



Singing the New Song

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Sean Lanigan

First Sunday of Creation Season~October 14, 2018

Isaiah 24:1-6

Now the Lord is about to lay waste the earth and make it desolate, and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants. And it shall be, as with the people, so with the priest; as with the slave, so with his master; as with the maid, so with her mistress; as with the buyer, so with the seller; as with the lender, so with the borrower; as with the creditor, so with the debtor. The earth shall be utterly laid waste and utterly despoiled; for the Lord has spoken this word. The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers; the heavens languish together with the earth. The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore the inhabitants of the earth dwindled, and few people are left.

Psalms 98:1-9

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| 1 Sing a new song to God, *
who has done marvelous things. | 5 Shout with joy to God, all you lands; *
lift up your voice, rejoice, and sing. |
| 2 With your right hand, O God, and your holy arm, *
you have won for yourself the victory. | 6 Sing to God with the harp, *
with the harp and the voice of song. |
| 3 You have made known your victory; *
your righteousness have you openly shown
in the sight of the nations. | 7 With trumpets and the sound of the horn, *
shout with joy before God who reigns in majesty. |
| 4 You remember your mercy and faithfulness
to the house of Israel, *
and all the ends of the earth have seen
the victory of our God. | 8 Let the sea make a noise and all that is in it, *
the lands and those who dwell therein. |
| | 9 Let the rivers clap their hands, *
and let the hills ring out with joy before God,
who will come to judge the earth. |

Romans 8:18-25

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 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. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; 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. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Matthew 8:23-27

And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. A windstorm arose on the sea, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him up, saying, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" And he said to them, "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm. They were amazed, saying, "What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?"

We've tried all the things. Or we haven't. Either way, we wring our hands and shake our heads. We worry. We post about our fear and anger on Facebook. Sometimes we show up for a march or rally. But really, in our heart of hearts, it feels as if little can be done. So, many of us will tend toward despair: when we hear that there are only 12 years left to take action on climate change. Just 12 short years, according to a United Nations report, out this past week. It feels almost impossible to comprehend. Impossible that it could really be this bad. Impossible to imagine that find a way forward, together as a unified human species, transcending our geopolitical divisions. It feels all but impossible to avoid the apocalypse.

We wonder still: should we nevertheless devote ourselves to action, or just bury our heads in the sand and pretend it all isn't happening? How in the world can and should we live our lives, with such specific and devastating threats looming over us? Threats that demand not just change in our personal habits of consumption, but swift and decisive global policy action, if we aren't already too far gone. What shall we do? Who can help us now?

Back when I was in Divinity School, I spent a summer working for the Yale Center for Environmental Law and Policy. My work that summer was to speak with evangelical pastors and theologians, to find out more about what sort of arguments might convince their communities of the reality of climate change and the necessity of doing something about it.

Even 10 years ago, it all felt a little bit futile. Because even when they believed the science, the evangelicals I spoke with just weren't worried enough. Most of us still aren't worried enough. And as recent research has demonstrated, Americans are getting ever more worried, and ever less hopeful. Because, as the UN report has confirmed this week, we really don't seem to have much time left.

So those who know the most and care the most are scrambling because they know the sky is falling. But everyone else is still mostly just muddling through their days, doing what they can manage to be ecologically responsible citizens, in the midst of the many other demands of life. But it's not enough, is it? It's never quite enough.

So what, then, does a faithful Christian response look and feel like, in the age of climate apocalypse? Do we have anything to add to the work of environmental activists? Can we do anything that will really help?

Of course, I think the answer is yes, cautiously yes. And I take my lead from Psalm 98. Because when all else fails, when nothing seems to be working, when we can't muster any more arguments... I believe we can still, always, everywhere: manage to "sing to the Lord a new song."

It may not sound like much, it probably doesn't sound like nearly enough...but sometimes when we're stuck, when we're despairing, when we don't know what to do—the very best thing we can do, is to sing a new song. Because a new song, sung in faith and hope and trust, can jolt us out of our usual ways of being and thinking. Because when we sing into the mystery, sometimes the mystery sings back. Singing into us a new spirit, a new imagination, even a new kinship with creation.

Psalm 98 encourages us in this way:

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth;
break forth into joyous song and sing praises.
Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
the world and those who live in it.
Let the floods clap their hands;
let the hills sing together for joy
at the presence of the Lord, for God is coming
to judge the earth.
God will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with equity.

Now, this may sound a lot like escapism, at first glance.

We'll just sing a new song and let God take care of the rest.
We don't have to worry about fixing things,
because God is judge, not us.
We've just got to wait it all out..and keep on singing.

Paradoxically, though, by liberating ourselves from the role of judge, and especially of eco-judge, I believe we can actually discover a whole new way of relating to both our fellow humans and to the non-human species with whom we share this planet. We can begin relate to all of them from a place of joy, of delight, of honor, rather than from a place of anger, fear, and condemnation.

And I think we can all agree that our lives are simply not filled with enough joy, or delight, or honor.

I think that if there's anything that might shift our consciousness, and our discourse, and our practices vis-a-vis rescuing the planet from climate change, it would be relating to the created order with far more joy, delight, and honor. It would be finding a renewed ability to sing in concert with the whole of creation. Singing a new song—together. A song in which everyone has a part. A protest song and a love song, rolled into one.

When I was growing up, we had worship at school every week. And one of our very favorite songs was the Cantic of the Sun, one of those folksy guitar songs beloved in Catholic churches. The refrain goes like this:

The heavens are telling the glory of God,
and all creation is shouting for joy.
Come, dance in the forest, come,
play in the field,
and sing, sing to the glory of the Lord.

I love singing this song. It makes me remember that I am still capable of a childlike relationship with creation. That I'm still capable of singing and dancing with abandon, and that when I do so, all of creation sings and dances with me. Because I am joining a song, a dance...that has been going since the very beginning. Because God has been singing and dancing in me, in creation...since the world was a flickering dream in God's heart. Singing does something. Singing calls new worlds into being.

A year ago, at the 2017 Fringe Festival, I saw an extremely moving piece of performance art entitled "A Period of Animate Existence."

It's hard to explain this complex work of theater and dance and music, which had 5 movements and over 90 performers.

The creators describe their piece, in the program notes, in this way:

We find ourselves in a perilous time, one that is being called the Sixth Extinction, an era in which we foresee the loss of 20% to 50% of all living species on earth. The gravity of these issues has entered mainstream consciousness, affecting our politics, media, and ultimately our individual beliefs about the trajectory of life.

How do we contemplate the future in such a moment?

A Period of Animate Existence is an inquiry into this great disruption. What is this effort for life to go on living; the language used by one generation to address another; the difference between the animate and the inanimate; the visceral feeling that the force of life itself permeates our notions of minerals, plants, animals, people, and time?

A Period of Animate Existence is panoramic and poetic. It doesn't offer answers or action plans. It doesn't kick you in the pants, telling you to get up and do something. In some ways, it is quite harrowing, even devastating, as it portrays how wrong things have gone. But as I walked out of the theater into the bright fall day, I felt the surprise of a bracing hopefulness, which I experienced as deeply holy.

I'm not sure I can fully explain why. But there is something about zooming out. About trying to look at the whole, as impossible as that is, that makes us see again in bold relief, the beauty and fragility and importance of the Earth. Zooming out provokes a sense of renewed wonder, the beginning of a new song.

Carl Sagan encompasses some measure of this zooming out, in an excerpt from his book: *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space*

Look at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives.

The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and

economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every 'superstar,' every 'supreme leader,' every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there—on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.

The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that in glory and triumph they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of this pixel on the scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner. How frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds. Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the universe, are challenged by this point of pale light.

For me, there is something intensely hopeful about the challenge wrought by this point of pale light. Something liberating about the groundlessness of taking this cosmic perspective, about remembering, again, that there is so much more. And so much more at stake.

It is the beginning of a new song And I rest my hope in its singing. My hope that in the singing, that in the joy, perhaps others, many others, will join their voices, too, remembering again the beauty of this life, this planet. And in the remembering, perhaps something new will happen. Something healing for us and for all of creation. Cold hard facts can't seem to sweep us into the joyous rhythm of the universe, in which we know once again, that we are connected to everything. But joy can, celebration can, singing can.

So maybe that's our role as Christians: to be the ones who throw a party for the Earth. To be the ones who pour the wine, break the bread, the ones who pass around steaming platters of the Earth's goodness for all to share. The ones who, during a lull in the party, dig out the entire back-stock of National Geographic, the Earth's family photo album...excitedly passing them around remembering again how good and beautiful and holy it all is. And as the night grows long, to be the ones who start the singing, finding a new song together, even amidst predictions of apocalypse.

A protest song, a love song, a canticle. And in the singing, to find hope, hope again...hope even amidst the groaning of a new Creation being born.

May it be so.

Amen.