

Where Were You When I Created Leviathan?

Carla Valentine Pryne

This sermon seeks to evoke the moment when people experienced personally a call to care for the God's earth. It seeks to reflect on the way we need to change to see life truly as sacramental. In so doing, perhaps it can call forth a transformative moment for others who have not yet awakened to the vocation to serve God by tending God's creation.

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: "Who is this that darkens council by 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 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? 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'? Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place?" . . . Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth? Declare if you know all this! . . . Have you entered the storehouses of the snow, or have you seen the storehouses of the hail, which I have reserved for the time of trouble, for the day of battle and war? . . . Do you know the ordinances of the heavens? Can you establish their rule on the earth?" (Job 38:1-12, 18, 22-23, 33)

If we think back on our lives, we can often see how seemingly small things were actually, in retrospect, very important. Though we did not realize it at the time, by a certain thing happening at just that certain time, our life would be changed. Missing that "something" by a day or even a few hours would have meant a very different life. The track on which we had been heading was interrupted and our life's course changed. God interrupted.

Roger Tory Peterson, author of *Field Guide to the Birds*, the birder's Bible, describes the experience—a seemingly small thing—that changed his life and set him on the course he was to follow. He called it a "trigger." One Saturday when he was a boy, he was taking a walk with a friend. They came upon a flicker in an oak tree ("or maybe it was a maple"). Thinking the bird was dead, he poked at it, gingerly, the way you touch something you think is dead. But the bird was not dead, it was just asleep, probably resting from migratory travels. When he touched it, its eyes flew open, and it flew away. "This inert bunch of feathers suddenly sprang to life." What struck him was the contrast between what he thought was dead, but in actuality was very much alive. "Almost like resurrection . . . Ever since then birds seemed to me the most vivid expression of life."

When the popular folksinger Raffi took time off to think about where his music should go next, a pivotal moment occurred for him when he learned about beluga whales in the St. Lawrence

River. When one of these great creatures dies, its body is so riddled with toxins that its body is classified as toxic waste. From then on, Raffi called himself a “radical Earth advocate,” committing his life to creating music that inspires people to care for the earth.

Richard Austin, a Presbyterian minister in southwest Virginia recounts the call to environmental ministry he experienced. “My parishioners were resisting the ravages of strip mining I emerged from that struggle convinced that God was calling me to articulate relationships between biblical faith and environmental responsibility.” Wherever I go, I hear so many similar stories from very ordinary people. These are stories about change, a change in the human heart.

My own ‘wake-up call’ happened after cleaning oiled shorebirds after a major oil spill off the coast of Washington state, the place I call home. Those birds I held and cleaned and, in some cases, buried were beings who were kin, family; in their presence, my view of the world and of my ministry changed forever. I woke up.

This waking is a shift in awareness, a sudden seeing of an extraordinary experience of the ordinary realized as the extraordinary experience that it is—a bird presumed dead that is alive, a whale whose dead body will not nourish, but rather will poison the earth. In these moments, we are touched by the beauty, fragility, and holiness of the Earth; and we find ourselves summoned to a work that will not wait. Something has been happening in people and more so in recent years than perhaps ever. While planet Earth faces the greatest challenges it has ever known, something—by the grace of God—is happening to the human heart.

We are none too early in being roused by our wake-up calls. Billions of tons a year of precious topsoil—gone forever. Ozone depletion, global warming—phrases that used to be evocative or predictive but that are now fact. And consider the critters: between 1550 and 1950, fifteen species per year became extinct. Beginning around the year 2000, the extinction rate exceeded more than 100 per day. In *The State of The World*, Lester Brown wrote, “Ours is the first generation faced with decisions that will determine whether the Earth our children inherit is habitable.”

Habitable! Can you comprehend this? Can anyone? People may disagree as to which environmental problems are most pressing, what timelines are the most accurate, but few experts disagree that the next few years are critical for turning around the course on which modern humans have been traveling. For, of course, we humans too are an endangered species. The task we face is to preserve the world in some wholeness for the generations yet to be born.

“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?” For centuries, the story of Job has humbled and comforted the seeking heart. His story has a message, I believe, for our generation. A message of challenge, of hope, and of perspective—a way to see anew and aright. Job, faithful servant of the Lord, is tested by terrible misfortunes, assailed by so many losses. Poor Job is comforted by well-meaning but ultimately unhelpful friends. They do not get it.

But at last Job is encountered by the terrible and awesome voice that alone can speak truth and comfort to his beleaguered soul. He is spoken to by the Holy One; the One who calls forth life

speaks to this son from the whirlwind. And Job, the one who was questioning, is himself questioned. “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?”

The key word throughout God’s monologue to Job is *understanding*. Do you understand? Can you create? The questions are exquisitely detailed. Can you tell the mother doe when her time for delivering her young is nigh? (Job’s wife would have been very pleased if Job could have done just that for her!) God is not just showing off here, God is showing Job who he is. And he is showing him the cosmic context in which, alone, his life has meaning and his suffering has its place. God is also showing Job the world; by having the mirror removed, Job’s face is turned toward the glorious cosmos of which he is a part.

When the voice from the whirlwind surrounds him, Job realizes how infinitely small he is in the vast cosmos. Human beings are small; but . . . they are small *before God*. Job begins to know his place and, therefore, himself. He feels small, but not insignificant. It is the difference between the insignificance we feel at the foot of a city skyscraper, and the tiny-ness we experience as we stand at the base of Mt. Rainier. When our foot is set at the foot of that great mountain, we feel connected to God, we know our place, and we know we belong. And why? Because Creation itself is an avenue of communion between Creator and creature. God reveals God’s self here, within the majesty, and sometimes the terror, of the Creation. God has given human beings wisdom—not the wisdom to fully penetrate the mysteries of nature, but rather God has endowed us with the precious gift of *seeing the Creator in the world the Creator has made!*.

God touched Job in his suffering. God did not answer all of Job’s questions. Actually, God did not answer *any* of his questions, but after his encounter with the Holy One, the autumn leaf feathering down from the tree, the sound of a stream at dawn, would always speak to Job of God. The world had become for him, as for Gerard Manley Hopkins, “charged with the grandeur of God.”

It is fascinating to note when Job finally listens: his questioning is mute at the very moment when God’s Creation has become the answer to the question of Job’s own existence. Put eloquently by the Jewish scholar, Margaret Susman,

This is not accomplished by Job’s understanding of the order of Creation and the role his own suffering plays in it. On the contrary, he does not understand, and that is his answer. He does not want to understand. There is nothing for him to understand; in humility he has accepted his own place in God’s Creation and in doing so, he has said yes to his own suffering.

And so, I believe, God is asking questions of this generation. God’s questions are turned to us. And the questions come to us not as accusations but as judgment. They come as wisdom and as hope and as choice.

We Christians take for granted the idea of God as Creator. Every Sunday we say the creed, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth.” Yet we rarely make the connection that the God to whom we pray is also the God of all that has life. The Word whom

we worship as the Christ was also the Word who breathed all life into being on the morning of the first day. We forget that the Christ who is our Lord is also the Lord of all Creation, every bird and bush and whale.

You see, what Job learned, finally, was to accept the terms of Creation, not with defiance, but with humility and gratitude. Wendell Berry, that great American philosopher and farmer, says that what we need to do is *to learn to experience our dependence on other living things with gratitude*. “For we are living from mystery, from creatures we did not make and powers we cannot comprehend.”

When we have been summoned—when some powerful experience wakes us up and opens us to the truth that we are living in mystery—then the Church has a tremendous perspective that, I deeply believe, can keep us on track. “I believe in God, Creator of Heaven and Earth.” In other words, God, we believe, is revealed first of all in the things of this world, that is to say, the Creation before our eyes and beneath our feet. Christians are not Platonists! Unlike Platonism, Christianity does not view this world as just a shadow, pointing away from itself, toward a truth and a reality that is essentially somewhere else. Rather, Christians hold a sacramental view of the world. There are no ordinary things!

John Keble, the Anglican divine writing on the Desert Fathers, said of their view of life: “Everything is capable of becoming a means of grace . . . the whole world, to them, was full of sacraments.” So, the water that we use at baptism, the bread and wine we bring to the Eucharistic table, are not accidental items; they represent, in the deepest sense, a world that to the person of faith is in every part a gift of God’s love for us.

Again, Wendell Berry, in speaking of the earth, speaks to me of the essence of sacrament. “I do not mean to suggest we can live harmlessly or strictly at our own expense; we depend upon other creatures and survive by their deaths. To live, we must daily break the body and shed the blood of Creation.” The point is, he continues, that “When we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration In such desecration we condemn ourselves to spiritual and moral loneliness and others to want.”

And so, in a few moments, we will break bread and drink wine. We will take the common, everyday things of our life and give thanks. We will eat consciously, gratefully.

We will also be invited by the Bishop today to renew our baptismal vows. In recalling our beginnings in the faith, we will also be reminded of the beginning of the world. God created the world and blessed it and called it good and gave it to human beings and other creatures of the Earth as food and life and as the means of communion with God’s own self. As the bishop stands before the baptismal font, as if facing the great waters on the day of Creation, he will give thanks for the waters of life and of salvation. In so doing, he will acknowledge the true nature of things—namely, that we receive life from God, we depend every moment upon God’s gift of life. So as we renew our baptismal vows, we indeed turn from death in order to choose life, to living consciously, gratefully, and therefore with joy and wonder in all of God’s work.

We live in a challenging generation, staggeringly so. If one believes even the more moderate statistics and predictions, this is a frightening time to be alive. If by God's grace, we are interrupted and awakened to the travail of the Earth, we need to learn to trust these experiences, to be faithful to these interruptions. Our generation has the spiritual calling to live in a profoundly sacramental way. If our sin is to have denied our reliance on God for the gift of life, our restoration to right relationship with God is to acknowledge our dependence on God and on God's gift of life, which we know only on this earth.

Like Job, we are definitely not patient at all, nor do we understand why things are the way they are. In many cases, we see only dimly in which direction the solutions lie. But I believe the Gospel. I also believe that the future does not depend upon human wisdom alone. We can say "yes" to the challenges of our times not because we trust humanity, but because we trust in the God who can make a forest out of a few seeds, a planet out of breath and song.

Water, mustard seeds, bread, and wine—the gifts of God for the people of God. God will take our offerings of love and work and hope; and though we know not how, God will transform our offerings into life. We eat and drink with hope, in the knowledge that long ago, history was interrupted and a child was born in Bethlehem, a seemingly small and insignificant event. Yet we know that it was not small, and certainly it was by no means insignificant. And we know that the child born in Bethlehem calls us to faithful service for the Kingdom. Each of us, molded and shaped by what we have suffered, like God's servant Job, in our own unique way, will do the work that needs to be done.

In the name of the One without whom all our striving would be losing. Amen.

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