

Sermon Proper 16 Year B, 2024; Epistle Ephesians 6:10-20

“God who is present within heaven, on earth, and within all of creation, open our eyes to see the truth.”

Creation Care and The Powers of the Present Darkness

We’ve heard a lot about bread lately. Today Proper 16 is the final episode of a series of Jesus’ teachings in John dealing with bread: Jesus as “the bread that came down from heaven.” I have decided that I will not preach on the gospel today. We’ve been talking about bread for several weeks now, and I don’t want to risk over-baking it! Last Sunday Jim in his typical eloquent fashion explained what the authors of John meant when they wrote that Jesus said “I am the bread of life...Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you.” Jim’s message was that just as was Jesus, we are all—each of us—the flesh and blood of Christ. Our blood is the life, and our flesh is our labor for Christ in the world. We are the body of Christ. We my friends are Christ alive in the world.

So let’s look at the epistle Ephesians we read today. It is a peroration, the summation ending and foundational message of the letter to the Ephesians. As an aside, for those interested in the study of scripture, you may find it surprising that this letter to the Ephesians was almost certainly not written by Paul. Most scholars agree that Paul wrote seven letters: The first is 1Thessalonians, which is incidentally the earliest piece of Christian literature that we have, at least 15 years before our earliest Gospel Mark. Then there are Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Philemon, and Romans. Those are the seven undisputed Pauline letters. The other six letters written in Paul’s name are probably not his. Three are referred to as Deutero-Pauline letters, meaning that they are pseudonymous books—forged writings—written by someone that claims to be Paul but is not. These are Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians. Why would the author forge Paul’s name? Probably because people were more likely to read something with Paul’s name as the author.

Enough for our study of scripture. What did we read today in Ephesians? The author is encouraging his audience to stand strong in the face of the cruel intentions of their adversaries including the oppressive Empire of the Romans, and against what he calls the “powers of the present darkness.” He writes “For our struggle is....against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” Then he gives instructions about what to use against these forces. “Stand firm,” he says, “and fasten the belt of **truth** around your waist, and put on the breastplate of **righteousness**. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of **peace**...take the shield of **faith**...and the sword of the Spirit, which is the **word of God**.” It is about truth, and it is about standing strong in the face of any ruler or authority or power or force that might oppose the truth. In our politically and racially and culturally divided world today it is our calling to first find and then stand up for the truth in all of the issues that divide us. The issue I will focus on today is caring for the Earth. How can this letter to the Ephesians possibly have anything to do with creation care? I’ll get to that.

The political climate has heated up quickly, hasn’t it? In just six weeks we have seen an assassination attempt on a former president; the decision by our current president to step aside and support a woman of color, a black and Asian American, to take his place; and the just-ended conventions of both political parties. And we are now just over 10 weeks from the election. In the midst of all this, and I think fortunately so, we will celebrate the Season of Creation in the church. This Season begins next Sunday September 1st, the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, and it runs through October 4th, the Feast Day of St. Francis of Assisi. It is an annual ecumenical celebration which started in 1989, and each year has a theme. This year the theme is “To Hope and Act with Creation.” We are jumping the gun a little by starting the Celebration today, but we do this today because caring for creation is in my opinion the biggest “issue”

we face today. That is why our liturgy today reflects our call to care for our home Earth. And it has somehow become a divisive issue, as if it is a political football, as if we have an option to either care for a healthy sustainable environment, or not. There is no option! We have to do something now! I don't like even calling it an "issue." Rather, it is an existential reality. We have all heard litanies of the damages and devastation we are now witnessing in our environment, on our home Earth: Extinction of over a million species of animals; warming and acidifying oceans with living fish being displaced with dead plastic; record-breaking and intensifying weather patterns with increasing deadly droughts, floods, wildfires, storms, and heat; disruption of food supplies with mass starvation; migration of millions of people with reactionary attacks on immigrants not just here but worldwide; the list goes on. Brian McLaren in his book Life After Doom, "Wisdom and Courage For a World Falling Apart," says this regarding our current situation: "First is the ongoing story of humanity's bumpy descent toward collapse, an inevitability—sooner or later—for a civilization 'that has overshot its utilization of our natural resources' (sic). This story is not just about atmospheric gases. It's about our toxic political atmosphere and hot air from the pundit-sphere. It's not just about rising global temperatures and extreme storms; its about our lukewarm spiritual climate and overheated religious extremism. It's not just about rising sea levels; it's about rising levels of economic inequality and racial injustice. It's not just about melting ice; it's about bonds of connection dissolving among us. It's a sad story, full of lies and deceit." And yet it **is** the story of our day. One of the important functions of our Season of Creation is to enhance our awareness of the truth about what is happening to the natural world, to act to change the current course we are on, so that we can leave those who will follow us a sustainable, livable environment. The "inconvenient truth" that Senator Al Gore wrote about years ago is not only that we are indeed witnessing climate change and global warming and the destruction of the environment, but perhaps even more painful is that we are all

part of the problem. For most of us not intentionally so, but by virtue of being part of the fabric of a way of life that is no longer sustainable; part of a culture that until only recently has been ignorant of the environmental destruction we have done to the Earth. We might call this a structural sin in failing our call to care for creation. In Genesis God the Creator pronounced the world “very good,” and gave humans the task to “till and keep” the Earth as stewards and caregivers rather than owners (Ps. 24:1). From Hosea: “There is no knowledge of God in the land. Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing.” From Revelation: “Hurt not the earth, neither the sea nor the trees.” As Paul wrote to the Romans, “For Creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God, groaning as it suffers together the sins of labor, and not only Creation, but we ourselves.” Isn’t it amazing how pertinent our old scriptures, written thousands of years ago, can still be? Our home Earth is suffering, “groaning” as Paul says, while it awaits our action. The climate and ecological crisis demands an urgent and bold response. It is a moral imperative. It demands that we look at the natural world—all of creation—differently, that we recognize our unity with it—that we are part of and never separate from it—and that we as the body of Christ are called to help to restore it to health. Our failure to care for the created order has brought us to this critical moment in history, and now we have to stand up for the truth, and stand against anything that undermines or hides it. And there certainly are numerous voices out there today doing that very thing! Or, as we read in Ephesians “cosmic powers of this present darkness,”

I think the Season of Creation is coming at a good time this year. We are in the midst of a hugely significant time of selecting a government that will stand for the truth about many social justice issues, including climate change, in my opinion the most important of all the issues of our time. It is a social justice issue, an environmental racism issue, literally a “life and death” issue. In the

words of the author of the letter to the Ephesians we read today, we need people including leaders who will “fasten the belt of truth around their waist,” who will “put on the breastplate of righteousness,” who will “proclaim the gospel of peace,” and who will carry “the shield of faith...to quench all the flaming arrows” of those who oppose or oppress it. Let us all become aware, become educated. May we choose leaders who will speak and honor the truth, who will help us restore right relationship with all of creation.