

Company of Preachers - Preaching for the Planet – by Jenny Wilson

Introduction

“Beginners” by Denise Levertov:

*But we have only begun
to love the earth.
We have only begun
to imagine the fullness of life.
How could we tire of hope?
—so much is in bud.
How can desire fail?
—we have only begun
to imagine justice and mercy,
only begun to envision
how it might be
to live as siblings with beast and flower,
not as oppressors.
Surely our river
cannot already be hastening
into the sea of nonbeing?
Surely it cannot
drag, in the silt,
all that is innocent?
Not yet, not yet—
there is too much broken
that must be mended,
too much hurt we have done to each other
that cannot yet be forgiven.
We have only begun to know*

*the power that is in us if we would join
our solitudes in the communion of struggle.
So much is unfolding that must
complete its gesture,
so much is in bud.*

1. Preaching – sermons as moments of conversion

Barbara Brown Taylor

Sometimes I think we resemble matchmakers more than anything else. Turning one way we carry the longings of the human heart to God. Do you love us? Do you care? Turning the other way, we bring back the answer. The reason you do not know is that you have never been loved like this before. If you let me, I will dissolve your heart with love. This is the kind of dialogue that calls for economy, courtesy, and reverence in the language we use. If we speak too long, or too factually, we will never help the lovers get together. Our job is to choose the fewest best words that allow them to find one another and then to get out of the way.¹

Eugene Peterson

What pastors do, or at least are called to do, is really quite simple. We say the word God accurately, so that congregations of Christians can stay in touch with the basic realities of their existence, so they know what is going on. We say the Name personally alongside our parishioners in the actual circumstances of their lives, so they will recognise and respond to the God who is both on our side and at our side when it doesn't seem like it and we don't feel like it. Why do we have such a difficult time keeping this focus? Why are we so easily distracted?²

¹ Taylor, Barbara Brown *When God is Silent* (Plymouth, UK: Cowley Publications, 1998), pp100-1.

² Peterson, Eugene *Under the Unpredictable Plant* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), p172.

...we easily slip into the routines of merchandising moral advice and religious comfort. Before long we find we are program directors in a flourishing business. We spend our time figuring out how to attractively display god products. We become skilled at pleasing the customers. Before we realise what has happened, the mystery and love and majesty of God, to say nothing of the tender and delicate subtleties of souls, are obliterated by the noise and frenzy of the religious marketplace.³

Walter Brueggemann

(1)“People are changed not by ethical urging but by transformed imagination.”⁴

(2)“Is there any word from the Lord? (Jer 37:17) We reach out, in fear and hope, to be addressed by newness, because we know the human spirit will wither if there is no address.”⁵

The prophet Isaiah, speaking in the context of the exile of the people of Israel in Babylon, responds: “‘Here is your God!’ (Isaiah 40:9) [Brueggemann reflects ...]The very utterance opened a new possibility that the poet will present”⁶ Brueggemann, who describes his preacher as a poet, gives to that poet *extraordinary creative power*: “The poet in vivid imagination can create ...”⁷

This is indeed a word from the outside ... a word that comes in the way of poetry, that offers no explanation, no certainty, no accommodation to the agents of surveillance. It is a moment of utterance!everything has now been changed by the poetic utterance, because the *poetry cannot be unsaid* ...The word has been uttered and the juices of alternative possibility have begun to flow.⁸

2.Preaching for the Planet – the Preacher as a Magpie

3.Bright Things

(1)Theology

Pope Francis in *Laudato Si-our care of our common home*

³ Peterson, p173.

⁴ Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination* p25.

⁵ Brueggemann, *The Word Militant – Preaching a Decentering Word*, pp1-20, p3.

⁶ Ibid, p6.

⁷ Ibid, p7.

⁸ Ibid, p8.

“The creation accounts in the Book of Genesis contain, in their own symbolic and narrative language, profound teachings about human existence and its historical reality. They suggest that human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour, and with the earth itself. ...these three vital relationships have been broken, both outwardly and within us. This rupture is sin. The harmony between the Creator, humanity and creation as a whole was disrupted by our assuming the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations. This in turn distorted our mandate to “have dominion” over the earth (cf Gen 1:28), to “till it and keep it (Gen 2:15).As a result the originally harmonious relationship between human beings and nature became conflictual.” (LS 66)

“The term ““dominion” has [wrongly] encouraged the unbridled exploitation of nature ... “Tilling” refers cultivation, ploughing and working, while “keeping” means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving. This implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature. ... “The earth is the Lord’s” [psalm 24 says in verse 1], “to him belongs the earth with all that is within it [we find in Deuteronomy 10:14]” (LS 67)

“In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the word “creation” has a broader meaning than “nature”, for it has to do with God’s loving plan in which every creature has value and significance. Nature is usually seen as a system which can be studied, understood and controlled, whereas creation can only be understood as a gift from the outstretched hand of the father of all, and as a reality illuminated by the love which calls us together into universal communion.” (LS 76)

“Our insistence that each human being is an image of God should not make us overlook the fact that each creature has its own purpose. None is superfluous. The entire material world speaks of God’s love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God. [Now there is poetry!!] The history of our friendship with God is always linked to particular places which take on an intensely personal meaning ... going back to those places is a chance to recover something of their true selves.” (LS 84)

“With moving tenderness he would remind them that each one of them is important in God’s eyes: “Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. ... The Lord was able to invite others to be attentive to the beauty that there is in the

world because he himself was in constant touch with nature, lending it attention full of fondness and wonder.” (LS 96, 97)

“Keeping Watch for Kingfishers” – by Jenny Wilson

Each one of us have seen pictures in social and news media of whales with their stomachs choking in plastic bags, of birds with their stomachs filled with tiny and less than tiny pieces of coloured plastic that they are enticed into believing is food. We have seen photos of sea shores covered with plastic bottles. What does God see as God looks upon our planet from the sky? A white film of plastic on the shores and seas that were to be a safe home for sea life, for human life? A white film of this substance that threatens to choke us.... A white film not unlike leprosy, perhaps, on the planet?

Does the planet cry out to God ... “If you choose, you can make me clean”?

...And can we doubt that Jesus gazes on the planet with pity and compassion and raging anger at what has been done to her and replies “I do choose, be made clean.”(p52)

(2)Words from Companions in Loving Creation

David Attenborough:

“We’ve seen albatrosses come back with their belly full of food for their young and nothing in it. The albatross parent has been away for three weeks gathering stuff for her young and what comes out? What does she give her chick? You think it’s going to be squid, but it’s plastic. The chick is going to starve and die.”⁹

David Attenborough says in another interview¹⁰:

“Plastic manufacturers happily say when you’ve used it throw it away, discard it. There is no away. Plastic is so permanent, so indestructible that when you’ve cast it into the ocean it does not go away. ... I am certain that when people understand the consequences of what they are doing that they will care for the rest of the world in a profound way ... There are simple things that we can do. ...”

Greta Thunberg

Was it listening to the sixteen year old Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg addressing the European Union Council about the desperate state of our planet? As she spoke of a “sixth mass extinction” her voice faltered. “The extinction rate is up to six times faster than what is considered normal, with up to 200 species becoming extinct every single day,” she said. “Erosion of fertile topsoil, deforestation of the rainforest, toxic air pollution, loss of insects and wildlife, acidification of our oceans – these are all disastrous trends. ... It is still not too late to act. It will take a far-reaching vision, it will take courage, it will take fierce, fierce determination to act now, to lay the foundations where we may not know all the details about

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/oct/15/david-attenborough-urges-immediate-action-on-plastics-blue-planet>

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cX1T79ZKJqM&feature=youtu.be>

how to shape the ceiling,” she said. “In other words it will take cathedral thinking. I ask you to please wake up and make changes required possible.”¹¹

St Francis

“The Franciscan approach to care for creation expresses Francis’ practice of humility in a way that neither utilitarian nor stewardship ethics do. Francis is a brother to all creation; he was not a steward. He did not view elements or animals as something for which he was responsible but rather as brothers or sisters to which he was related. Francis rejected power, ownership and authority for himself. He wanted to be humble, to live in solidarity with creation just as Christ did through the incarnation. Francis recognised Jesus as “brother” through his shared humanity with others and thus his shared corporeality. His encounter with wild animals provoked a greater consciousness of his vocation as brother to all creation. ... Francis and Franciscan theologians describe the Earth and its diversity as sacramental. Life on earth has intrinsic value because it is created by God, not merely because of its intrinsic worth.”¹²

4. Creation and Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril by Elizabeth Johnson

Clara: I know many people who believe in God’s mercy in Christ but find it difficult to connect this faith with the ecological world, despite our discussion here. You can spell out the implications of creation, cross, resurrection, and incarnation all you want, but it feels like a giant seismic shift to rearrange the faith furniture in their head to see that all creatures are embraced by God’s mercy.

Elizabeth: We have already discussed a major reason for this, namely, the Western philosophy that holds humans are superior to the material world which, in turn, is made for our use. The problem resides in a tyrannical anthropology. We loom so large in our own minds that we block out the others around us. The last part of the trail, therefore, will be made up of small stepping stones that fitted together can move us toward conversion not only by thinking more inclusively but also by feeling kinship with other creatures. The goal is to live in the spirit of the burning bush, to see, hear, and “know” the world in a godly sense. Toward that end, I propose that we engage in five thought experiments.

¹¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/apr/16/greta-thunberg-urges-eu-leaders-wake-up-climate-change-school-strike-movement>

¹² Ilia Delio et al *Care for Creation* p77.

Together their cumulative effect may rejuvenate our imagination so that faith convictions of mind and heart can flow to practical ecological commitments.¹³

These stepping stones consist of imaginative exercises. Elizabeth writes that the first is to: *...bring to mind the picture of our planet taken from the moon. There it is, a beautiful blue marble spinning against the vast black background of space. Now imagine that under its shielding atmosphere there exists an network of living creatures ranging in size from wee microorganisms to giant sequoias and massive blue whales, including humans toward the larger end of the scale, all interacting with the land, water, and air of their different ecosystems. In scientific terms this enveloping skein of life is called the biosphere. In faith terms it is called the community of creation. Picture yourself as an indigenous member of this community.*¹⁴

With this image in mind the second thought experiment invites us to let go of a pyramid view of creation with human beings at the top:

This exercise, Elizabeth writes, *aims to remove a key obstruction that prevents us from taking the community of creation seriously. So imagine yourself stepping down from the tip of a pyramid of privilege and rejoining other creatures as their kin in the circle of life on earth. ... biblical authors consistently place human beings within, not over, the magnificent interdependent circle of life, whose center and encompassing horizon is the generous creating God. Ponder Psalm 104. Here one does not find the duality of humans and nature or the grant of dominion over creation typical of Western tradition. Rather, in cascades of ecologically-attuned poetry this prayer puts all creatures including human beings on a plane of equality in the wonderful order of God's creation.*¹⁵

Johnson goes on in the third thought experiment to ask us to imagine seeing creation as God sees it, quoting Pope Francis, “we are called to recognize that other living beings have a value of their own in God's eyes” (LS69)... Even the fleeting life of the least of beings is the object of God's love, and in its few seconds of existence, God enfolds it with affection” (LS77).¹⁶ He writes so that we will become “painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening in the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it” (LS19).¹⁷

¹³ Elizabeth A. Johnson *Creation and Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril* p 198.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p199.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p203, 205

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p209

¹⁷ *Ibid.* P210

The chapter continues with the reader reimagining the word “us” in the scriptures. When in Matthew’s Gospel Jesus is called “Emmanuel – God with us” who is the “us”? When in the Prologue of John’s Gospel we read “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” again, who is the “us”. Johnson writes:

With this imaginative move we come full circle, back to the round blue earth with humans and all creatures together as a community of creation, and bring this kinship relation to expression in pronouns. If the previous experiments have succeeded, if we imagine our human selves as part of the community of creation, come down from the pinnacle of privilege to rejoin the circle of life, acknowledge the intrinsic value of other creatures, and see their interaction with the living God, then we should be able to include them with ourselves at appropriate moments. So reimagine “us.” Try to expand the boundaries of “us” when you think, speak, pray, teach, preach, read, or propose actions, in order to include other creatures along with our human selves in relation to God.¹⁸

Conclusion

¹⁸ Ibid. P216.