

INHERIT THE EARTH
TEND MY SHEEP

*God marked a line and told the sea / Its surging tides and waves were free
To travel up the sloping strand / But not to overtake the land. (Thomas Troeger)*

Texts on Sunday, April 14, 2013

Revelation 7: 9-17; John 21: 1-19

The poet who wrote the lyric for that hymn, Rev. Thomas Troeger, teaches at Yale Divinity School, my alma mater. When I attend a conference there, Tom Troeger is often addressing the assembly, so I have developed a feeling for his sharp mind and great heart. For that reason, when I see how long ago Troeger penned these words—almost thirty years—I can't help but imagine that he would be the first to say that his verse has suffered a reverse at the hands of climate change. God did *not* mark a line and tell the sea anything, or else the sea wasn't listening. Ask Sandy. Ask Irene. Ask Katrina. Surf's up, people, in the worst way. Either God never had a word with the sea . . . or God's order is out of order.

Today, we are going to think hard about what Christian faith has to do with caring for the earth. We are going to return to the question next week, and the week after, April 28th, when Bill McKibben, the world's foremost earth care activist, will bring our morning sermon. Now, our preaching, including Mr. McKibben's, will certainly be preaching. Proclaiming the good news of the gospel is the heart of our message. But we are not going to change the subject.

In the last hundred years, humans have so altered the earth that ours is no longer the same stable planet upon which civilization took root ten thousand years ago. A different world is coming. If the Crucifixion/Resurrection of Jesus Christ does not bring us before our Maker to account for what we have done to Earth and to one another, and to give us strength for a new day, then our religion is worthless. We cannot change the subject. Why, the whole tragedy of the Christian church in its complicity with the evils of society consists mostly in this, that when we have felt weak in the face of the Cross we must bear, the Church has simply turned the page, and started in on some other story, changing the subject, interrupting itself from getting anything done—and what the world needed from the Church was attention.

Everyone here has read or heard about what is happening to the earth. Last week, the *New York Times* ran a major story about the Qori Kalis glacier in Peru, which provided life giving water to that nation. Ice which took 1,600 years to accumulate in that giant frozen reservoir has melted away since 1980. McKibben recounts that "between 2003 and 2008, more than a trillion tons of Greenland's ice melted—an area 10 times the size of Manhattan." The *Economist* has reported that temperatures on the Antarctic

Peninsula are rising more rapidly than anywhere else on earth, now close to twice as fast as they rose during the 1990s. According to U.S. hydrologists, the drought across the American Southwest has become a permanent condition, cumulatively reducing crop yields of wheat, corn, barley totaling more than 40,000,000 tons every year.

We could read on and on and on until data like these bled from our ears—but that would not be the gospel. Let us bring home the main points. One. The climate is changing. The consequences will be very hard on every species which developed its habitat on the old earth. In McKibben's words, "The Planet on which our civilization evolved no longer exists. The stability that produced that civilization has vanished; epic changes have begun. We may yet be able to maintain the planet to sustain *some kind* of civilization, but it won't be the same planet, and hence it cannot be the same civilization. The earth that we knew—the only earth that we ever knew—is gone." (McKibben, *Eaarth*, p. 27)

Two. Murdoch, NewsCorp, Fox, and the Koch brothers are lying. Climate scientists are of one mind on the question of what causes global warming: Humans have done this. Burning fossil fuels has caused this. Consider this. One gallon of gasoline represents the carbon from 100 hundred tons of ancient plants, crushed down over hundreds of millions of years into that black magic potion called petroleum. No wonder the stuff explodes! If I drive up and back to Albany to see my brother, I blow a billion tons worth of ancient trees into the atmosphere. The fact that we didn't observe this for a very long time can give us a sense of how immense and forgiving the Earth was. After Standard Oil was founded in 1870 by John D. Rockefeller, one hundred years of burning billions of barrels of oil passed before the first Earth Day in 1970, when finally we began to notice of what we have been doing to the planet. We have pushed Mother Earth to the breaking point. Now she is pushing back. But she is far more powerful than we are. And she does not negotiate. When she hurts, she takes her time, then she hurts back.

Three. Climate change is not an "issue." It is what is happening. It is linked to every evil on earth. Yes, you can ignore it. All of us do, in very basic ways. There's a name for that: *ignorance*. Yes, we can take solace in the fact that we are old. Let the young people deal with what we've done, for soon it will not be our problem, since we get to check out before the heat hits the fan. There's a name for that: *cowardice*. Yes, you can get anxious or terrified or depressed and climb into denial to deal with all those feelings. There's a word for that: *faithlessness*. But if you have faith, even as a small as a mustard seed, *you will say to this mountain of oil, gas, and coal, "Move from here," and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.* (Matt 17:20)

Climate change “represents the deepest of human failures,” writes McKibben. Let us put that in terms of faith. Climate change represents the ultimate sin, the final betrayal of the trust called earth which God placed in our hands. Right here on April 4, 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. famously drew the connection between the “giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism” and the propensity of the sinful heart make “property rights . . . more important than people.” Here is how it works.

We make war for oil. The only security our wars buy this homeland is the security to keeping pumping oil and gas into our cars, factories, and homes. We are willing to frack the foundations of the earth and pour millions of gallons of toxic chemicals into vaults of the earth in order to get our fix of fossil fuels. For the sake of oil in the Middle East, our leaders will not challenge Israel to treat Palestinians justly. Food supplies and prices are threatened the world over as we turn food into gas for our cars and drive farm soils to ruin in a deluge of petrochemicals. Racism, the bastard of American slavery and many other evil fathers, is finally one more means by which the privileged keep economic benefits for themselves. Hoarding power is the motor inside the chariots of empire—and empire craves oil, coal, and gas to fuel the engines of wealth. Mass incarceration, wage stagnation over the last 40 years, the gutting of clean air and clean water regulations; an unjust, unaffordable health care system, rotting infrastructure, crumbling public education and the destruction of democracy—all these evils are driven by the unregulated desire of power to get more power by whatever means necessary. Climate change is nature’s blunt instrument to respond to systems which are fundamentally irresponsible. Capitalism, if unregulated, is simply sin. And the wages of sin is death.

Now, for a Christian, seeing that we have betrayed our God is not the worst of disasters. The worst disaster is *not* seeing, as in the words of Thomas Hobbes: “Hell is truth seen too late.” Seeing just in time what we have been and what we have done is the beginning of salvation. By a charcoal fire in the night, Peter betrayed his Lord three times. In the story from John we heard today, a charcoal fire is burning once more, but it is morning. Now, three times, the risen Lord asks the betrayer, *Simon, do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?* With each putting of the question, Peter protests more urgently, *Yes, yes, yes!* Then feed my lambs. Tend my sheep.

Never has it been more urgent that Christians accept these stories not for museum display as if of things that happened long ago, but as helps for ourselves personally, to put ourselves in Peter’s place before our Master, in the full knowledge of our betrayals, yet ready to accept the extraordinary mission which is entrusted to us.

Riverside, you have been wandering through a long night of transition. Like those evil days between Peter's betrayal and his running at last to the empty tomb, this transition has been a time of testing at Riverside, and many have dropped away. But now Crucifixion's Resurrection is ready to behold for yourself, for on the earth as it is going to be, the Body of Christ—living spiritual community—now matters more than at any time in your memory.

The unregulated desire for *More!* which bedevils humanity has a spiritual root which the eye of flesh cannot see. Whoever has faith absolute that God goes with us, even to the end of the age, knows that God has laid within us this eternal hunger for *More!* This God does, not that we might devour the earth and its creatures to grow great, but that we might learn that not anything in all the earth can satisfy us, so great is the need for God within us. Therefore, people of faith can make ready to go where we did not wish to go. We can learn the practice of relinquishment as we literally and figuratively ease up on the gas pedal and push for the bicycle pedal. Our unending thirst for *More!* can turn us to the living God, to the living Love, to hunger and thirst for justice and righteousness. In the confidence of absolute faith in God, our work now is to see a new fulfillment of the vision of John. *Do you love me? Feed my lambs. Do you love me? Tend my sheep. Bring the multitudes out of the great ordeal; that they might hunger no more, and thirst no more; and the sun not strike them, nor any scorching heat.*

Riverside, it is time to act. Ask God to help you give up all small-mindedness, all petty back-biting and anxiousness. Take on the vision worthy of your calling. Understand that private virtues—changing light bulbs, recycling, walking to work—while important are no match for the unregulated forces of wealth arrayed against the earth. Much more movement is needed. Democracy, regulation, and laws are the only paths to a sustainable future. Politics and faith must come together as never before. On April 28, when Bill McKibben is here, let us be thousands in this sanctuary. Every day, invite another person to come to church on April 28th. We will pass flyers out all over the city. Later this week, you can come get as many as you want. We will give you a Riverside T-shirt to identify you as one sent for a whole world from this place. Someone even suggested we use no bulletins on April 28, but project on a screen whatever you need to see. I believe Riverside must divest itself of its \$10 million in stocks in fossil-fuel-related companies. It is time to become who you are. Go. Feed my lambs! Tend my sheep!

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*The Riverside Church
in the City of New York*