

Message on the theme of "Air"

Genesis 1:2; Genesis 12:1-4; Psalm 121;

Ephesians 2:1-10; Matthew 6:16-18

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Last week we talked about water. The bible has at least two points of view on water -fear, chaos, destructive force on the one hand; and living water on the other. This week we are talking about air.

The air is invisible. There are fewer references to air and most are metaphorical for God. Only the evidence of the wind is visible. The Spirit blows where it wills *cf. John 3:8*. Ancients knew that breath was a sign of life but they would have had little understanding of the atmosphere and its composition. Nor would they have understood that humans or their activities could threaten the atmosphere, the weather or the climate.

In our current world context we have this unseen air borne problem – climate change – in part due to human patterns of consumption and industrialization. CO₂ emissions, as well as other more potent but less abundant green house gases, are causing our earth to warm imperceptibly to us in the short term with impacts that we do not feel here, but they are felt already in other parts of the world.

The scriptures I have chosen for today's focus on 'air' make oblique reference if that.

1. Imagine Abram and Sarai journeying under clear bright skies by day, and stars at night. If we had read the whole story we would hear of the promise of descendants as numerous as the stars, and of "the land I will show you" [*Genesis 12:1*] named "Canaan" [*Gen 12:5*], as a perpetual holding [*Gen 17:8*]. Abram belief is reckoned to him as righteousness [*Gen 15:6*].

How much of this story holds true for us today? The part about as many people as the stars as world population approaches 7 billion? Yes. But we can often no longer see those stars or clear blue skies— light pollution in cities, summer haze from air pollution in the Fraser Valley.

We think we have perpetual claim to the land we occupy.

Psalm 121 – I lift mine eyes to the hills – implies clear skies to see. There is no direct reference to 'air'. The psalm also includes being shielded from the moon by night. What is that all about? You will see in the next

reading from Ephesians.

Ephesians 2: ¹You were dead through the trespasses and sins ²... following the course of this world, following the **ruler of the power of the air**, ...

There is certain malevolence to the power of the air. Greek thinking in first century understanding of the universe placed air in a murky region between earth and the moon. The moon and sub lunar regions were thought of as places of evil.

The Matthew 6 text is about fasting. In the "Time for Growing" souls we talked about fasting as a carbon fast. This is another view of fasting which connects with air and is still faithful to biblical intent IMO.

But for us, the biggest threat to our existence and the continuation of life as we know it today and in the next 50 years resides in the atmosphere (the air), the accumulation of CO₂ and other green house gases. They are contributing to climate change (commonly called "global warming").

So where are we to go, if not to the bible, as we reflect as people of faith on the 'gift and care of the air' that supports life?

Let us move then from specific biblical passages to the more general comments of theologians, eco-theologians who can help us make the connection between God however we understand God, humans, and this aspect of creation – the air that surrounds our *fragile* earth and permits life.

“The task of theologians comes prior to our action: it is at its roots. Then with hope, different action may follow. This is where we as a congregation fit in - doing our part and having faith that God will do God’s part (which may be through us and humanity).

A holistic way of seeing things is, of course, intrinsic to ecology, for the discipline is the study of the interrelationships of life systems. The common tendency is the call to focus upon the 'big picture'. For all its necessity and benefits there is an irony. Such realism can lead to occasional changing our ways. But it can too easily give a profound sense of disempowerment, a feeling of being overwhelmed and in despair. The problems can seem too big for individuals and small communities - even to those with the best will in the world.

Christian faith has stood condemned on the grounds of being highly anthropocentric and being committed almost exclusively to

our own salvation. In the time of Lent to preach a turning away from individual salvation is a brave thing to do, but that kind of move is necessary to show we are serious about caring for the earth.

Not all Christians continue to hold the view of divinely ordained dominion over by humans. Let us not succumb to inaction because of these claims. Interpretation and informed reflective re-interpretation of scriptures is the way of our vision of seeking justice for all creation and all God's people.

Climate change can be seen as a moral and justice issue. Some name Christianity a religion of ethics (or morals). This means our beliefs inform us to right **actions**. Our beliefs can motivate and sustain our actions even when the actions are difficult and countercultural.

We may have a tendency to think of ourselves as countercultural when it comes to the secular west coast. It may even be a source of misplaced pride. But if you read the Vancouver Sun on many occasions you will find that being environmentally responsible is actually a strong cultural value in Vancouver, striving to be the greenest city in the world.

The consequences of global warming are no longer in doubt. Moreover the consequences are unjust. North Americans and Western Europeans have contributed 2/3 of CO₂ emission while 3% have come from Africa. A growing number of developing countries and environmental lawyers insist the first world owes a climate debt to the third world. Though it may be possible for the first world to focus on adaptive measures to protect itself in the near future, it is neither just to do so nor rational in the long run.

We must see the vast difference in humanity in terms of responsibility for the crisis as well as the consequences. This underscores the connection of ecological and justice issues.

For our poorer brothers and sisters who did not cause the crisis, we need to develop and share mitigating strategies against famine, drought, floods, disease. We need to work on two fronts: reducing our emissions below the tipping point of catastrophe and sharing mitigating funds and technology with those who will experience the worst consequences. This is a test not only of our survival but of our humanity.

Understanding and our response to ecology is conditioned by culture, history and location. Some examples:

We tend to idealize the way it was – aboriginal life was more eco-friendly than modern life. First Nations peoples in Canada are good examples of the belief of oneness with nature and the hierarchical structure given to animals and to family life. Among these people there was no notion of ownership of land or of dominant use of resources. Rather these people see themselves as "a part of" and being "cared for" by the earth and its resources. For these people, community is held in esteem - community with the higher spirits, with nature, and with members of the tribe. There is value in this approach to reality yet the hierarchical structure within it still allows domination of one group over the other (males over females or one tribe over another).

Now let us consider context of history and place in sub-Saharan Africa. Cooking fires that emit particulate carbon in smoke are the biggest contributor to the carbon foot print in that part of the world. Also the use of wood stripped from the spare stock of trees and shrubs denudes the landscape of plants who could remove CO₂. Because of the sheer size of the population of sub-Saharan Africa this smoke from cooking fires is an important source of Green House particulate emissions. Yet we would not deny people their food. This is where sharing in mitigating technology (low tech) comes into play. Here is one solution we

can take on in a small way. World Vision 2010 gift catalogue offered for \$50 an eco-friendly stove that can be fueled by vegetable debris rather than wood. The stove emits less smoky particulate. This is a gift that groups or individual can consider giving now or next Christmas.

Let us look at our own urban setting: City planner and author, David Owen visited Vancouver this past week said "If you can [live without a car], then you've shrunk your impact [on the environment] about as far as you can for a prosperous 21st century population". This is possible in Vancouver where Skytrain and transit options are available.

But "One size does not fit all" and context is important, so David Owen's statement needs to be modified for Abbotsford where many of us live or work in greater Vancouver and others who live here find transit options inadequate. So what can we do? Tele-commute for some part of our work (that means working from home using internet and telephone for communications and meetings); drive a hybrid car, car-pool; examine when walking is an option and advocate for better transit in Abbotsford. It is a given that our transportation choices have the biggest impact on our carbon footprint.

The Postmodern world will be different, but not necessarily less happy. Think back 50 years to a time when people had smaller houses, one bathroom, maybe a family car, minimal electronic equipment (a radio, a TV), walked to school, took the bus or train to work, and traveled by plane perhaps once a year. A little known statistic to Canadians is that Americans have never been happier than they were in 1957, before rampant consumption became the dominate lifestyle.

Thomas Berry, poetic and esoteric ecology writer has delineated conditions for a present or future "Ecozoic" era, which will assist the change of consciousness necessary for a great stage of transformation. To allow the universe to continue its immense project of life and be creative, we must understand ourselves as members of, and live within the limits of the earth community. All professions must be realigned to reflect this reality and sensitivity for life. For example, economics must have the well-being of the planet as its first priority. The legal profession needs to include inter-species issues, biocide, geocide and realities of ecological justice. The educational system must be adjusted to educate humanity to live with the earth.

Berry writes,

'we need to have religious sensitivity to the sacred, a deep, emotional, imaginative sensitivity to everything, from the bluebirds to the butterflies'.

Berry's work is immense in scope.

It would be helpful if ecological theologians developed the role of forgiveness in their theology. We rely on our biblical text for that today.

Ephesians 2:4⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved

Let us come back to Abram and Sarai – journeying by faith, believing in God's call to righteous living and guided by understanding of God's will for them.

Our journey needs to be the same - believing in God's call to righteous living and guidance by understanding of God's will for us and the earth.

We come to the need for broad re-interpretation of who we are as humans in this finite world.

We come to the need to understand God's will for justice and equity as our guide.

To the need to join our brothers and sisters – secular and religious, rich and poor - to keep alive the promise of land perpetual and fruitful that was made to Abram and Sarai.

And that even though we stumble in this endeavor, God's love forgives us to try again.
AMEN

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