, painful cry of anguish. "The earth mourns and withers, the heavens and earth languish together, for the earth lies polluted under its inhabitants." Or as Paul wrote to the Romans: "the whole creation is groaning in travail. . . ." There is something wrong today, very, very wrong.

What is wrong with our world today? The only honest answer is this: we ourselves are wrong! Isaiah was certainly speaking to a different situation, to the judgment of God on Israel, but his words ring out with a truth in our own context that we simply cannot avoid: "The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants. . . for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, and broken the everlasting covenant." *We* are the cause of the earth's suffering today. *We* are crippling the earth, perhaps killing it. *We* are wrong. *We* are wrong in our heads and we are wrong in our hearts, and the two are very much related.

In the first place, the anguish of the earth today is very much the result of a certain set of beliefs locked in our heads. It is certainly a gross oversimplification to say that our biblical religion is *the* cause of the earth's anguish today. But still, we cannot avoid our own culpability in it. We simply cannot escape the charge that our theological belief system that has often been preached from our pulpits and taught in our churches has played a part in the abuse of creation.

For instance, the Judeo-Christian faith has affirmed that we are created in the image of God to exercise dominion over the earth. That notion is clearly stated in the first chapter of Genesis and in the eighth Psalm. But the trouble is that we have usually interpreted this image of God in terms of our own superiority over nature, and we've exercised our dominion in terms of an aggressive mastery over nature, ruling over it, controlling it, exploiting it, no

matter who or what is hurt in the process. To some extent, as many have argued, that traditional Judeo-Christian mindset has been one of the factors that helped unleash the development of science and technology with all its many benefits, but also its accompanying pollution of the air and the earth. One historian has written: "Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt. . . for giving humankind powers which, to judge from the ecological effects, are out of control" (Lynn White). Much of what is wrong with the world today, much of the anguish of the earth today is the result of our thinking, our mindset, and our theology. We are wrong in our heads.

We are also wrong in our hearts. Perhaps it was nurtured by the Protestant work ethic, but we have come to feel that more is always better. In the Western world, we are like the man in Jesus' parable who always wanted to build bigger and bigger barns. The more he had, the more he wanted. "Greed" is its name. Contrary to Jesus' teaching, we have defined the good life, the abundant life as more and more abundance, and thus we have made growth the god of our economic system. That definition of the good life, that preoccupation with growth and consumption is at the heart of our economic system and firmly lodged in all our hearts. I am afraid that notion is a large part of what is wrong with our world today. It is why "the heavens and the earth languish together. . . under the pollution of its inhabitants."

It is rather obvious to all that the world needs many changes: systemic changes, structural changes, political and economic changes. But when all is said and done, the greatest need today is for another kind of change: *a change within us, a change in our hearts and minds, a change in perception*. Of course, that has always been a religious theme, but more and more secular scientists are coming to that same conclusion. One author makes this comment after surveying the literature in the field: "Despite wide differences in both diagnosis of the present and prognosis of the future, there is one solid conclusion emerging from it all: ours is a time in which a change in perception is critical to any humane future." I find in that statement a secular echo of the Word of the Lord through the prophet Ezekiel: "Repent. . . and get yourself a new heart and a new spirit," or St. Paul's admonition to ". . . be transformed by the renewal of your minds."

What is the shape of this new heart and renewed mind? I believe we need to understand our creation in the image of God not so much in terms of our superiority over the rest of nature, but first of all in terms of our imaging or reflecting God's love and care for all creation, human and nonhuman alike. We are called to love it and care for it as God loves it and cares for it.

I believe we need to exercise our dominion over nature not in terms of an aggressive mastery and conquest of nature, but the way Jesus, our *dominus*, our Lord, exercised dominion: with restraint, with humility, with reverence, with sacrifice - a loving, caring, gentle dominion.

I believe we need to start seeing ourselves not so much as standing over or above or against nature, but standing *with* nature and to recognize our mutual dependency.

I believe we need to recapture that strong biblical sense that we are stewards of creation, not to abuse it for our own immediate gratification, but to use

it in keeping with God's intention for all to enjoy and to preserve it for future generations.

I believe we need to follow the natural extension of Jesus' Great Commandment not only to love God and one another with all our hearts and minds and strength, but also to love God's precious earth.

And above all else, I believe we need to let God's Spirit purge us of that insidious and poisonous notion that life consists in the abundance of things, that more is always better, and to hear again Jesus' words addressed to the builder of bigger barns now addressed to us: "You fools!"

Resolving the ecological crisis we face today, healing the anguish of the earth will require such fundamental changes within our own individual hearts and minds. And I am becoming increasingly convinced that it will also require fundamental changes at the very heart of our economic system and our assumptions about economic growth and what constitutes the good life.

From the biblical perspective, such changes finally come about only by the power of God, when people like you and me truly "... participate in the suffering of God ..." over the anguish of the earth, when we see the blindness of our vision, the folly of our ways, the corruption of our hearts, and the judgment of God in the events of our day. Only then will we truly repent; that is, turn around, undergo a conversion, and experience a change of heart and mind and total self.

"The earth and the heavens languish together. . . under the pollution of its inhabitants." Evidence and images abound: an oil covered bird, a dead fish, a dying forest, a polluted river, depleted ozone — all signs of the suffering of the earth and the anguish of God. "To be a Christian means. . . to participate in the suffering of God in the life of the world."

To share in God's suffering over the anguish of the earth can be a heavy burden for any of us to carry. The only way I know to carry the anguish is also to stay in touch with the beauty of the earth. There is plenty of anguish out there, but there is also plenty of *glory*! Just open your eyes and you will see it all around you. John Calvin was right: "The liniments of God's glory are conspicuous in all the earth." We see it in the majesty of mountains, the exquisite beauty of a flower, the delicate wonder of a butterfly, the dazzling color of a sunset, the awesome grandeur of a starry night, the enchanting scent of a rose, and white billowy clouds against a blue sky! All around are "the liniments of God's glory" which prompt within us once more the psalmist expression of praise: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole world is full of God's glory." So drink deeply of it and enjoy it to the fullest, for it will strengthen you to sustain the anguish of the earth.

But there is also a glory to God of another kind. It is the glory, the praise that comes to God whenever we turn from our foolish ways, undergo that conversion, and seek to heal the anguish of the earth by becoming faithful and care-full stewards of God's precious and wonder-full creation so that generations yet unborn can enjoy it too, and God will once more look upon it and say: "It is good, very, very good!"