



EARTH DAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, April 26, 2009

Earth Day will be celebrated around the world in 2009 on Wednesday, April 22.

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Lection - Romans 8:18-23 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 18) I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. (v. 19) For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; (v. 20) for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope (v. 21) that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. (v. 22) We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; (v. 23) and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

On April 22, 1970, Denis Hayes¹ coordinated the first Earth Day, a national network of rallies, garnering the participation of 20 million Americans. By 1991, what began as an American movement had become a worldwide call in 141 countries to corporate interests and governments to work toward the production of clean energy, the elimination of oil spills and toxic waste dumps, and the reversal of global warming. That year, the celebrations calling humankind to live in ways that promote a healthy sustainable environment for all people varied widely from culture to culture. In Gabon, a chain of “talking drums” linked villages while, in the United States, almost a million people marched on the nation’s capital.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Romans 8:18-23

Part One: The Contemporary Context of the Interpreter

I am a faculty member at Vanderbilt University’s Divinity School. With more than 21,000 employees, Vanderbilt is the second largest employer in the state of Tennessee. In a single month, the institution disposes of 200 tons of refuse which, at one time, was sent to a landfill in Bordeaux, a black neighborhood in north Nashville. Thankfully, the school has begun a

university-wide recycling program as a means of curbing its waste production. Recently, the university reduced its monthly refuse production by 50 tons through recycling.

Like most African American churches, my church had little concern for environmental issues. I grew up in a church that never celebrated Earth Day, never recycled, and never connected conservation of the earth's resources to Christian stewardship. As far as I understood them, environmental issues were concerns of elite, white liberals. Certainly, environmentalism was not a concern for black folk consumed with racism and marginalizing sexism and classism. Years later, as a pastor in Atlanta, Georgia, I became involved with a civic group concerned with environmental racism. I was fascinated to learn that the majority of toxic waste sites and landfills are located adjacent to neighborhoods populated by blacks, Latinos, and poor whites. The residents in these neighborhoods experience a disproportionately high incidence of cancer and other maladies. I began to speak out on issues of environmental sustainability in defense of those who have little voice in determining where society dumps its waste.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

In Romans 8, we hear Paul's concern for the suffering of creation and his desire for its ultimate freedom from bondage. Paul connects the bondage and freedom of humanity to the bondage and freedom of all creation. With this assertion, Paul makes a distinct turn from his other writings. He no longer describes God's salvation as solely reserved for humans, but for all of creation. This creation, in verse 21, "eagerly awaits" the activity of the children of God to reveal God's glory. Paul understands creation to be in decay (v. 22), but waiting with humanity for a new birth. In other words, both humans and the rest of creation stand in need of God's redemptive work. Humans then are not valued over or against creation, but rather as a part of God's creation. God's salvation is not exclusive to any one part of the created world, but is instead a cosmic redemption for the entire universe.

Paul reminds us that we live inextricably linked to the rest of creation. God values all of creation and works toward its redemption. As Christians, we are God's children, admonished by Paul to care for the world that God so values.

The world in which we live appears to have missed Paul's message. We can choose to be the children of God. That is, we can work for God's redemption of the world or we can work against it. As we act with the belief that we have no connection to the Earth, the Earth continues to remind humanity through melting ice caps, contaminated water sources, and rising temperatures that every time we choose to leave a light on unnecessarily, frivolously burn fossil fuels, or fail to recycle, we are working against God's redemption of the cosmos. Every time we choose to live extravagantly rather than moderately, we reduce the resources available for God's children in other parts of the world. We can see it, we can hear it, and we can feel it. How bad does it have to get before we realize that our stewardship of the earth can make all of the difference? Change, in this case the redemption of the earth, begins one person at a time; it always has and always will.

Paul then calls us to a radical rethinking of our relationship, not only with humans around the world, but with the bird, the fox, the tree, the grass, the sun, the moon, and the stars, all of *which* sit with humanity awaiting God's cosmic redemption.

Finally, Paul describes this redemption with hope and great anticipation. Just as the agonizing pangs of a woman's labor (v. 22) occur amidst the hope of new life, so also are we to be expectant even amidst the decay (v. 21) of this world. God's renewing activity is assured! The children of God will reveal it! We are called to make that revelation known!

The redemption is coming. The only question for us is, "Are we working for it or working against it?" In other words, "Are you on the Lord's side?" There has been a great deal of talk lately about "living green." Some have said we have a "green" president in the White House. But for Christians, it should not matter who is in the White House. What should matter is, are we on the Lord's side? If we are, then we surely know that we are inextricably tied to all of God's creation. We cannot live as if our actions as consumers and citizens in America do not affect our neighbors in America and our neighbors in Africa. We cannot ignore the damage done to the environment and not do what we can do from our corner of the world to make things better. Maybe we will drive less, carpool, use more paper than plastic, use more things that degrade in land-fills easily rather than those that linger for years, recycle our bottles and cans, teach our children to recycle, teach our churches to recycle, march with those who have organized movements to end toxic dumping in poor neighborhoods; the list is endless. So, we have no reason to do little or nothing at all. Too much is at stake. The very planet on which we live is at stake.

Celebration

Wherever we see God transforming the decay around us into new life, we see the signs of God's redemption. When we experience life triumphing over death, we see the signs of God at work around us. Every renewal is a sign of the coming redemption. Every time a green sprig sprouts from a decaying stump, God is bringing life out of death! Every time a flower breaks through the frozen ground at the end of cold, dead winter and signals with clarion color the arrival of spring, God is just reminding us that death and decay do not have the ultimate say! We praise God that we can participate with God in the redemption of the earth.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sights: God's glory (v. 18); children (v. 19); the pain of bondage and the exhilaration of freedom, abuse of creation, polluted air, contaminated water, shrinking forests and wetlands, humans suffering from cancers and other maladies (v. 21); and

Sounds: The arrival of laughing and joyous children (v. 19); the groans of the pain and indignity that come from bondage, the celebratory shouts of freedom (v. 21); groaning of labor pains in a maternity ward heralding new life; and the groaning of the earth in increased incidence of

hurricanes, tsunamis, rising oceans, increasing temperatures, droughts and subsequent famine (v. 22).

Notes

1. "Denis Hayes." Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. 23 Feb 2009. Online location: http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Denis_Hayes&oldid=272779807 accessed 28 December 2008