

By

Karen Barrows

4-21-2024

St. Paul's Episcopal Church

It's always with some fear that I approach sermonizing, a feeling totally out of proportion to the actual event itself. Today seems like the right time to begin addressing you as close friends, on this fourth Sunday in Eastertide. Tomorrow we celebrate Earth Day, and Passover begins tomorrow evening at sunset. We live in significant times. I've been coming to St. Paul's regularly for almost 22 years, which comes to about 88 seasons, of my life and yours. Increased awareness of creation means sitting more and more deeply with its comings and goings, its ebbs and flows, its shifts and currents, its openings and closings, its unexpected changes, and of course its births and deaths.

It's probably the most familiar psalm, the 23rd, the "Amazing Grace" of the psalter, and it describes our passage through life and into eternity. Our earliest experiences bring us face to face with Creation in all its splendor and awe. My grandmother told me that fairies lived in the deep, moist mosses in our "Pine Parlor" in Michigan, and to this day I am gentle with moss, suspecting secretly that she was right. We honor the Creator when we walk through soft meadows and lie beside quiet streams. Parks and campgrounds are packed with people from now until October, our hungry souls seeking restoration in just that way. The psalm tells us that we are safe even across the table from our enemies, who actually are essential to us becoming the powerful selves we truly are.

There are also valleys filled with shadows. The valleys are where we experience loss of our most beloved people, pets, places, and things. The valleys also cradle hatred, betrayal, cheating, violence, and evil. The valleys contain all the times we have not acted in accordance with Christian principles. The peril in the valleys can cause so much fear that we sever connection with entire segments of humanity, not to mention the rest of the natural world. Today's Gospel lesson demonstrates clearly that all those we cleave away are part of the flock that the Good Shepherd tends, and for whom he will lay down his life again and again.

When my nephew Sam was three years old, a group of family were on the beach at our family home near Traverse City, Michigan, and little Sam was spinning around a short distance away and talking loudly, and very seriously, seeming to point at and lecture someone. After a while I asked him what he was doing, and he yelled in earnest, "I am the Leader of the world! I'm teaching everyone what they need to do." And he went back to playing. I was amused and touched, but also realized that the human yearning to be important, to matter, to be able to impact our world, is very strong.

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Author Brene Brown says she has “spent most of my life trying to outrun vulnerability and uncertainty.” The very first step in AA/Al-Anon, programs in which I have been a member for 36 years, commits the person taking it to admit both powerlessness and the unmanageability that ensues when one is still trying to control everything. It’s a very tall order, admitting powerlessness. And yet doesn’t Jesus ask that we stop trying to outrun vulnerability? He characterizes us as sheep, after all, which is a big tell! It is fine to think we are the leader of the world when we are three; but misunderstanding our role has led to cascades of unpleasant consequences as we lean into adulthood. Our current difficulty in adequately caring for creation stems from our preoccupation with controlling outcomes we think matter more.

My dad drove my brothers and me to elementary and middle school; we attended a private academy some distance from our home, and he had the radio turned to news the entire 45-minute ride every morning. It was 1968 and I was nine years old. The talk was endless about how many men were wounded, how many casualties there were, peace talks, guerillas (I thought apes must be involved in the war), cities I had never heard of ... I remember asking him once what a “casualty” was, and the long hesitation before he said it was “when people got hurt.” These days when I listen to the news about Ukraine and the Middle East I have exactly the same feelings I had in that car, the knot of dread in my stomach, the fear, the desperation to protect myself, those I love, and this world I adore. It’s the same thing going around and around again and again. The names and faces and dates change, but otherwise it’s the same thing, the same valley. The problem is not being solved. All that has changed is that destructive capabilities are so great as to imperil every single life on the planet. We are standing at a hinge moment in history, a moment in which the decisions made literally have life and death consequences (how must it be for children and animals in these places?)

Peter and John were placed in custody by the Sadducees, after Peter preached a sermon in the temple complex about Jesus’ resurrection to a group of people who had gathered to marvel at the healing of a man who could not walk. The Sadducees did not believe in bodily resurrection and denied the immortality of the soul, therefore they were bullying Peter and John. These are the same men who cooperated with Pilate in the crucifixion we honored four and a half weeks ago. Peter responds to them by referring to Jesus as the discarded cornerstone the builders rejected, directly implying that they are the builders who made this huge mistake. Under our supervision God’s earthly creation is at risk because as modern societies we have fallen into the same trap of rejecting the cornerstone.

Albert Einstein is credited with the observation that the mind that creates a problem is not the same mind that will solve it. Paul said, “We are transformed by the renewing of our minds.” New minds are required to solve our problems. Jesus’ thinking is transformational; I wonder if we are ready to embrace this. I know that we should not

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have to live inside an endless horror movie, wherein gruesome scenes repeat ad infinitum and countless lives are lost and traumatized. One change we *could* consider is to place more women in positions of power. I am not saying that men are incapable of leadership. The vast majority of men are healthy enough to share lives very well with women. However, pervading modern culture is the idea that women are not as capable of leadership as men. We are all, even women, enabling women's historical absence from power, in business and in governing. We need a structure of power that prioritizes values typically attributed to women, and to gentle men, and to Jesus. This is the spiritual transformation needed to realize here on Earth the life described in the 23rd Psalm.

This has been done, successfully. In the spirit of demonstrating how differently different people can think I'd like to finish today by sharing a paragraph from an article entitled, "How Native American Women Inspired the Women's Right's Movement," by Sally Roesch Wagner, who writes about the impact on early American suffrage leaders of the Haudenosaunee, or Iroquois Confederacy. The six-nation Confederacy extended throughout what is now New York State, and had a family/governmental structure based on female authority. Wagner writes, "Haudenosaunee women controlled the economy in their nations through their responsibilities for growing and distributing the food. They had the final decisions over land transfers and decisions about engaging in war. Children came through the mother's line, not the father's, and if the parents separated, the children stayed with their mother, and if she died, with her clan family. Women controlled their own property and belongings, as did the children. Political power was shared equally among everyone in the Nation, with decisions made by consensus in this pure democracy, the oldest continuing one in the world. Still today, the chief and clan mother share leadership responsibilities. The clan mother chooses and advises the chief, placing and holding him in office. These men, appointed by the women, carry out the business of government. The clan mother also has the responsibility of removing a chief who doesn't listen to the people and make good decisions, giving due consideration to seven generations in the future (that's about 200 years in the future). To be chosen as a chief, the man cannot be a warrior (since it is a confederacy based on peace), nor can he ever have stolen anything or abused a woman. Women live free of fearing violence from men. The spiritual belief in the sacredness of women and the earth—the mutual creators of life—make rape or beating almost unthinkable. If it occurs, the offender is punished severely by the men of the victim's clan family - sometimes by death or banishment." Wagner goes on to contrast this structure with the conditions of Euro-American women in the early suffrage movement, which were the mirror opposite: women were the property of fathers or husbands in the 19th century, and had no economic, property, or civil rights.

In today's Epistle John says, "Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God, and

Creation Care Sermon

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we receive from him whatever we ask.” Washington State has already issued a drought emergency, due to low snowpack and low water levels in rivers and streams. Set up a birdbath or a fountain, or build a pond this summer. Celebrate Earth Day tomorrow by giving thanks for our amazing home. Today’s scriptures assure us we are blessed with permanent protection. There’s only one catch: we are expected to extend the same love to each member of the flock in our own lives.

Amen