

All Creation Groans; What We Do Matters
July 23, 2023: The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
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Oh Lord, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be always acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

I wonder if there are any among us who have felt the earth wobble?

Perhaps when we are walking along Great Plain Avenue, and we stumble ever so slightly, even though there was nothing in front of us?

Or maybe lying in bed at night, looking at the ceiling, when all is quiet, and there is a slight shimmy in the house, barely detectable?

Apparently, in the past two decades, two things have happened. First: melting polar ice caps and glaciers have raised the sea level. Second: people have pumped thousands and thousands of trillions of gallons of water out of the ground, for crops, livestock, and human households. Together, the redistribution of such a gargantuan amount of water has changed the way the earth spins. Imagine throwing a football with a large bulge in the side. It wobbles. ¹

It's impossible, actually, that we would feel that wobble.

But it's pretty amazing to contemplate.

Paul writes that the "whole creation groans."

This past week, nearly one third of Americans, something like 113 million of us, are under some sort of heat advisory.² Wildfires are crisping Southern Europe and Canada, with more than a month of peak fire season left. Volatile thunderstorms, catastrophic monsoons and punishing heat are wreaking havoc and menacing lives across three continents, with little relief in sight. On Thursday, NOAA reported that last month was the planet's warmest June since global temperature record-keeping began in 1850.³

¹ . <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/28/climate/groundwater-earth-spin-axis.html?smid=em-share>;

<https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/26/world/pumping-groundwater-earth-axis-shifting-scn/index.html>

² <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2023/7/19/photos-millions-feel-the-effects-of-an-unrelenting-heatwave>

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-66195722>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/21/world/asia/record-heat-wave-flooding-climate-change.html?smid=nytcare-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare>

Closer to home, we've had colossal rains over the last few weeks in parts of the Northeast, bringing devastating flooding to parts of Vermont and New York state, destroying farms in Western Massachusetts.

And then culturally and politically, there is the growing threat of “gut-level hatred” consuming Americans as reported by the New York Times.⁴ Some scholars think the existential threat of artificial intelligence may undermine our very relationship with God.⁵

Paul writes about the “sufferings of the present time.” Paul was writing in the first century, in the context of the tumultuous early years of the church. But his perspective is cosmic as well as individual and social. Something was not quite right with the whole earth, as well as with human beings. I wonder what he would make of what's happening to our planet. I wonder what we think of when we hear that phrase, “the sufferings of this present time” ?

Matthew's Gospel was written in a time of crisis for his church, likely centered in Antioch, a location in present day Syria. The story that Jesus tells today addresses the reality of persecution for that Christian community, of the challenges presented by intentionally evil and disruptive acts, of the complexity of living in a faith community following the destruction of the Temple in the year 70, and the amputation of its Jewish roots.

But even as Jesus promises a cosmic reckoning at the end of time, he also seems to be warning us away from knee jerk thoughts and actions against those whom we perceive to be our enemies. In the context of the parable, the real, healthy wheat looks enough like the fake, toxic wheat that it is best to play the long game.

Put another way, it seems best to work on seeding rather than weeding. We might hurt something good in our attempt to root out the bad. And, lest we forget, at least in the narrative of Scripture, God often chooses surprising characters to carry forward the story of salvation. God appears in ordinary circumstances and people who we might never predict, and in fact, whom we might reject.

As a case in point, take the story in our Hebrew Bible reading this morning. We drop back into the saga of the patriarchs and matriarchs. Jacob is the son of Isaac and Rebekah, the grandson of Abraham and Sarah. On the one hand, he is not a very nice person. He is a rogue and a swindler. He had wrangled the paternal blessing by cheating his older brother Esau and conning his elderly father, with the help of his conniving mother Rebekah. He's on the run now, from Esau, whom he imagines has been stoking his resentment for the last 20 years.

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/19/opinion/polarization-nationalism-patriotism-history.html>

⁵ (<https://soundcloud.com/yaleuniversity/how-ai-threatens-religion-with-professor-john-pittard>)

As night falls, Jacob lies down to sleep using a stone for a pillow. As he slumbers, he dreams of a ladder with angels ascending and descending. The God confirms the promise made to Jacob's father and grandfather: land, descendants, blessing for the whole earth, and God's continuing, undiminished support. Jacob wakes up, astonished: "Surely the Lord is here, and I did not know it."

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I take that as a caution to us who work to address injustice and bigotry. Jesus may be saying that there are circumstances in which we don't know how God is working or where. But we know that God is working; our job is to build up rather than to tear down. And we let God take care of punishment.

Now, I confess that I'm not wild about the hellfire and damnation comeuppance that Jesus describes. But perhaps my privilege has protected me from the sort of oppression the early Christians and other marginalized groups throughout history have endured, or I embrace such an ending.

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You all know by now that I have been taken over by the TV show "Ted Lasso." A line in the last episode of the first season has stuck in my mind. AFC Richmond is about to face the mighty footballers of Manchester City. The phrase that is on the lips of many is, "It's the hope that kills you." Apparently, it is a popular phrase in the world view of the football-mad British. It is, of course, a defense mechanism against disappointment.

Paul's approach to hope is different. For Paul, it is not about optimism or hoping for the best. It is about trust in the God of the Universe. In the words of the Black Church, it is about "the God who makes a way out of no way." Or, as NT Wright puts it, "Hope for the Christian is not wishful thinking or mere blind optimism. It is a mode of knowing, a mode within which new things are possible, options are not shut down, new creation can happen."⁶

Hope in God for our future both depends on us and doesn't depend on us. In face of a future that may seem unnerving or terrifying, we stand with God, and we work with God. What we do in Christ's name is not in vain, even if it seems like a drop in the bucket. Archbishop Tutu, building on St. Augustine, is supposed to have said "Without us, God won't; without God, we can't; together with God, we can."⁷

I end with a very long quote that has encouraged me in the face of a groaning creation. It's from the theologian NT Wright.

"You are not oiling the wheels of a machine that's about to roll over a cliff. You are not restoring a great painting that's shortly going to be thrown on the fire. You are not planting roses in a garden that's about

⁶ NT Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, p. 72.

⁷ Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, "It's about Love" opening Sermon, July 11, 2023;

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to be dug up for a building site. You are—strange though it may seem, almost as hard to believe as the resurrection itself—accomplishing something that will become in due course part of God’s new world. Every act of love, gratitude, and kindness; every work of art or music inspired by the love of God and delight in the beauty of his creation; every minute spent teaching a severely handicapped child to read or to walk; every act of care and nurture, of comfort and support, for one’s fellow human beings and for that matter ones fellow nonhuman creatures; and of course every prayer, all Spirit-lead teaching, every deed that spreads the gospel, builds up the church, embraces and embodies holiness rather than corruption, and makes the name of Jesus honored in the world—all of this will find its way, through the resurrecting power of God into the new creation that God will one day make. That is the logic of the mission of God.”⁸

Amen.

⁸ NT Wright *Surprised by Hope* p. 208