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Where Being Right Clashes with Being Amazed

A sermon given by
Rev. Dr. Peter A. Luckey
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A few weeks ago on a Sunday afternoon, after the final hymn was sung, I found myself wanting to prolong the celebration. It was a brilliant, clear fall Sunday like today. It was a day that cried out for an excursion into God's other sanctuary, the Flint Hills. So no sooner had I gotten out of church than our car was packed and we were headed west.

I don't know whether you've ever been on the Skyline Drive that runs from Paxico to Alma, but for sheer beauty I'd stack that drive up against any drive in the country, and it's only an hour from Lawrence. There's that moment when you leave Interstate 70 behind; you slow down and you begin to kick up some dust and stones. You roll down the window and you begin to be able to breathe. You begin to relax. You see yellow cottonwoods in the dry gullies. You look at the tall grass, the switch grass, and it's turning all kinds of different colors, going from reds to brown to brownish reds and beige to golden. There are bright patches of emerald green in the valley. You look above and see a Red-tailed Hawk. There's a Turkey Vulture swooping down right now on our CRV as if we were a large green rabbit. As you look around you are amazed at the beauty around you.

I imagine that our little Honda is like a prairie schooner. We are rolling up and down the swells, riding the prairie wave, down one side and up the other, up, up, up high onto the crest. What view will await? The air is so clear up there that you can see for miles, one treeless hummock after the next, all of it under this grand, Kansas sky. And you think of Emily in "Our Town" exclaiming, "This, this land, this earth, this sky. Oh, earth, you are too wonderful...does anybody ever fully appreciate you every, every minute?" [Thornton Wilder]

Out of the whirlwind a voice bellows:

"Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me if you have understanding.

Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it. On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?"

A moment like that in the Flint Hills is a moment when you become aware of the beauty of creation. You're filled with such a reverence and awe—a mystery beyond our knowledge.

Our plan was to turn around at Alma and come back home. But we got to Alma and we said, "Why, this is so beautiful. Let's go on to Alta Vista." So we went to Alta Vista. We got to Alta Vista, we said, "Well, we've come this far, why not just go to Council Grove?" So we went to Council Grove. Council Grove was beautiful, and we thought,

“Well, golly, we’re as far as Council Grove—we ought to go down to the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve, go to Cottonwood Falls.” So we went down to Cottonwood Falls and by the time we got home it was pitch black.

But, you know, that’s how it is when you are enthralled with God’s good creation. You can’t stop. You just want to go one more piece. “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?”

How many of you have watched Ken Burns’ television series on the origins of the National Parks? How many of you have seen part of this series on Public Television? And, if you’ve watched it, how many of you have been again reminded of the beauty we have in this country, this nation of ours? Beauty that we did not create, we did not plan, we did not design, but it’s all here for our enjoyment and our love of it.

Sometimes, we wonder, do we deserve it? It’s astounding, really, what we’ve done to spoil the nest. The statistics are that by the year 2050 fifty percent of the species that we have today will not be here if we continue along this same course, this same path. Thousands and thousands of human decisions are being made, large and small, that are bringing us to this place, and it is about us.

Some of you are aware of Archbishop Desmond Tutu; you know his incredible work for justice in South Africa, his non-violent approach to dismantling that oppressive regime of apartheid. We’ve seen apartheid fall. He won the Nobel Peace Prize, and now Desmond Tutu is using his stature—this small man—using his stature to promote and to speak out on behalf of the globe and what’s happening to our earth. He says, “Climate change is the greatest human-induced crisis facing the world today. It is totally indiscriminate of race, culture and religion. It affects every human being on the planet.” He adds, “I am not speaking about some theory....a young woman from Nigeria came and she said ‘our tribes are fighting because our pasturage is shrinking.’”

Two years ago Archbishop Tutu was preaching in a church in Norway, a town called Tromsø, in the Arctic Cathedral. Next to the pulpit was a slab of ice that was melting as he was preaching. A woman bishop of Greenland said, “Ice in our country is melting. So thin now that we can’t skate over it, so our way of life is being altered drastically. Animals are drowning because the ice is thin, thin, thin.”

We in this country share more than a little bit of responsibility and culpability. We consume 30% of the world’s resources, we create 30% of the world’s trash, and we are 5% of the world’s population.

Why has Archbishop Tutu taken up this cause? Why has Bishop Tutu gone from the cause of justice and racial equality to concern about the environment? Because he sees how interrelated all these issues are. Issues of violence, issues of poverty, issues of race are not unrelated to what is happening to our globe in this time. He sees it all part of one piece. They are all ways that we humans have thwarted the coming reign of God.

Now, switch with me for a moment and think about this theologically. Think about this. In the face of our overwhelming problems, there are some that will just throw up their hands and say, “Why doesn’t God fix this? Why doesn’t God just clean up this mess?”

Why doesn't God make it right?" There are some who are going to look to God to bring down lightning bolts from the heavens. Some are looking at God as a punishing God, a vengeful God, saying the days are coming when God's going to set it all right. Others believe that God is going to save us from our folly, our myopic ways, our greed, our thirst for power and dominance. But to those who expect an interventionist God, the evidence is not compelling. God did not save the Jews from the Holocaust and the gas chambers of the Nazis. Then why would God come and save us now?

At the other end of the spectrum are those who say, "God is coming? You've got to be kidding! There's no God. There's no power beyond us. We made the mess, we're the ones responsible for cleaning it up."

So, two views: God is coming, or there's no God at all. Two polar opposites, but they hold one thing in common. Neither one of them gives us hope, and hope is what we need. We need hope to fuel our drive, to fire our passion. We need hope to give us the source of our energy, the power to keep us going. And, after all, what was it but hope that motivated Job in his relentless pursuit of God?

There is a third way. The third way is this: it is that God is coming, but God is not coming without us. We are in this together. It is a partnership with God. It is a collaborative effort. Bishop Tutu paraphrases St. Augustine in saying, "God without us will not; as we, without God, cannot." In other words, God has no hands but ours; God has no voice but ours; God has no feet but our feet; no eyes but our eyes.

Extraordinary, isn't it, to think that we are in partnership with God, that God wants us to be partners when our track record is not real solid. God's counting on us to save the day? Counting on those of us who love to debate and argue and posture and politic while Rome burns?

Look at the disciples that we've been studying all fall in the Gospel of Mark, these bumbling, self-interested, bickering, clueless disciples. A whole bunch of people, a crowd gathered and they're hungry, but the disciples say, "Send them away, let them get something to eat on their own." And Jesus says, "No. You find them something to eat."

In the lessons we read this morning, Jesus is only days away from Jerusalem where he will offer up his life as a gift for humanity. Yet, what are the disciples doing? They're locked in petty debates about who is the greatest, who gets to sit on Jesus' right hand or who gets to sit on Jesus' left hand on the day of glory. These folks are clueless. Where else in the world today do we see leaders bickering, politicking, playing power games and acting like buffoons while the earth burns? Hmm. Maybe Congress?

And yet we are called to be partners with God. God is calling us and saying, "Come, help feed my creation. Come, feed my people. Come, be the sign of my coming reign. Be my servants." I wonder if the voice coming out of the whirlwind is something like the Nike ad. Just do it!

Today we celebrate our birthday as a congregation. On October 15, 1854, 155 years ago, some settlers gathered in a Hay Tent and organized themselves into a Congregation. Think about it for a moment. They could have stayed back in New

England. They could have said, “Yes, slavery is an evil, but it is an entrenched evil. It will never be abolished in my lifetime. There’s nothing to be done.” They could have said that, but they didn’t. They must have heard a voice in the whirlwind that said, “Without you I will not; as you without me cannot.” They heard the voice of God calling them to be partners. They left everything behind for this call. They listened to that voice.

Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela listened to that voice and people laughed at them. They said, There’s no way apartheid can be dismantled in our lifetime. There’s no way that this is going to happen without a huge revolution, without a terrible, terrible loss of life.” Yet, at the end of the day, it did happen. God knows South Africa has miles and miles to go, but it did happen because people like Desmond Tutu believed that he was called to be a partner with God.

I think about all the ways in which we today are called to be partners of God in the healing of God’s creation, the bringing of God’s reign. Every time we serve a meal at LINK. Every time we help house homeless here in our congregation. Some of us are growing winter gardens in our homes, like Josh Longbottom. Some of us are like Scott Morgan, learning about how to do microwind technology and inviting people to put little windmills on their houses so that we can lessen our dependence on the grid and lessen our carbon footprints in the world. People are taking matters into their own hands, called to be partners with God. Not waiting for somebody to say, “Do something!” but just doing it.

“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?” the voice bellows from the whirlwind. The only honest answer is to say, “We weren’t there in the beginning. We are your creatures, we are not the creator. We are your servants.” But we can also say, “We will be there when the new foundation is laid. We can be there, our hammers and nails at the ready, to rebuild your sanctuary, to renew the devastation. We can be there so that your realm will be on earth as it is in heaven. We can be there so that someday our children and our grandchildren and our great-great grandchildren, when this church is another 155 years old, can go out into the Flint Hills and be awed and moved by the grandeur of God’s creation. And say, “Earth, you are too wonderful. Does anybody fully appreciate it every, every day?”