

Sermon: The Tears of Creation - Climate Grief

Things are going really bad for Ezekiel. The city of Jerusalem is razed, burned, and destroyed. The temple Solomon built, the holy of holies, is rubble. Anyone who has wealth, education, power - everyone middle and upper class - has been captured and marched to their captor's lands - Babylon.

This is where we sit crying by the river Babylon. This is where we sit with everything dying, being destroyed - all the land marks we know gone - the cultures eradicated - the ways of life ended. This is the reality of Ezekiel.

And it is the reality of Anishinaabeg and other First Nations.

Of Palestinians.

And it's the future for all humanity.

The United Nations reported this week that all hope of meeting the Paris Accord and keeping global warming temperature under 1.5 degrees Celsius is kaput. We -- humanity -- have overshoot this goal. The world is now warmer than 1.5 and still increasing. We have not drastically changed our ways of life and given up fossil fuels. Indeed, several countries are polluting more than they were in the Accords -- and some countries have pulled out of the promise.

1.5 was chosen because if we kept the planet's warmth under that we'd be in the world we're in now - a world that is more unpredictable - with tornadoes in Toronto, insane wildfire seasons, weak polar streams giving us winter vortexes and summer heat waves - unpredictable, rougher, but livable. It isn't the kind of weather we remember from even 10 years ago -- let alone 40 or 50 years ago -- but it is a climate that more or less still functions.

More than 1.5 and the loss to human, plant, and animal life becomes unlivable. Extinctions inevitable. Ecosystem collapses guaranteed. Suffering -- global suffering -- of all a given. And this is where we are now.

I cry for ourselves. For all my relations. For the waters.

Our waters are incredible. The oceans have absorbed 90% of the increased global heat. That means most of the warming we haven't felt. 1.5 is a global average temperature increase -- but the oceans are warming faster than that. In 1970, when ocean temperature began to be well tracked, the ocean temperature average was about 20.2 Celsius (86.3 Fahrenheit) This year, the average is 21.1 Celsius (70 Fahrenheit.) A few degrees, averaged, over the globe, doesn't seem to mean much. But the warmth is not even. This is the average.

Our poles are warming faster. The difference between -1 and +1 is the difference in ice shelves, floes, polar caps. But in the poles we're looking at the difference of 10 degrees this year -- and more next year. Iceless poles are becoming a reality. Less ice means less reflection of the hot sun. That warms the waters more - melting more ice. The ice is fresh

water - too much melted dilutes the salt water and density of the ocean. The density changes the conveyor belts of the ocean churn that we have depended on as long as there have been humans. This circulation of water gives us stable weather, marine life, nutrient circling, a warm Europe and monsoon seasons for Africa - and more we're just beginning to understand.

And the UN has said we can't avoid the results we most wanted to avoid.

Now our last hope is to keep the global average under 2 degrees Celsius increase.

Humanity may not exist as a species if we overshoot that ½ a degree more.

Between 1.5 and 2... we're in for destruction; loss of landmarks, and culture, and peoples, and all that Ezekiel experienced in a localized scale we'll know on a global scale.

And I weep.

There is a value in knowing something exists, even if you don't live near it or interact with the something. Just the knowledge is valuable. I've never seen the Great Wall of China, but the knowledge it exists brings me a smile.

I grew up hearing about the Amazon Rainforest. I always thought I might see it some day. I know about the levels of life; how an atmospheric river flows through the unimaginable diversity of plants and animals. Leopards! Toucans! Poison dart frogs! The largest river on earth that is like an inland ocean moving across the land.

The Amazon today is nothing like this. Great portions are desert. The river a trickle.

Lifeforms are going extinct daily. Between 1.5 and 2 degrees – the next few years - we will lose the rest of the rainforest. What will it be like to look at baby books and they're full of animals we know no longer exist?

"[The] Amazon river used to pour at the ocean 2.5 billions gallons of water per second. Now... and the dry season will be long and hot... if El Nino keeps next year, the Amazon forest might collapse. And if it collapses, Central South American will become a desert. It was the biggest river in the world. But if [the] Amazon forest dies, it will throw too many gigatons of CO2 at the atmosphere." Brazilian Forestry Agent, 2023

Have you read the UK is warning people to stock up for this upcoming El Nino? The last large one on record killed 3% of the world's population. 250 million in today's numbers. If it also collapses the Amazon rainforest...

I sob.

I grew up learning about the Great Barrier Reef. I'd look at photos of the living corals, the fish that depend on them as they depend on the fish. I thought "some day, I'll go scuba diving and I'll see reefs!"

We already have lost 80% of our reefs due to the heat. We're going to lose the rest shortly. Coral will be extinct in the wild - that ecosystem gone - and with it the fish, the dolphins, the starfish and clams and everything else that lives in a reef. They will be in zoos and

picture books only. Watching Finding Nemo is not going to be the same when Nemo is only in aquariums.

“I’d just recruited a PhD student to study fish behaviour, and between the time of recruiting him and getting out for the first field season, the Great Barrier Reef died – 80% of the corals where we work were gone, and most of the fish that lived there also moved on. I told him in the interview that his first visit was going to be this most wonderful experience, and it was just a tragic graveyard of historic coral reef life.” – Steve Simpson, professor of marine biology and global change at the University of Exeter, 2020.

I grew up learning about the arctic. I loved the story of Balto the sled dog; and find arctic foxes the cutest. Polar bears - seals - whales. Already this ecosystem is collapsing and the crisis is driving animals, and people, to starvation.

“We are people of the sea ice. And if there’s no more sea ice, how do we be people of the sea ice?” Inuit Elder, 2020.

No reefs. No arctic. No rainforest. What else am I losing this very moment? What else am I going to lose in the next few years?

Venice.

Edinburgh.

The French Quarter of New Orleans.

What won't be around in 25 to 100 years? Try 80% of UNESCO world heritage sites.

The Easter Island heads.

The US Statue of Liberty.

Disneyland.

Vancouver.

Downtown Toronto.

Most of the boreal forest and every Canadian town within them.

Even the pyramids of Egypt are threatened! Extreme heat makes extreme winds. Extreme winds carry abrasive sand and threaten the pyramids in Egypt. Flooding in the Nile, and increased humidity, threaten them more.

And this makes me lament. Grieve. Panic. I feel it in my muscles and in the way low grade anxiety constantly hovers over me. I feel it in my thoughts of the future. In my prayers for those younger than I. I plant trees and I wonder - will this plant survive ecological collapse? Will I? Will life?

This is climate grief. Climate anxiety. Climate despair.

It is affecting our scientists so much so they have specialized counselors. It is wrecking those who are connected to the land and water - rural and Indigenous peoples are much more distressed than those in cities and in cultures not connected to land.

But the crisis is beginning to hit cities too. No one is safe.

I'm not safe.

And that makes me scared.

This week I was at a 2 day event to chat about what do those ages 0 to 30 need of the United Church in this region. And one answer was - climate action. While people who are retirement age to elderly are fretting about being the last generation of the church, those who are 0 to 30 are fretting about being the last generation of humans.

Despair. Despair. Lament. And crying by the North Channel. Crying for the children born who are in the coolest year of their life. Each year will be hotter than the last. Crying for the powerlessness of us compared to the consumerist culture, affluent people, ways of life, and human sins that conquer us.

We are collectively guilty.

Some are way more guilty than others - but we are collectively born into this sinful system. Born into exile.

We cry.

We begin this year's season of creation with lament. Lamenting with our ancient faith ancestors. Crying over what we have lost, and what we know we will lose. Facing this... mortality. And collective failure. We grieve.

We cannot ever get to the point of changing our lives, our cultures, our cities, our whole world views if we do not face the truth.

God's temple is burning.

The work of God's hands is melting.

The image of God is being bombed over the last remaining fossil fuels - which only endanger us more by burning.

God feels so distant.

We feel so powerless and alone.

We weep, remembering all that we have lost.

Repenting is coming to yourself. Facing the music. Knowing the way things are cannot go on. It means reaching that point where costs sunk are not more than the cost of turning around. Return. If you're part of NA, AA, or another Anonymous group – you know the 12 steps – you know the first steps are admitting we have a problem. Turning towards Creator – and owning up to the damage around us to ourselves, our society, our friends and family. It is repenting.

From repenting, we can take inventory and find a way forward. From lament, we can find hope.

In the book of Ezekiel, in all the loss and hopelessness, in all the despair and powerlessness, the prophet foresees God offering a new start. It begins as a tiny stream of living water coming out of the midst of the destruction. The living, fresh, sweet water grows and grows as more and more life joins the new way of being. The entire ecosystem is healed - and the healing is to spread. It comes from the waters. It comes from the leaves. It comes from the humans joining God and God's creatures.

Ezekiel sees then, and now, that our way forward is a return to God's temple and way; it is through deserts and hard times; but when we, and creation, are gathered as one - there is healing for the nations. Healing for the ecosystems. Healing for you and me.

This season of creation, we're going to focus on water. But to get to hope and action... we first have to take account of where we are, and grieve. And take heart, God did not leave Ezekiel's people hopeless. God will not leave us hopeless. Ezekiel's people found a way to return, rebuild, and rededicate their lives to living in harmony with God and God's creation. We will find a way to return, rebuild, and rededicate our lives to living in harmony with God and God's creation too.

God is with you and gives us the strength to repent, turn, and live again.
Amen.

Scripture Reading. (Ezekiel 47:9,12)

"Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows. There will be large numbers of fish, because this water flows there and makes the salt water fresh; so where the river flows everything will live. [...] Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river. Their leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fail. Every month they will bear fruit, because the water from the sanctuary flows to them. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing."

May God's spirit shape our understanding of these words.
And may they awaken in our hearts

