



SAINT PETER'S CHURCH

Sitting in Dust

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field

The Fourth Sunday of Creation Season:

Sustainable Energy ~ November 11, 2018

Job 38:1-11, 31-35

words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation 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? Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb?—when I made the clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band, and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors, and said, “Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped?” “Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades, or loose the cords of Orion? Can you lead forth the Mazzaroth in their season, or can you guide the Bear with its children? Do you know the ordinances of the heavens? Can you establish their rule on the earth? “Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, so that a flood of waters may cover you? Can you send forth lightnings, so that they may go and say to you, ‘Here we are’?

Psalm 46

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| 1 | God is our refuge and strength, * a very present help in trouble. | 7 | The nations make much ado, and the realms are shaken; * God has spoken, and the earth shall melt away. |
| 2 | Therefore we will not fear, though the earth be moved, * and though the mountains be toppled into the depths of the sea; | 8 | The God of hosts is with us; * the God of Jacob is our stronghold. |
| 3 | Though its waters rage and foam, * and though the mountains tremble at its tumult. | 9 | Come now and look upon the works of the Most High, * who does awesome things on earth. |
| 4 | The God of hosts is with us; * the God of Jacob is our stronghold. | 10 | It is God who makes war to cease in all the world, * who breaks the bow, and shatters the spear, and burns the shields with fire. |
| 5 | There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,* the holy habitation of the Most High. | 11 | “Be still, then, and know that I am God; * I will be exalted among the nations; I will be exalted in the earth.” |
| 6 | God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be overthrown; * God shall help it at the break of day. | 12 | The God of hosts is with us; * the God of Jacob is our stronghold. |

Colossians 1:15-23

Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him—provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel.

John 11:32-44

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

The culminating moment in the book of Job is the one we just heard—God shows up and speaks to Job. For 37 chapters, Job has been arguing his case, asking that God show up and answer for Job's suffering. And, finally, God does show up, and in a breathtaking whirlwind tour of the globe, God "answers" by pointing out the vast wonders of the earth and asking Job if he, Job, had anything to do with creating or sustaining them. Job, gobsmacked, just sits down and says, wow, now I get it—you are Creator and I am creature. All of this is beyond me, beyond my understanding and control. And that answer was accurate for millennia—pretty much from when the Book of Job was penned until the last 40 or 50 years. Until we humans began to, in a sense, play God. Not necessarily deliberately, but by altering the basic balance of the earth and its life—and thus changing some of the boundaries of which God spoke to Job.

It began when we discovered fossil fuels and accelerated when we began using them on a massive scale, powering everything from airplanes to cars to hair-dryers. In our quest to free up time so we could tackle the important things of life, like playing Candy Crush on our phones, we turned over all the things we used to do by human or non-human animal energy, such as laundry, plowing, getting from place to place, grinding coffee, we turned all of that over to fossil fuel powered machines. Don't get me wrong, in many ways all of these things have made life easier and safer—at least for those of us who have access and can afford them. But the cost to the planet has been huge. Mountains blasted or stripped away and vast mines dug into the ground to get coal. Oil wells that spew out waste—not to mention spill oil into the ocean and other delicate ecosystems. Fracking for gas that pollutes groundwater and causes earthquakes. Nuclear power that generates waste with a half life range of 24,000 to 17 million years.

And aside from the damage that extracting this energy from the earth does, there is the damage done by burning fossil fuels—creating a rapidly warming climate, driven by human activity. We in the US are one of the biggest culprits, spewing more CO₂ into the air per capita than most other countries. Our current government is shredding every policy and agreement that was designed to reduce our carbon footprint and has halted giving money to a fund that helps poorer countries invest in clean energy and adapt to a warming world. So far, all of this has driven a 1 degree F rise in temperature, and computer models make it clear that unless we make dramatic changes in the very near future the temperature will rise another 5 degrees. That is not the worst case scenario; that's the middle case guess, and it will happen in the lifetime of the youngest people in this room. It is a change that will make the world warmer than it has been for hundreds of millions of years and will result in what NASA climatologist, James Hansen, called a totally different planet. This is a global catastrophe—for all of life. Though, as usual, it will disproportionately affect people who are poor and vulnerable, as well as non-human life. The best guesses are that the extinction consequences of the temperature increases we are creating would be greater than the last time an asteroid hit the earth, except this time we are the asteroid. And the latest UN Climate Report says we have about 12 years left to have a hope of altering this trajectory.

We western humans have, perhaps unwittingly, created a situation in which we do not have to follow Job's script. We don't need to sit down, stunned and silent in the face of Creator God, we can spit in God's face. You set the boundaries of the ocean? We can do that too. Simply by raising the temperature of the water, even before we significantly melt polar ice, we'll raise the levels of the seas 2 to 3 feet. "Do you know where I store the rain and the wind?" Yeah actually we sort of do—severe storms that drop more than 2 inches of rain in a 24 hour period have increased about 20% at this latitude in the last 20 years. And though we once called massive hurricanes "acts of God" they are now arguably human acts with each passing year and with each new part per million of CO₂ in the earth's atmosphere. We have done what God says over and over again in Scripture not to do, and that is put ourselves in God's place. God, from our beginnings in the garden, knew that we would tend to be self-centered, need to put ourselves in God's place. And God knew that would not go well for us and for God's beloved creation and so warned us again and again. But we have not listened; we have wandered far from Eden. And we live in an age when pretty much any academic discipline has more authority than, "Thus says the Lord."

To be honest, there are times I feel our situation is just hopeless. Like even asking "what do we do" is futile. But, of course, as people with moral agency and as the hands and feet of Christ, we have to do what is within our power. Things like walking or taking public transit instead of driving, and when we must drive, using a hybrid or electric vehicle. Composting. Recycling. Keeping the heat set low and the air conditioning set high. Not using oil or gas. Buying energy from providers who generate it through wind, water, or sunlight. Advocate for green solutions—Philadelphia City Council is currently considering an ordinance that would lead to city owned buildings getting 22% of their power from a large solar farm. And St. Peter's has taken great strides towards being green—our eco-committee has done a thorough energy audit and has tackled everything from putting in LEDs, to switching energy providers, to using green cleaning products. All of these things help—and are a source of

hope.

But the other much harder part is a spiritual fix—us getting back into right relationship with God and with the planet. That sounds fuzzy, but it is not, it is specific and difficult. It is, with Job, remembering our place in the universe. Acknowledging that we are creature, not Creator, that we are beloved of God, but so is the rest of the planet and we can no longer continue to be people who think everything exists for us. It means rethinking productivity as our primary goal; seeing humans as valuable only when we are productive. It means we need to remember that God built Sabbath into the fabric of the world—not as a luxury but as a necessity because God knows we need time to just stop—to not be productive but rather to just be—to rest trusting in God, reconnecting with our creatureliness, and reflecting on our dependence on each other and the world. Perhaps each of us could commit to the discipline of taking a Sabbath, and commit to doing one thing differently—like hanging laundry on a rack instead of using the dryer, or going for a walk instead of using a treadmill—things that both save energy and helps us slow down and pay attention

The sort of changes I am talking of are not trivial—they require a complete rethinking and reordering of how we live, I know that, and most of me really, really doesn't like it. But, honestly, at this point we have no choice but to change, to act. We are on a trajectory that is taking us, and the planet with us, into extinction.

I struggled for over 48 hours with how to end this sermon, because I always want to inject a good measure of Gospel hope into any situation—because I believe it is always there. I do trust in God—not in the sense that we are entitled to a hallmark card ending, but in the sense that I trust God's goodness will ultimately hold me and the world in a loving eternal embrace. But right now, I think any quick move to hope is false and meant only to make us feel better. Perhaps instead of rushing to Easter what we most need to do as Adam, that is, as earth-creatures is sit in the dirt with Job, grounding ourselves in the stuff we and all of life are made of and to which we will return. Sit with Job, who, although he was dumbfounded by the magnificence of God's earth, managed to find his voice enough to say, "I am appalled at myself, I am sorry, and I repent in dust and ashes". Perhaps spending some time in awe of this marvelous planet and remembering our place in it—that we are creature and not creator, and then repenting in dust and ashes is the medicine we need to bring us back to our senses, back to each other, and back to God.