

September 18, 2022

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost/Second of Creation

Meditation: "What were we thinking?"

Jeremiah was writing just prior to the Babylonian invasion that led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, and the exile of the leaders to Babylon. He saw the inevitable coming, but he did not think that the coming disaster was the result of politics. Rather, he saw the disaster as self-inflicted. The people had turned from God and worshipped idols and foreign gods. God was about to judge them for their faithlessness. And Jeremiah despairs at what he sees. Both the summer crops and the fall fruit harvest have been gathered. It ought to be a time of joyous celebration and thanksgiving to God for their abundance. But it is not. God is far from the thoughts of the people, and there seems to be nobody who can change their minds. Punishment has drawn near in the form of the Babylonian army.

Perhaps it is because it is the season of Creation, or perhaps it is all the news lately of scorching heatwaves, droughts, and wildfire; of torrential rainfall and flooding; of the discovery of microplastics in places as remote as the top of Mount Everest, in Antarctica, at the bottom of the oceans, and in life-forms around the world; or even of the recent news that rainwater is no longer safe to drink anywhere in the world because it is contaminated with so called forever chemicals, chemicals that change our hormonal systems. I can almost hear what Jeremiah would have to say:

My joy is gone; grief is upon me;
my heart is sick.

Listen! The cry of creation from far and wide:

"Where is the LORD?

Does God not care about what is happening to Creation?"

("Why have they played god, destroying my Creation by clear-cutting forests,

overfishing the waters, and polluting everything with their chemicals?”)

For the brokenness of Creation I am broken,

I mourn, and horror has seized me.

Is there no hope for Creation?

Is there nothing that can be done?

Why then has the health of Creation

not been restored?

O that my head were a spring of water

and my eyes a fountain of tears,

so that I might weep day and night

for the destruction that has been wrought on Creation!

As much as today's scripture snippet screams of despair, Jeremiah wrote not to send people into depression, but to offer hope. Jeremiah wrote to call the people to repentance and to restore their relationship with God. He was a contemporary of the prophet Ezekiel, who, in the face of the invasion of the Babylonian army, bought land and stored the deed in a clay pot as a sign that some day land would be bought and sold again in the kingdom of Israel, some day the people would return to the land. Repentance didn't mean that there would not be a time of punishment, that there would be no consequences for their actions. Repentance meant that there would be a future.

As depressing as the news can be, I also heard news that scientists had just discovered a simple and easy way to break the chemical bond in many of the forever chemicals in our environment. There is hope that they can be broken down so that they will either be benign, or they can more easily be treated further. This is a major breakthrough, yet I barely heard it in amongst all of the bad news about war and natural disaster and the death of a monarch.

And then, on CBC radio, I heard the story of tiny forests. Tiny homes I'd heard of, but not tiny forests. Tiny forests stem from the work of Japanese scientist Akira Miyawaki. Apparently, there are a number of tiny forests in Kingston, Ontario, and Hamilton is embracing the concept too. You start with a plot of land about 100 meters by 100 meters and smother everything growing there with a layer of cardboard and mulch. Then, the next year you plant a small, dense forest of fast-growing native vegetation. Four types of vegetation are planted. A canopy type tree, such as a tulip tree, which is native to south-western Ontario. Then trees, such as ironwood, then what they call a sub-tree, such as dogwood or redbud, and finally shrubs, like black chokeberry. This is far different than planting a few trees in a park or planting a regional forest of a single species of tree. Tiny forests create desirable habitats for wildlife, halt the loss of biodiversity, decrease the impact of climate change, and increase the frequency of nature in urban areas. A single tiny forest can process 30,000 liters of rain, helping to reduce the incidence of flooding. Tiny forests also help reduce air pollution, and that says nothing about the mental health benefits they have for humans able to visit these tiny oases of nature.

As a species, we have not always been the best stewards of God's creation. And whether you think climate change is linked to human activity or not, it's hard to argue that the climate is not changing. The prophet Isaiah delivers God's message that there will be a new heaven and a new earth. Like Jeremiah's message, it doesn't mean that there will not be consequences for our actions. It does mean that there will be a future for God's creation. And for that, we thank God.