

Care for Creation Commentary on the Common Lectionary

Readings for the Season of Lent, Year B 2021

By Dennis Ormseth, for *Green Blades Rising*

Salvation with Animals and Land

Readings for the Season of Lent, Year B,
Third and fourth Sundays, March 7 and 14, 2021

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Does otherkind matter in the Lenten narrative of salvation? If humankind is obviously the reality that needs rescue and repair, the rest of creation has inestimable interest in seeing that it happens, given that we are now in the human-dominated Age of the Anthropocene. Looking out for otherkind's presence in the lectionary texts through Lent is accordingly more rewarding than one might at first expect.

Third Sunday of Lent, Year B, March 7, 2021

Exodus 20:1-17

Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

John 2:13-22

Non-human creation appears to have only a bit part in the drama of this Sunday's gospel. We can imagine caged doves cooing, tethered cattle and sheep, mooing and bleating, shifting restlessly as they await their dark fate. There would have been a brief burst of mayhem when Jesus took in hand the soft whip he made from cords lying around and gently drove them off the Court of the Gentiles. But attention would have shifted quickly to the coins spilling out across the floor as tables crashed to the pavement. The disciples saw how angry he was, John remarked; his action had reminded them of the words of Psalm 69: "It is zeal for your house that has consumed me, the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." By the time anyone thought to look, the animals were no doubt out of sight, far down the mountain.

However minor their part, these animals are significant for our understanding of the event. They were in the court to be sacrificed in temple ritual. Why Jesus drove them out presumably had something to do with that fact. Were they polluting the sacred precinct? Were their owners making an inordinate profit on a corruptly advantaged connection to the priests? Noting that Christians terminated the practice of animal sacrifice, was Jesus opposed to animal sacrifice? Such arguments have been made. What's at stake for us in Jesus' cleansing of the temple, and especially the magnitude of it, can presently be well illuminated, however, by comparing it to the recent riot at the U.S. Capitol. The reading this Sunday might well induce reverberations of that astounding event in congregants' minds. And there are indeed some striking similarities between the riot and Jesus' cleansing of the temple: both actions

occurred at the symbolic center of each capitol; both interrupted a ritual of signal importance for national life. And very significantly, both led to death of participants, in Jesus' case, according to the Gospel of Matthew, his own: his words at the event were cited by witnesses at his trial and taunters at the cross (Matthew 26:61, 27:40). Finally, the legitimacy of both was immediately questioned, and became notoriously controversial, subject to rival explanations, as we have already suggested with respect to Jesus.

We have made note of these similarities to alert the reader to the immense significance of the event of the cleansing. We will step away from further comparisons, however, so as to avoid partisan conflicts; readers can make any further comparisons on their own! They are also very different events, and factual differences between the narratives of the synoptic gospels and the one here from John also complicate the interpretation of the event: the synoptic accounts place it at the beginning of Jesus' visit to Jerusalem in his last week, thus making its connection with Jesus' trial and death dramatically immediate; John instead places it in close to the beginning of his ministry, as a sign pointing to what Jesus' entire mission is about. But he then also ties the event to talk that links destruction of the temple with Jesus' death and resurrection. Interpretation of the event as reported in the synoptic account remains fundamental to our appropriation of its meaning for care of creation. We will consider it first, and then turn to John's additions.

What was Jesus' intent in his action, and by what law or principle could it have been justified? In their book on *The Last Week* of Jesus' life, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan develop their masterful analysis of the cleaning of the temple primarily on the basis of the Markan account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and his immediate attention to what's happening at the temple. Mark, they write, "considers each event a preplanned demonstration of prophetic criticism." Resisting "so many past misunderstandings" of his intentions, neither action, they insist, "was an attack on Judaism as a religion, on the priesthood or even the high-priesthood as an institution, or on the temple as a location for blood sacrifice." Rather, the event needs to be understood against the background of the fateful events in Jewish history of the time.

Jesus' description of the temple as a "house of prayer for all the nations," quoting Isaiah 56:7, and "a den of robbers," quoting Jeremiah 7:11, is particularly revelatory. The latter connected Jesus to a prophetic tradition threatening the destruction of the temple, if worship there became a substitute for justice, or if it became "a haven for perpetrators of injustice and a den of robbers." Writing sometime after 70 CE, Mark knew that although the Great Court of the Gentiles, where Jesus' action took place, had been "a place of prayer for all nations," it was certainly that no longer. In the events leading up to the historical destruction of the temple by the Romans in 70 CE, it "had become a stronghold for Zealot insurgents, initially against their own Jewish aristocracy and eventually against the besieging Roman legions." Their presence in the temple had indeed turned the great Court into what the Jewish historian Josephus also called "a den of robbers" or a "hideout of brigands." So also for Mark: the temple was "a hideaway, a safe house, a refuge" for the insurgents. It was "not where robbers rob, but where they flee for safety after having done their robbing elsewhere." Seen in this perspective, Jesus' action and speech was prophetic protest against the use of the temple to provide legitimation for armed political domination by either side. What the actions of Jesus mean, not only for Mark's readers but also for us, is Jesus'

absolute criticism not only of violent domination, but of any religious

collaboration with it. In that criticism, of course, he stands *with* the prophets of Israel such as Zechariah for the anti-temple action against injustice, but he also stands *against* those forms of Christianity that were used throughout the centuries to support imperial violence and injustice

As Borg and Crossan put it, quite bluntly, Jesus symbolically "shut down the temple," in the same way that draft card burners "shut down" the Pentagon (or, we can't resist adding, rioters shut down American democracy (*The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus Final Days in Jerusalem*, HarperCollins, 2006, pp. 49, 53. See their thorough analysis of the entire event, pp.32-53).

But where does care of creation figure in this picture? Back to those animals in the Courtyard. Again, Borg and Crossan provide important context: sacrifice is best understood, they suggest, as means to "create, maintain, or restore good relations with a divine being," much as humans might do with one another, with either a gift or a meal. "In a sacrifice the animal is *made sacred* and is given to God as a sacred gift or returned to the offerer as a sacred meal" (Borg and Crossan, pp. 36-38). The reader may recall from the first Sunday of Lent, God's delight at the sacrifice of Noah, in gratitude for the safe landing of the ark. Furthermore, these authors insist, "The sense of *sacrifice* should never be confused with either *suffering* or *substitution*", a view also in agreement with the understanding of God's covenant with Noah as a promise to *never again* visit deathly retribution on creation on account of human injustice. Sacrifice was made not to placate the Creator's anger, but rather to honor the Creator's love. Sacrifice was made in gratitude for new life and new beginnings. It could never be a substitute for justice; indeed, to offer it as such both dishonors the gift and insults its recipient. We suggest this was precisely what Jesus' "zeal for God's house" was about. He felt the insult of the false sacrifice on his body; the sacrifice of the animals under those circumstances *dishonored* both the Creator and the creation. It must not happen!

John can be seen to underscore these points: first, he enhances the list of animals involved, adding to the synoptics' mention of doves, typically given by the poor, both sheep and cattle, the expected gifts of more expensive animals from more wealthy members of the community. No matter how significant the gift, it still was not worthy for worship when offered by unjust hands. But here is the key point for care of creation: Jesus prophetic action not only registered his opposition to the unjust practices of the political and religious leaders. It also freed the animals from suffering an involuntary substitution for justice in an act of worship that offended their Creator. Secondly, John cleverly connects the destruction of the temple which came after the occupation by the forces of oppression and violence to the "rebuilding" of the temple with the resurrection of the body of Jesus – both his personal body, and his corporate representation in the body of believers. Henceforth, John foresees, people from all nations will indeed be able to participate in a meal of reconciliation with their Creator, one from which the sacrifice of otherkind has been removed, as a sign of God's delight in the recreation of a new, all-embracing community of humankind and otherkind together.

Are these judgements appropriate? Their justification is close by in the first reading from the Decalog from Sinai. Right worship of God brings "steadfast love to the thousandth generation" of those who offer it (Exodus 20:5-6). But "you shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name" (20:7). And it needs to be remembered that keeping the Sabbath rest of God holy includes solicitude for the well-being of the entire community of life: "you, your son or your daughter, your male

or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns," are all included. Consistent with these commands, Jesus could without reservation release the animals intended for sacrifice. Indeed, how could he do otherwise? In their righteous worship, the Psalmist reminds us, the whole creation joins in genuine praise of the Creator; "their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world (Psalm 19:3-4).

What do these reflections offer us humans by way of principles for our ongoing relationship with otherkind? We suggest this: our relationship is one in which sacrifice is a constant factor. By feeding ourselves, most obviously, but also in other ways: researchers acknowledge that their laboratory animals are "sacrificed"; environmentalists call our attention to the many "sacrifices" that our appropriation of habitat for all sorts of human development requires of all sorts of animal species; and by the same token, we hear cries of "sacrifice" from advocates of opportunities for enterprises and jobs when land is regulated to conserve species from extinction. All living things need space, food, and water, and to deny any of these things is to invite suffering and death. To view them only as factors in a relationship characterized as "stewardship of resources"-- the first paradigm we drew from Christian tradition in our comment for the Second Sunday of Lent -- is to value them primarily in relationship to ourselves and our needs and interests. To see them, on the other hand, as partners in a community of life -- the second paradigm we described -- in which all relations are gathered up and sanctified in grateful common worship of the Creator, is to acknowledge that all have value in relationship to God *and* the multitude of relationships they have apart from us, with each other. They are sacred to God, and God cares that their sacrifice is made for righteous reasons.

How do we know what figures as righteous in these relationships? We need to know, either through personal experience or scientific observation, what those relationships actually are. And then to place value on them, as God values them, which is to say, as God created them, for life. This sound complicated, and it is. It is work that requires much wisdom and humility. Larry Rasmussen suggests that for people of faith thinking about "justice" and "neighbor" is a helpful place to start. A moral frame for this work which is derived from ecological science is the imperative proposed by a founding parent of the discipline, Aldo Leopold: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." Rasmussen further particularly commends the perspective of ethicist James Gustavson: As measurers of all things the measure we need is that we "'relate to all things in a manner appropriate to their relations to God'." When we do this, he writes,

human interests are thus relativized in the interest of the more inclusive life communities of which we are part and upon which we entirely depend. Human beings thereby share with other participants in the Community of Life the need to make those sacrifices required for the welfare and sustainability of this community as a whole. This requires . . . a moral and emotional nervous system that opens out beyond a strict anthropocentric circumference. It requires rubbing away the moral callousness of prominent traditions and ways of living, together with deeply inscribed habits, particularly in the ranks of the powerful and privileged.

Any callused area, to develop the metaphor, becomes "thick skinned, hardened, inured, and unsusceptible." Confronted with nonhuman nature, "the moral and emotional nervous system . . . neither receives nor sends empathic messages. And without those, compassion is stillborn." (*Earth Community Earth Ethics*, Orbis Books, 1996, p.345). That day on the Court

of the Nations, we suggest, Jesus was himself without calluses, but he rubbed away more than a few from the hearts of his compatriots.

Fourth Sunday of Lent, Year B, March 14, 2021

Numbers 21:4-9

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

Ephesians 2:1-10

John 3:14-21

Our advocacy of the biblical paradigm of the Community of Life for the relationship of humankind and otherkind faces a strong challenge from the first reading for this Sunday. God's sending a swarm of poisonous snakes against the people of Israel, in retribution for their complaining about shortages of water and food as they wander in the wilderness, seems contrary to the notion of community the model promotes. God seems neither gracious nor life-giving as he imposes suffering and death upon the people to silence their resistance against Moses. Furthermore, the episode follows immediately upon God's acquiescence to the prayers of the Israelites in action against the Canaanite king Arad: "the Lord listened to the voice of Israel, and handed over the Canaanites, and they utterly destroyed them and their towns; so the place was called Hormah" (Hebrew, for Destruction; Numbers 21:1-3).

Was this appropriate retribution for an attack by the Canaanites that had resulted in the captivity of only "some" of the Israelites? Does complaint about the lack of basic human needs merit the revolting punishment of a deathly invasion of snakes? Darwin's "nature red of tooth and claw" would seem a better descriptor of these two scenes than "creation's community of life." In the discussion of "The Moral Frame" for sustainability which we drew from in our previous comment, Larry Rasmussen allows that a "comprehensive communitarian ethic," while "itself a decisive earth action on behalf of sustainability," must go beyond pleas "to listen to nature and mimic natural designs." It must do so, "because much of nature is simply *too casual about suffering*" (*Earth Community Earth Ethics*, p. 346-7). But attending to the present text, in which not some anonymous "nature," but God, is the primary actor, might not that charge also be laid against Yahweh? Does Yahweh's action here actually support the creation of a "community of life"?

Is there, in other words, a scriptural warrant for a communitarian earth ethics? We encounter here what Rasmussen regards as "one of the most difficult and ongoing tasks of earth ethics," namely

to decide where what lines are drawn and where what distinctions are made as

humans intervene in the larger panorama of a nature too casual about pain, suffering, and death. Determining what the relevant wholes are and what life requires in the way of a reciprocity of interests, with the concomitant sacrifices, is among the most daunting of interests. No simple disclosure tells us precisely how to "relate to all things in a manner appropriate to their relations to God."

A key factor in this determination is the aspect of power. As Rasmussen puts it, in a formula which we will consider further below, the aim of the moral quest for sustainability "is to find ways of the most comprehensive nonviolence possible within frameworks of shared power."(*Earth Community Earth Ethics*, p., 347). As noted, Rasmussen develops this analysis in connection with his search for an earth ethic of sustainability, which is, of course, not precisely what the narrative of our text is about. "Survival" might be a better description of Moses' goal. Nevertheless, the terms of Rasmussen's quest for a sustainable community of life are remarkably relevant to the evaluation of the events on their journey, as an examination of the two episodes from Numbers nicely illustrates.

The Israelites had tried unsuccessfully to negotiate permission to go through Edom, paying a fee and promising not to damage Edomite land enroute (Numbers 20:14-21); their subsequent detour led them to the conflict with Arad and a longer route which took them back into the desert, where they suffered shortages of food and water. At which point they reproached God and Moses for removing them from the comforts of Egypt! The serpents invaded their camp, and in response, Moses repeats the action that had delivered them from the Canaanites: he seeks a second intervention by Yahweh, which led to the posting of the bronze serpent. If bitten, they were to look to the serpent, and so be healed, which may seem a bit magical to us, but came to be seen as a sign of Yahweh's compassion on them. They returned with renewed enthusiasm and energy to the journey, on a route that also provided the needed water! (Numbers 21:10-18.)

Thus, in Rasmussen's terms, both "the play of human power on human-to-human terms" (Israel's wandering people to the settled Canaanites), "as well as human-and-the-rest-of-nature terms" (the people to the wilderness and its poisonous snakes) are related to God (source of power) by the human speech of their complaints and their intercessory prayers. Even if one removes God as an agent from the narrative and replaces the magical with modern medical interventions, questions of the powers inherent in the community remain relevant, as its moral character determines the outcome in tandem with their relationship to nature (both occupied land and wilderness). The sequence is highly instructive: from the frustrated hope for a negotiated, non-violent passage, to violent response to unprovoked, violent opposition, then to non-violent relief from the snakes, Moses leads the people on their way through the wilderness. With its stark reminders of their dependance of Yahweh for liberation from Egypt, the goal of their trek, the narrative nicely illustrates something of finding "ways of the most comprehensive nonviolence."

Yes, the Israelites engaged in violence to clear their way through the attacking Canaanites, after seeking to pay their way through Edom. The intentions were good, but the proportionality of their counter attack was questionable, which may explain the name, "Destruction," which they gave to the site. The fight was not to be remembered in an idealized way. And significantly, there was to be no need to engage in similar violence against the snakes, though they posed as great a threat as the Canaanites to their successful passage! In religious terms, what was an agent of death in the desert was transformed by

God into a sign for healing and spiritual empowerment to continue on their way to settled life in freedom. Installed eventually in the temple in Jerusalem, the bronze serpent was a popular reminder of God's compassionate action to restore their spirits for the journey. Its possible derivation from either Egyptian or Canaanite culture was no reason to regard it , 18:4). The Creator was free to find the "way of the most comprehensive nonviolence possible within the frameworks of shared power" in the situation. Humans have learned, but slowly, that nature is not dealt with well by application of brute force; we need, rather, to learn how to work with nature to strengthen its own inherent healing powers, as has happened successfully, for example, with the development of vaccines in the current pandemic. Perhaps we can now proceed with confidence to develop solar power as the remedy for the great damage caused by a violent extraction from earth of fossil fuels. But we digress.

Turning to the Gospel for the day, as a "teacher of Israel," Nicodemus could be counted upon to know the story of the bronze serpent. So Jesus referred to it, as he led his nocturnal visitor to an understanding of what he himself was about. He, too, was to be lifted up, so that the nations might come to know that Yahweh had compassion on them all. Our proposal here is that though this action was on a different scale, appropriate for a different time, it was one that would expand the possibility of healing from the wilderness and the temple in Jerusalem to the scope of Roman imperial domination and beyond, even to the outreaches of the cosmos, wherever suffering and death became a barrier to trust in God's love. To paraphrase the Evangelist, as God had given the snake in the wilderness, so God also gave Jesus to the earth, to reveal his utter compassion on people divided by injustice and violent domination. Jesus would be lifted up onto a Roman cross because of his resistance to that religiously and politically sanctioned violence; nevertheless, his way was to be vindicated by God's raising him from the dead. Once again the means of death was to be transformed into means for healing, and even, in John's phrase, "eternal life." "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" (John 3:16).

Finding "ways of the most comprehensive nonviolence possible within frameworks of shared power," we propose, turns out to be characteristic of God's way of loving the creation, bringing into being and restoring its communities of life, ultimately as *the* Community of Life that is the cosmos. Suffering and violence remain an inherent characteristic of nature; after all, according to good scientific theory, they are an essential factor in creation of nature's awesome diversity. Nature, though indeed "red in tooth and claw," is more than casual about developing its inherent powers; that aspect of nature is essential to both creation and new creation. And in this great work, otherkind receives no less regard than humankind. With Jesus in mind, there can be no excuse for being any more casual about the suffering, of either humankind or otherkind, than is God, who so loved the world. With that proposal in mind, we move forward to a final prelude to, and then the narrative itself, of Jesus' last week .