

June 16, 2024

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 6

Meditation: “Change is Inevitable”

Once they were a federation, a federation of tribes, but they looked at the peoples around them and saw the wealth of those peoples and they were envious. They wanted what their neighbours had, and that meant that they would have to stop being a federation of tribes and become a nation, with a king at its helm. From the time they chose to follow the path of the world, to be ruled over, to concentrate wealth and power in the hands of a few at the expense of the many, to live beyond their means, once they chose a king, change was inevitable. They hadn't understood that concentrating wealth in the kingship would cost them. They hadn't understood that concentrating power was unwise too. It is said that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Saul turned out not to be the king they had hoped for. They were convinced that what they needed was a different king; one who loved and obeyed God. Samuel needed to anoint someone to be Saul's successor.... only it had to be someone who wouldn't sin as Saul had sinned.

A couple of weeks ago I went to a day of lectures, and then when I was off following the regional annual spring meeting, I read the book that the lectures were based on: *Life after Doom: Wisdom and Courage for a World Falling Apart*. The book is about overshoot and the consequences of overshoot. I know, what is overshoot? Overshoot is about living beyond your means, quite literally. It is about living beyond the means of the planet to supply our needs and to clean our waste. Overshoot is about accumulating wealth without regard to the environmental consequences.

Hunter-gatherers, nomadic pastoralists, even early gardeners took from nature only what was necessary. They lived simple lives. To accumulate wealth people needed to exploit energy. Initially, that energy came in the form of slaves. Think of the wealthy plantation owner whose farm was powered by slaves. Later on the power needed to accumulate wealth came from burning fossil fuels. The accumulation of wealth through the expenditure of power is the hallmark of what we call civilization. Our civilization is built on the myth of an ever-growing economy. The consequences? Slavery, racism, colonialism,

pollution of the air, soil, and water, the endangering of some species and extinction of others, and climate change just to name a few.

The 'doom' that the book talks about is the imminent collapse of both our civilization and the biosphere, and the two are intricately connected. The author, Brian MacLaren, outlines four possible scenarios in the near future. He made sure to indicate that there are probably many other possible scenarios, but he wanted to focus on four. They are: Collapse Avoidance, Collapse/Rebirth, Collapse/Survival, and Collapse/Extinction.

Collapse Avoidance assumes that we will act radically enough and quickly enough to avoid the collapse of our civilization. That would also mean avoiding the collapse of our biosphere. It would mean preventing global warming from exceeding a 1.5 degree Celsius rise in temperature, the melting of the polar icecaps and glaciers, the rise of sea levels, the rise of sea temperatures, the bleaching of coral reefs, and a mass extinction event.

Collapse/Rebirth assumes that we will not act quite quickly or radically enough to prevent collapse, but almost, and there will be enough of us left to rebuild our economy and institutions and cultures. In religious terms, think of it as death and resurrection.

Collapse/Survival assumes that we will not act nearly quickly enough or radically enough to prevent collapse, and that while many will die, not all will die. The environment will not be very livable. We will survive as a species, but only just.

Finally, Collapse/Extinction assumes that we will fail to act quickly or radically enough to prevent or even slow collapse and things will spin out of control so much so that there is a mass extinction event, and humans will be one of the species that go extinct.... just like the dinosaurs.

As you may imagine, the book was anxiety inducing, made me despair, filled me with depression, and so many other emotions. I hoped that there would be an answer, or at least a counter to those emotions later in the book.

Every day that I see politicians arguing about making beer available at corner stores and building monster homes and multi-lane highways on protected land

that filters our drinking water and so many other stupid distractions that totally ignore or try to distract us from what is happening to our climate and our civilization fills me with dread, and frustration, and anger, and grief.

MacLaren talked a lot about grief in one of his chapters. “Grief,” he says, “the feeling of loss, has a thousand dimensions in this time of doom – grief for the simplicity of the old life before doom moved in, grief for the old normal when we assumed that our economy was innocent, benevolent, and sustainable, grief for the loss of confidence in politicians, institutions, technology, or even democracy being able to protect us... grief for paradises paved to put up parking lots, grief for beautiful creatures becoming endangered or extinct, grief for the loss of wild and green places, grief for our children because of the unstable climate we are leaving them... grief for what we could have done but didn’t... grief for all the beauty that will be desecrated between this point and the end point of any one of the four scenarios we have considered. So much grief.” (pg. 51)

Yet, he quotes theologian Walter Bruggeman in saying that grief is a counter to denial. Sticking our heads in the sand and pretending things aren’t happening, or distracting ourselves with reality tv, or beer in corner stores doesn’t lead to grief because we are in a state of denial about the problem.

MacLaren talks about the upside of grief. He said as we grieve, we become aware of what it is that we’ve lost. When we grieve the death of a loved one, we remember special memories that we treasure and realize how blessed we were to have had them in our life. Grief is not all bitterness, but bittersweetness, and grief can make us better humans. It can help us appreciate what we’ve lost, what we have, and it can make us more empathetic towards others. Grief can make us aware that “it is not having that brings us deep joy, but appreciating” that brings us deep joy. (pg. 53)

As I was processing all of this I wondered, instead of thinking about the collapse of our civilization or the collapse of our biosphere, could I think about these four scenarios in terms of the church. Would it be different if I were thinking about the global body of Christ, or our denomination, or perhaps even just a single community of faith? Where are we in the four scenarios? I see

the denomination hiring what they call Growth Animators. Is that the denominational attempt to either avoid collapse or, worst case, work at collapse/rebirth... I mean death and resurrection? What about a single community of faith? Where do you think Dorchester United Church fits in? Don't worry, I don't expect you to answer.... right now. I do think we should all be thinking about it though.

I know. I hear you. This is heavy, anxiety inducing, maybe even a little depressing. And you came to church today not to be depressed, but to worship God and to be uplifted. Where is the good stuff, you ask?

MacLaren says, "healthy religion exposes us to the deep wisdom of sages, past and present, so we can learn to imitate their way of life – so we can live in our time with the same creative insight they modeled in their time." (pg. 204) He goes on to say that, "the best future I can imagine for organized religion in these dangerous times. Instead of helping nostalgic people inhabit bubbles of the past, religious communities can help people go forward... where in defiance of a rising level of ugliness, people cultivate beauty.... seeing it, creating it, savouring it. Savouring beauty within will lead to beautiful outward action." (pg. 216-217)

MacLaren explains, "When our prime motive is love, a different logic comes into play. We find courage and confidence, not in the likelihood of a good outcome, but in our commitment to love. Love may or may not provide a *way through* to a solution to our predicament, but it will provide a *way forward* in our predicament, one step into the unknown at a time.... To put it differently, even if we lose hope for a good outcome, we need not lose hope of being good people, as we are able: courageous, wise, kind, loving, 'in defiance of all that is bad around us.'" (pg. 85). We did not ask to be born at this point in time, but here we are. We can't change what has happened, and there is precious little we can do individually about what is happening around us, but we can be who God created us to be. It is really the only thing that we are in control of.

The people of Israel recognized the injustices of King Saul's rule. They wanted to be ruled by love, and not by greed and lust for power. They hoped David would be better. In reality, David was merely different. God had warned the

Israelites against seeking after a king. God had warned them that what was really needed for a life of contentment and deep joy was not to be found in material wealth, but in appreciating the wisdom of living within the boundaries of the garden, within the means of the carrying capacity of the earth, to live appreciating the gift of life itself, a life lived within the rule of a loving and gracious God, because, as MacLaren says, “our life is not about *us*. It is not about us as individual humans, nations, religions, civilizations, or even as a species... **we** are about life; life that is bigger than us, life that goes on after we’re gone.” (pg. 71)

We are created in the image of a gracious and loving God, so go and be the people God created you to be – the courageous, wise, kind, and loving people that I know you to be, even, no, especially in the face of all that is evil, perverse, and terrifying in this world. And know that God goes with you, whatever happens.