

John Sampson
"An Earthly Passion"
Text: Luke 22:47 - 51
Preached at KVCC
September 15, 2019

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer.

Amen.

What if we stopped pretending?

What if we stopped pretending that the global environmental crisis that is already here is somehow avoidable?

What if we stopped pretending, and finally accepted that we can no longer avoid the catastrophe that is already destroying ecosystems, and political systems, and spiritual systems all around our world?

What if we just stopped pretending that an earthly salvation is possible?

This is the question and the challenge that Jonathan Franzen asks in a recent article in the New Yorker magazine. It was Martha Swan who forwarded a link to this article after our last Mission and Social Action meeting where the group that gathered together spoke about how this congregation could take a series of next steps in making this congregation a greener church, and could be more connected to the ways our wider community is trying to save energy, reduce emissions and waste, and leave a lighter footprint in our world.

I hadn't read more than two or three paragraphs from Franzen's article, when something deep inside me exhaled, because I felt like someone was telling me a truth I hadn't yet felt I was allowed to express openly. We keep hearing that the point of no return, the point at which we can stop and possibly begin reversing the effects of global warming is 5, or 10, or 15 years off. But Franzen argues that for all intents and purposes the door to saving our world, as we know it, has already closed, because we, as a species, have simply not shown the commitment to the type of collective action that is necessary to avert the disaster already sitting right in our midst.

You don't have to agree with Franzen. You can still hold out hope that the door to a future that looks more-or-less like our environmental present is still open, even if it is closing quickly. But for me, in this reflection, I will embrace Franzen's challenging perspective and assume that the door is closed, and we have missed the moment to save the earth as we know it, and as we love it.

And so this morning I invite all of us, you and me, to inhabit a moment where salvation is no longer possible – where the salvation of God’s earthly Creation is no longer an option. I want us to occupy a moment where paradise is lost.

Who will we be in this moment?

Who will we become because of this moment?

A couple of weeks ago I preached at All Souls Memorial Chapel just down the road. And my reflection was about how reading *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis’ encyclical on the environment and human ecology was affecting me. And after worship a woman came up to me and said, “You need to share your reflection with your congregation.” And I respond, kind of flippantly, “Oh, I don’t need to share this with them. They’ve already got me.” And she looked at me even harder and said, “No, you have to share it with them.”

In this moment, when I ask all of us who we will be, and who we will become, when we stop pretending that we can save ourselves, and our planet, from the environmental collapse that’s already here, I am going to take that woman’s advice, and share with you a piece of the reflection I gave at All Souls.

I shared with those who attended worship that morning that our Christian tradition can allow us to see that the environmental crisis we find ourselves in the middle of is a story of crucifixion. The world, our earthly mother, the one who our spiritual ancestors tell us we were created by God to take care of, and nourish, stands before us beaten, and bloodied, and dying. Innocent, she is none-the-less the object of a ruthless cruelty.

But if we move the camera back, and allow ourselves to see more than simply the world naked and dehumanized before us, we actually begin to recognize all of the players, and all of the dynamics of power, swirling around our crucified mother. There on the margins of our icon we can see the multinational corporations, the nationalisms, the economic systems built on cheap fossil fuels, the destruction of forests cleared for fields all working together to bring our world to the brink. But behind it all, I think, is our insatiable selfishness, our bottomless need for more and more, to satiate our never-ending inner emptiness. What we have before us, what we are living right in the middle of, is not simply an image of a crucifixion, but the drama of a Passion story.

And so I ask again.

Who will we be in this drama?

Who will we become when we stop pretending we aren’t already part of this earthly Passion play?

I chose today’s reading about Jesus’ disciples trying to save and protect their teacher from arrest, because I think it speaks to this moment where the death of the world we have

always known is no longer something we can avoid, where it has, in fact, become a present reality.

Think of where this reading of a severed ear healed sits in the larger Passion narrative.

Jesus has known for a while now that if he continues to speak about the unbreakable love between God and humanity, if he continues to perform miracles that feed the hungry, if he continues to prioritize the needs of the least important members of his society, that those in power will finally silence him through death. And I don't think his insight has anything to do with supernatural vision. I think it has everything to do with Jesus embracing a soberly realistic view of politics and power.

And so Jesus comes to Jerusalem and has his final meal with his followers, and his friends. And after supper he goes to the garden of Gethsemane, and he prays, and he asks God to take away the future he sees closing in on him. And God responds with the profoundest reply, a reply we often mistake for no reply. God responds with silence; God responds with an absence that is in no way different from a presence.

God responds to Jesus, just as she is responding to all of us today. For this moment in which we stand, this moment in which our planet is dying, is bathed in a Divine silence, isn't it?

And yet it is in this moment of silence that Jesus finally stops pretending that his death is avoidable. He opens the eyes of his soul and finally accepts the shattering truth standing right before him. There is no salvation coming. There is only the cross.

Franzen asks us to open the eyes of our souls and see where it is we actually stand, and to finally admit that the possibility of salvation for our world is past, that there is no salvation coming, that there is only the cosmic cross standing before us.

I have been sitting with Franzen's article about the future of our world for a couple of days now, and it has caused within me a tectonic shift of my spirit. Because what I prayed would never happen and would never be forced to see, is not only closer than I ever thought it could be, it is already here.

If my words today are having a similar effect within you, we're in the same boat.

Jesus stands in that garden surrounded by his friends and followers and the guards of the priests come to arrest him. And one of his disciples slashes off the ear of the guard who lunges to grab Jesus. And the man who is beyond hope, the man for whom the possibility of salvation has evaporated before his eyes, uses this moment to show us, to show you and me, what an ethics in a world without salvation looks like.

It looks like nonviolence; it looks like healing; it looks like still being active and engaged. Jesus doesn't crumble before his knowledge that his life is lost, and he asks us not to crumble before our knowledge that our world, at least as we have always known it, is lost.

In this moment when we stop pretending that the environmental catastrophe is avoidable our teacher models for us his commandment that we can't stop our works of love and compassion. In fact they are needed now more than ever.

As the effects of climate change intensify we can already see the social dislocations that are resulting: the migrations, the conflicts, the hunger, the spread of disease. This is the time that we are called upon to stand and to recommit ourselves to works of humanity and sacredness, not because they will lead to salvation, but because they will ease suffering, and protect the most vulnerable, and allow the sacred image of God to be recognized living within the hearts of all of God's children, human and nonhuman.

This is who our teacher asks us to be at this moment when we stop pretending that the environmental crisis is avoidable.

The people of love and compassion are what the Crucified asks us to become, as the world we knew has already slipped through our fingers.

Amen.