

## **SEVEN TIMES GOOD**

In humanity's first trip to and orbit around the moon in 1968 the three Apollo 8 astronauts marked the occasion by reading ten verses of primeval poetry that is 3,000 years old, but nevertheless familiar even to the most irreligious person. In fact, they read ten verses of scripture beginning with the first sentence of the Old Testament that Ursula read for us this morning: *In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.* Planet earth – so beautiful – so mysterious – so very fragile...

The Genesis creation poetry does not enlighten us about history or science as we understand those disciplines today; how could it? Even if that was the intent, such science and history would have been outmoded shortly after it was written. Rather, the Hebrew creation story illuminates truths that transcend those disciplines.

When Christians confess the Apostle's Creed, we worship God as the *maker of heaven and earth*. We don't know exactly how God did this, and not even precisely when (probably about 4–5 billion years ago). We heard in our reading this morning – heard seven times – something that is easy to forget these days, that what God created is thoroughly good.

As a divinely created entity that is distinct from God, we believe that our earth is somehow sacred, but we do not believe that it is divine. We recognize that our earth is dependent and contingent – it will not last forever, even if it lasts as long as astrophysicists predict (maybe another 4–5 billion years before the sun grows unbearably hot). The notion of our planet's ongoing preservation is every bit as important as its original creation. Most remarkable of all, says the Hebrew poet, when God finished the creative activity, God *rested*, turned to humankind created in the divine image, and said, "here, now it's yours, to populate, steward, rule over, and manage, but not to plunder, neglect or exploit." The preservation of creation is a distinctly human responsibility that God bestowed upon us when we were designated as guardians *over all the earth*.

Much of what we read and hear about today is a call for humanity to care for creation. For those who are believers in God it is a given that we consider that the planet and every person on it is a gift of God's love, a trust to tend, and the arena of God's providential purposes. Everywhere we turn we are challenged in our commitment as God's stewards of the earth.

The threats of environmental degradation, economic disparity, and globalization accelerated by technology demand the wisdom and creativity of scientific minds, along with clear-eyed and brave leadership. In the past couple of weeks these looming dangers were joined by two natural disasters – an earthquake in China and a cyclone in Myanmar. These perils provoke the special concern of Christians who confess God as *creator of heaven and earth* – as those who seek right relationship with God.

Perhaps the Trinity which we celebrate today is a symbol of what it means to live in right relationship. One part of the Trinity would not be "God" without the others. Here we experience that God is not whole unless God is related to the various aspects of God's being in ways that are connected and meaningful, dynamic and active. Every time we experience the Holy Spirit moving within and among us, we know that God, the Creator is also moving and changing. As we live into the redemptive activity of God through Jesus we know that God is breathing new life into all of creation. And, as the Creator groans at the ongoing destruction of the earth, we know that this groaning changes the way in which the redemptive and active parts of God are at work in individuals and in the world. God is intimately interconnected, even as the dimensions of the Trinity are distinctive.

So it is also with our relationships with one another, with the earth, and with the whole of creation. What we do individually has an impact on the whole of our relationships and makes a difference in our experience of God and God's experience of us. As we hear and see the visions of upheaval and chaos in Myanmar and China, we are aware that it is God's body that is suffering and not simply individuals who live in some other part of the world. Our connectedness to their suffering reminds us that "right relatedness" requires of us an extension of the right hand of fellowship made real in the flesh and blood of workers to assist, money to support, prayers to encourage, and belief in the gift of love and hope.

As we watch the unfolding of violence in our homes, our neighborhoods, and in our streets we are ever more mindful of the reality of systemic oppression and pain. We know that our relationship to those who are our "neighbors" requires us to look into the eyes of others, to examine our biases and fears, and to move into the world with renewed vision and hope. We are called to be active disciples on behalf of God – Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer.

As we seek to understand and mitigate the environmental and social ills our lifestyle perpetuates and as we participate in the lives of those around us through our daily relationships, we are called to do so with a sense of integrity and care. "Right relationship" moves us beyond our individualized understandings of the God of salvation to a corporate belief that what we do in our daily lives makes a difference to God and to the world of God. The Trinity is embodied in our valuing of all of creation, in our movements toward justice on behalf of people everywhere and our shared planet.

Cyclone Nargis claimed 22,000 lives, with an additional 41,000 missing and perhaps as many as one million homeless. These staggering numbers are painfully reminiscent of December 26, 2004 when an earthquake in the Indian Ocean triggered a series of devastating tsunamis, killing more than 225,000 in 11 countries.

In the massive earthquake that struck Central China on May 12, 2008, casualties of at least 12,000 people have been reported, with more than 18,000 others believed to be trapped in rubble. In some areas 80 per cent of all buildings have collapsed and officials estimate that 3.5 million homes have been destroyed.

Heavy rainfall, power outages and impassable roads are slowing the rescue work. Doctors and other emergency workers were forced to walk to the epicenter, which they eventually

reached 24 hours after the quake. Military officials have deployed approximately 50,000 troops to assist local emergency services. Trains carrying relief items have begun to make their way to the affected areas, carrying tents, fuel and numerous other relief materials.

Despite the struggles in China and the concerns about its internal politics, the situation in Myanmar is even more complicated. That country, under the control of rival military dictatorships since World War II, has steadfastly resisted outside influence and cooperation. They are refusing help from most other countries and are not granting visas to aid volunteers.

The most likely reason is that they have something to hide. You may recall last year when thousands of Buddhist priests and supporters took to the streets to protest dramatic and sudden increases in fuel costs leading to higher costs for staples such as rice and cooking oil. The clergy's unified and courageous demonstration of solidarity with the plight of the poor was amazing, but seemed just a blip in the world's ever-shortening attention span.

According to the most recent Human Rights Watch's World Report for Myanmar, the country has not only failed to provide the basic needs of its citizens, but in outlying areas – where you find greater ethnic diversity – abuses include: *forced labor, summary executions, sexual violence against women and girls, land confiscations, and the use of land mines to disrupt civilian food production.* These violations are maintained by a core of military personnel, leaving the government desperate to coerce, threaten and use physical force to recruit children as young as 10 years old to do their bidding for them.

These desperate and horrific situations call for an authentic expression of humanity and an equally courageous determination to help *the least of these*. If we consider that the planet and every person on it is a gift of God's love, a trust to tend, and the arena of God's providential purposes we must reflect on how each one of us is called to participate – to pray and to act.

Less well-known than the reading of Genesis from lunar space is a prayer that one of the astronauts subsequently offered to people everywhere. After completing their scientific work, he prayed these words on behalf of God's good creation and every human being created in the divine image: *"Give us, O God, the vision which can see your love in the world, in spite of human failure. Give us the faith to trust the goodness in spite of our ignorance and weakness. Give us the knowledge that we may continue to pray with understanding hearts, and show us what each one of us can do to set forth the coming of the day of universal peace. Amen."*

This Sermon Copy reflects the style of the spoken word rather than the written word. Allowances should be made for grammatical style and sentence structure that are characteristic of the spoken word. Thanks to the PCC website, and essays by Dan Clendenin, Mark Johnson and Joretta Marshall for current events included in this message. The Rev. L. T. Kavanagh, 2008