

Sermon: September 22, 2019 – Psalm 113

Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

My Mom grew up on a farm near the town of Bruce Mines, Ontario, home of the first hard-rock copper mine in Canada, predating confederation by 20 years. When the mines were open, which was sporadic at best, they contributed much to the local economy, but they also contributed the dreaded respiratory diseases, silicosis and black lung, to the men who mined there. Most of the local men, then, knew two things: (1) they'd better have access to some farm land, so they weren't relying entirely on mining income, and (2) if they'd worked the mines they shouldn't plan to live past 55, because the lung diseases were so widespread.

My Dad's family, meanwhile, was from Lambton County in SW Ontario. I'll tell you the names of the two closest communities to the Wooley family farm, and you can guess what other resources may have contributed to the local economy: Oil Springs; and, Petrolia. The first commercial oil well in North America was at Oil Springs, in 1858, and the landscape was much like rural Alberta: Oil was a big player, but all around the oil wells were farms growing corn and wheat and sugarbeets, and on my family's land there were plenty of cattle as well.

Closer to home, we live in an area where the economy has had a monumental swing, from the Coal Mines that ran from 1886 to 1979 to Tourism, which absolutely exploded in preparation for the 1988 Olympics and has been on an upwards and onwards trajectory since then. Mining first brought the settler population to the Bow Valley, but the beauty of nature is what now brings residents and guests from all around the world to our back yard.

I share these stories, because they represent a common reality in industrialized society: the tension between the needs of the planet and the jobs provided by resource extraction. In some places, like here, nature is both a thing of beauty and an economic driver, but in so much of the world we have this tension between resource-based jobs, and the potential decimation of earth and sky and sea, and, somewhere in the picture, food production. And in so much of the world, we also see that the poorest of the poor are not only the ones who struggle to find safe, reliable employment; they are also the ones hurt first and deepest, when there is a natural disaster, living closest to the ocean and in the least sturdy housing.

As Christians, concerned in Jesus' name with the needs of anyone and anything that is vulnerable, we look at these tensions and know that our choices and priorities need to change. In recent months, the language of "climate change" has morphed into the term "climate crisis" and with good reason. Young activists, like Sweden's Greta Thunberg, have issued a wake-up call that is hard to ignore. During a January speech in Davos, she said "Adults keep saying 'we owe it to the young people to give them hope'. But I don't want your hope. I don't want you to be hopeful; I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act, I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if the house was on fire, because it is." Leading up to this weekend's UN Youth Climate Summit, she reiterated her plea, then stepped back so that other young voices could add their passionate calls for action. If you want to learn more about Greta there's no shortage of information online, including a popular TED talk, and a feature article in Broadview magazine.

Whether we are elected leaders or consumers in the marketplace, we know that our actions need to ramp up. It's one thing to say that we *should* do something – and Greta Thunberg reminds us that we are really, really good at saying things – but it's another thing to find the motivator that will transform our good intentions into sustainable actions.

Sometimes it is as simple as just doing something, but I am a firm believer that our changed actions will be more sustainable, if supported by thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs which have also been examined, and changed.

- For some people, a personal experience will fuel your commitment to sustainable environmental practices - like living in a first nations community that has had a boil-water advisory for as long as you know, or like my Mom's experience, of watching her Father die of copper-mine-induced silicosis at age 53.

- For some, worry gets things going: as Greta Thunberg noted, many of her contemporaries are terrified of what's going to happen to this world if things don't change drastically, soon. There's even a term for it: "Eco-Anxiety." That certainly describes the emotional landscape for my three young-adult children, who are attempting to dig in personally, practically and politically rather than getting immobilized by fear.
- For others, compassion or sorrow – or perhaps guilt, which I don't recommend as a motivator but it is a pretty effective one - will be the emotional motivators. If you have a heart for "all creatures great and small" it's hard to hear of the devastating human impacts of deforestation, or to realize how many species of plants and animals are disappearing, without re-upping one's commitment to new, sustainable behaviours.
- For some, hard science and statistics will imbed themselves into your will, a logical sequence of actions and consequences spurring you to action. If this describes you, events like the upcoming Climate Change panel on October 1st promise to be informative and inspiring, featuring the Very Rev Bill Phipps (who has spoken on this topic from this very pulpit) along with scientists like Paulette Fox and Bob Sanford.
- And for some, the motivator and sustaining power for change will come from our beliefs: about God and humanity, and God's relationship with the world...and this morning I'd like to spend some time with this one.

The 113th Psalm, today's scripture lesson, is a particularly helpful guide in this spiritual exploration, and I give my thanks to American Bible Scholar Nancy deClaissie-Walford, for her structural breakdown of this Psalm.

¹ Praise the LORD!

Praise, O servants of the LORD; praise the name of the LORD.

² Blessed be the name of the LORD from this time on and forevermore.

³ From the rising of the sun to its setting the name of the LORD is to be praised.

⁴ The LORD is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens.

⁵ Who is like the LORD our God, who is seated on high,

⁶ who looks far down on the heavens and the earth?

⁷ He raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap,

⁸ to make them sit with princes, with the princes of his people.

⁹ He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children.

Praise the LORD!

This Psalm begins and ends with the same declaration: Praise the Lord! - literally, Hallelujah! Everything that lands between those bookends, then, is about praising God.

The first major section, draws the connection between the God of Israel, and the earth. Sunrise and sunset are not listed here as mere time-markers; God is to be praised from sunup to sundown because everything we experience on earth, comes from the God whose life-breath enlivens all existence. God's glory is above any nationalism, the awe of the Holy One rises above even the wonders of the skies. So in this first part, we are reminded about God's existential bond with the natural world, the bond between the creator and the created.

The linkages of the second section are quite different. God's concern, here, is with the poor, the needy, those who have given up hope. The word-pictures of the second half are more vivid, and the role of God is more active. The God who is experienced in the first half as majestic, even aloof, the master artist who is praised for being so adept and ingenious, is in the second half the one who literally gets down and dirty into the "dung-hills" of life, engaging systems of oppression, lifting the downtrodden to places of honour.

Between these two halves, is a question that both ends the first part, and launches the second: "Who is like the LORD our God, who is seated on high, who looks far down on the heavens and the earth?" Well, there is no one else, actually. For at one and the same time, the creator we meet in the hugeness of mountains and the intricacies of wildflowers, is the protective parent who will not rest while some of her children are voiceless, marginalized, abused.

This notion, of a personally concerned Divine presence, involved in both the glories of creation and the quest for social justice, is so important for us in this amazing place where we live. I hear so regularly, that people in the Bow Valley experience God most fully in nature. And when I'm out on a trail, I can appreciate how someone would feel that way. In our Wednesday night Evensong services, I have loved hearing the words of authors like Wendell Berry or Mary Oliver, as they express the holiness of all things of nature, and that conceptualizing of the holy within the glories of creation fits so well in a place of great natural beauty.

Yet God – the same God – doesn't just stay out on the trail, enjoying the sunshine. The loving intention of God is incomplete, wherever and whenever systems favour the rich over the poor, or insiders over outsiders. The God who can take credit for the flavour of blueberries and the fragrance of a pine forest, calls humans to actions that will create economic, ethnic and gender justice. One God: the one who loves the natural world, is also the motivator for justice.

Now that this congregation has officially voted to be an Affirming Ministry – news that was happily and heartily received and endorsed by Affirm United – there is quite a task before us. It will be so important for us to approach that affirming vision and plan, as a collective entity, as the collected knowledge and ability and experience of each person as well as the things we know and believe together. And so I encourage you to identify the needs and action areas that really call *your* name, and respond to that call. If you are knowledgeable and passionate about the needs of wildlife, I urge you to follow that passion for God's creation. If you are drawn to help this congregation get more specific about our environmental knowledge, practices and proclamations, please do so. If you would like to join with those who are working toward the calls to reconciliation with our Indigenous sisters and brothers, we can get you connected to that. If your life, or the life of a loved one, has been impacted by marginalization, let's further the conversation about how this congregation can be an authentic place of safety and advocacy. If we view this congregation as one, single, slow-moving entity, or if too much lands on the plate of yours truly or our Church Council, our capacity will be really limited; but if we can honour and embrace the huge variety of backgrounds and aptitudes that all of us bring, so much can happen in answer to God's complex callings. Wherever you find God, let God find you and motivate you, as we seek to hear and answer the one who stands up for all humans in need, the one who just as staunchly opposes the degradation of this planet.

In this room, there will be many different approaches, and motivators. And yes, as happens with groups of human beings, there will be conflicts from time to time, disagreements in priorities and methods, not to mention questions of funding. But I invite you – and challenge myself – to find sustainable actions, for the good of this planet, for the good of anyone on life's edges, for the good of those most directly impacted by the climate crisis. Find a few other people who are moved by the same things you are, or link in with a local group already active. There are countless starting points, there are changes both simple and complex to be initiated, there are voices – often young voices – to be heard to keep us moving. And we never act in isolation, for the God of life and justice is already there. Praise be to God, the source and centre-point of transformative change. Amen.

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