

Tuning in to Challenging Voices

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

September 1, 2019

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

Message based on Job 38 Season of Creation Ocean

Neither Job nor God in the book of Job were climate activists. The main thrust of the book of Job is how a person experiencing profound tragedy in their life struggles with what they feel as unjust, and then God's response.

God's voice, noticeably muted for most of the book of Job, is rather strident here, not giving an easy answer. Throughout, the Hebrew Bible attributes a few different names to the Creator, but it's noteworthy that the Hebrew name used for the God who responds to Job's complaints is the very same name used for the Holy Voice who told Moses that he was chosen to deliver the Israelites out of slavery. Scholars suggest that this is no coincidence – this is a picture of a God engaged with human suffering, not at all distant or disconnected.

In fact, this is a God who cares enough to hear the plight of humans. Granted, God doesn't give Job the answer he yearns for. Instead, there remains great, even unsettling, mystery.¹ God reminds Job, and us, that we will not get answers or solutions until perhaps we gain the power to create vast oceans, land, sky and all the wondrous creatures. That Holy Voice is indeed a challenging one to listen to.

So much so, I think, that we humans, especially humans with wealth and power, try to tune out the wisdom of God if that wisdom cannot be reduced to, contained within, human conception. Eminent scholar Walter Brueggemann often reminds us that in the many Bible sagas, people always seem to forget the Covenant that God made with them through Moses - their promise to love God, and to love their neighbours as they want to be loved. Time and again in the Bible, God's children lose track of the path they are to follow, yet God never stops loving them. God loves them back into a relationship again by sending prophets – those irritating, irrepressible voices – who speak truth to the powerful people who don't usually want to hear it.²

The Israelite prophetic voices are lifted up again by Jesus in the Christian Gospel stories as he calls people to let go of their safety nets and their presumptions of how God necessarily works. Jesus disrupted the conventional political and religious ways of thinking of his time.

To those who claimed to have special knowledge of God's ways, Jesus presented God's kin-dom vision, to be inherited by the least powerful, the outcast, and, most perplexing I'm sure to people in power, *children*.

¹Jo Bailey Wells, "Theological Perspective" *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. Year B, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16).

² For more on this, Walter Brueggemann. *The Prophetic Imagination* (40th Anniversary Edition) © 2018, Fortress Press.

Two weeks ago, I arrived as chaplain at Camp McDougall, a United Church camp in Thessalon. I had an hour each day with the kids to explore theology. I shared with them the Gospel story where parents brought their children to Jesus. But the disciples tried to shoo the parents and children away. In defence of the disciples, they probably felt that Jesus needed rest.

Jesus, of course, wouldn't have it. As he did so many times in the Gospels, he baffled those around him – this time by setting the children up as role models for the elders. He said:

I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. [Matthew 18: 3]

After paraphrasing this story for those kids at Camp McDougall, I asked them, "What is it about the kids that Jesus understood, how do kids understand God's vision better than the grown-ups?" It was a holy conversation we had that day, and I think a surprise to those kids to hear a religious person tell them that they might understand the Holy better than church leaders!

A moment reminiscent of the humorous story about a kindergarten teacher walking around to see each child's artwork. She stops where a little girl is working diligently. The teacher asks what the girl is drawing to which the girl replies, "I'm drawing God." The teacher pauses and says, "But no one knows what God looks like." The girl quickly looks up and replies, "They will in a minute."

Enter Greta Thunberg, a 16-year-old from Sweden whose ability to speak truth to power has inspired youth and adults around the world. She is the cover story in our latest issue of the United Church Magazine, *Broadview*.³ The audacity of a teenager quoting climate science and declaring that our lifestyles, yes, yours and my lifestyle, must change, now – well that is surely a bitter pill to swallow for many. Surely a few of us will accuse her of being naïve, perhaps even self righteous and misguided.

Self described as being on the autistic spectrum, diagnosed with Asperger's, a condition that hampers one's ability to read social cues. She said in her TED talk last year:

*Some people say that I should be in school. Some people say that I should study to become a climate scientist so that I can solve the climate crisis. But the climate crisis is already solved. We already have the facts and solutions. All we have to do is wake up and change.*⁴

Our first reaction might be to minimize the message because of her multiple diagnoses and her age. But, somewhere, deep inside of us, surely we hear truth in this. We can deflect blame to other countries for having larger carbon footprints, much larger than ours.

³ The story about Greta and youth taking a lead, found at <https://broadview.org/youth-climate-crisis/>

⁴ https://www.ted.com/talks/greta_thunberg_the_disarming_case_to_act_right_now_on_climate?language=en

But we know, just as those disciples knew when Jesus called them out, that holy wisdom shines in a child, or in this case the voice of a bright teenager.

Philosopher and Historian Carolyn Merchant puts our present environmental reality in a larger perspective in her book *The Death of Nature* as she establishes that the Scientific Revolution (a period that began in the mid 1500s) brought us many breakthroughs, but it also gave humans the tools to dominate and destroy nature. Science generated a mechanistic view of nature, one that sanctioned the exploitation of the natural world.⁵ Imagine that period in history, brilliant inventions and discoveries from the likes of Galileo, Copernicus, Sir Francis Bacon – this period simultaneously gave us the tools to make life easier, more comfortable, yet that period also programmed humans to dominate, and justified harming Creation.

It's a humbling realization; how myopic the brightest of humans can be, especially when we become so egotistical as to presume that our control over nature is sanctioned by our Creator God. I suggest that God, at least the God that Job encounters in today's story, would have a great deal to say about any notion we might have about dominating nature. As we see extreme weather patterns across our globe, from hurricanes to tornadoes, to melting glaciers and forest fires, I wonder if Creation is speaking.

A special report was published last October by the United Nations body charged with assessing the science of the crisis, the IPCC. The Team put a hard deadline on action to avoid irreversible devastation to our environment: 12 years.

In response to this blunt message, young people in various countries have launched class action lawsuits against their governments, accusing governments, "infringing on their rights by failing to have an effective plan to cut carbon dioxide emissions."⁶ Sit with that picture, for a moment. Young people accusing their governments of falling asleep at the wheel as our world burns, floods. Greta speaks in monotone, "Adults have failed us. Now we must act."

Is there Good News in this message? *Was* there good news in what God had to say to Job? I think so.

Holy Voices are always among us, speaking. *We may not hear them* because we seek echo chambers where we live, and work and play. Thankfully our Biblical stories reconnect us with the Holy Voice of the One who Created and *is still* creating.

This Fall, I hope that our children and youth take up Greta Thunberg's call to strike from school and stage sit-ins at their houses of government. Nature has been warning us for a long time, Now, young people speak out, and teach us how to be the stewards of Creation.

⁵ *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* © 1980 Carolyn Merchant. Published by Harper & Row.

⁶ Formerly *The United Church Observer*, now *Broadview* magazine. <https://broadview.org/youth-climate-crisis/>