

Getting Low Enough to See

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

September 18, 2022

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

The World Council of Churches has invited the global Body of Christ to mark the Week of Prayer for Peace in Palestine and Israel from September 15th to 22nd. As we grieve the horrific discovery of mass graves, a symbol of Russia's ongoing attack on Ukraine.

We pause and are to hope for peace and justice there. It is a busy time for news media; little time to cover the terrible treatment of the Uyghur population by the Chinese government, not to mention the decades-long Israeli occupation of Palestine which has brought anything but security to the people of Israel.

At first glance, this may not seem a relevant observation for Sunday in the Season of Creation. This kind of news strains our ability to heed Jesus' teaching in today's scripture, telling us that we should not worry.

I took this photo during my recreational time while I was in Palestine, witnessing first-hand what happens when one country seeks to control another, thinking, wrongly, control will bring security and safety. Being in Bethlehem, I was on the edge of wilderness, and could never resist the temptation to forge out on regular adventures after my daily work was done.



I found this example of "fauna" on one such adventure. There were no beaten paths, only scrub vegetation, lots of sand, and heat, and hills. Always hills to climb. From a distance, the landscape always looked barren, rocky, scrubby. But, when I crouched down, I saw little lizards, huge centipedes, and yes, this turtle.

We humans are strange creatures. We have this urge to make our mark where we live. Joni Mitchell captured this instinct to transform:

*They paved paradise and put up a parking lot.*¹

Of course, we do wonderful things too, humans collectively. We stand up for justice, we care about the environment. But, somehow, when confronted by science telling us that our comfort and convenience harms Creation, we humans take a long time to change our lifestyles accordingly. Old dogs... new tricks.

Theologian Richard Rohr looked to the Church Fathers long ago for insight about how, just as today, over 1,000 years ago there were a few Christians who got Jesus right:

Tertullian, a third century Father of the Church, often called the first Christian theologian, said "enfleshment is the hinge of salvation."

Rohr then says:

We don't come to the God Mystery through concepts or theories but by connecting with what is—with God's immediate, embodied presence which is all around us. I want you to begin to notice that *almost all of Jesus' common stories*

¹ Big Yellow Taxi, Joni Mitchell

*and examples are nature based and relationship based—and never once academic theory!*²

That is so true, isn't it, that just about every story or example or parable that Jesus uses is "enfleshed", connected, relationship-based, whether the relationship is between people or nature. Understanding God's vision, or kingdom, or kin-dom as I say it, is grounded in connection, in relationship.

One Australian theological thinker suggests that we in the church think that we are main source of praise for God. But consider:

If God had wanted to receive only human praise, God could have chosen to create only us. God did not...

Clearly God cares about all creatures. In fact, God clearly loves diversity to such an extent that some have joked that given the abundance of beetle species on the earth God must be particularly fond of them – after all surely one or two species of beetle should have been enough for God, even ten.

Why do we need something like 400,000 species? That's 30 percent of all the animals that we know of in the whole world and yet for whatever reason God felt that creation was not complete without each of the 400,000 plus species.

God placed us in the garden with all of this abundance. It was as wise stewards not as wasteful and despotic overlords.³

Jesus tells us not to worry. Well, of course we worry. It is only when we get down on our knees, or at least bend over, and look – look with intention and expectant hope – it is then that we behold Creation in all its earthy wonder.

I want to leave you with the poetry of Wendell Berry, American poet, environmental activist, cultural critic, and farmer. This is "A Poem on Hope":

It is hard to have hope. It is harder as you grow old,
for hope must not depend on feeling good
and there's the dream of loneliness at absolute midnight.
You also have withdrawn belief in the present reality
of the future, which surely will surprise us,
and hope is harder when it cannot come by prediction
anymore than by wishing. But stop dithering.
The young ask the old to hope. What will you tell them?
Tell them at least what you say to yourself.

Because we have not made our lives to fit our places, the forests are ruined, the fields, eroded, the streams polluted, the mountains overturned.

Hope then to belong to your place by your own knowledge of what it is that no other place is, and by your caring for it, as you care for no other place, this knowledge cannot be taken from you by power or by wealth.

² Adapted from Richard Rohr "The Christification of the Universe," a homily at Holy Family Parish, August 16, 2016, Center for Action and Contemplation.

³ YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dgjnD8m2Rvg> Jessica Morthorpe, Uniting Earth Advocate.

It will stop your ears to the powerful when they ask for your faith, and to the wealthy when they ask for your land and your work. Be still and listen to the voices that belong to the stream banks and the trees and the open fields.

Find your hope, then, on the ground under your feet. Your hope of Heaven, let it rest on the ground underfoot. The world is no better than its places. Its places at last are no better than their people while their people continue in them. When the people make dark the light within them, the world darkens.⁴

⁴ "2007, VI" ["It is hard to have hope"] by Wendell Berry, from *This Day: New & Collected Sabbath Poems* © 2013 Counterpoint.