

2020 09 13 – Earth, Tremble Before your Maker

Psalm 114 &

We Who Prayed and Wept by Wendell Berry

We who prayed and wept
for liberty from kings
and yoke of liberty
accept the tyranny of things
we do not need.
In plenitude too free,
we have become adept
beneath the yoke of greed.

Those who will not learn
in plenty to keep their place
must learn it by their need
when they have had their way
and the fields spurn their seed.
We have failed Thy grace.
Lord, I flinch and pray,
send Thy necessity.

Today's scripture reading is a poem of praise and thanksgiving. It is a song that would have been sung at all the ancient Hebrew festivals. It is a song that remembers the story of the Israelite's exodus from slavery in Egypt, their journey through the wilderness and their eventual arrival in the Promised Land of Canaan. It is a song that celebrates the miracles of nature that took place during that journey.

At the beginning of their exodus, the Red Sea parted so the Israelites could leave Egypt safely (Exodus 14:21-22) and, at the end of their journey, the Jordan River stopped flowing so that they could enter the Promised Land (Joshua 3:14-17). And so they sang, "The sea fled at the sight: the Jordan turned back on its course."

At Mt. Sinai, where God gave them the Ten Commandments, they experienced smoke and fire and felt the mountain shake violently (Exodus 20:18). And so they sang, “the mountains leapt like rams, and the hills like yearling sheep.” And when the Israelites were complaining of thirst, Moses, their leader, struck a rock and water flowed from it (Exodus 17:6). And so they sang:

Earth, tremble before your Maker,
before the God of Israel,
who turned the rock into a pool of water
and flint into a bubbling fountain!

The Israelites believed that all these miracles of nature occurred just for them. They believed that YHWH, the God of Israel, intervened on their behalf and they celebrated their deliverance from Egypt with a song of praise to their God.

So, in this celebratory hymn, why are they telling the Earth to “tremble before your Maker?” Are they suggesting that their God is a God that should be feared? Are they suggesting that creation itself is in danger from this all-powerful deity? Certainly fear is one reason for trembling. But trembling also occurs as a result of awe, of wonder, of reverence. In this song of celebration I believe the Israelites are asking the entire earth to tremble with awe and thus to join with them in their song of joy and thanksgiving.

In fact, if the earth has any reason to tremble with fear, it is not from dread of its Creator. The earth has much more to fear from humankind, from us, from you and me. Scientists have clearly proven that our activities are the main cause of climate change and that climate change is having a devastating effect on the planet on which we live. The Saskatchewan Environmental Society says on their website:

In Saskatchewan the largest effects to date have been very heavy rainfall events with extensive flooding, severe forest and grassland fires, and migration of insect pests from further south. Globally, climate change has disrupted the hydrological cycle, accelerated the melting of Arctic sea ice, resulted in a sharp decline in mountain glaciers, caused a dangerous rise in global sea levels, increased the intensity of hurricanes and typhoons, led to extensive damage of coral reef ecosystems, reduced crop yields, and killed hundreds of thousands of people each year.

<http://environmentalsociety.ca/issues/climate-change/>

Yes, our earth and all its inhabitants have great reason to tremble with fear. This is the type of flinching fear that Wendell Berry is referring to in today's second reading when he says,

“We have failed Thy grace.
Lord, I flinch and pray,
send Thy necessity.

Wendell Berry is an American novelist, poet, environmental activist, and farmer. His love for the land is deep and he has been writing about climate change and other environmental and political issues for decades.

In today's poem, written in the early 1980's, Berry blames human greed, our need for more even in the midst of plenty. He writes:

We who prayed and wept
for liberty from kings
and yoke of liberty
accept the tyranny of things
we do not need.
In plenitude too free,
we have become adept
beneath the yoke of greed.

And then he gives a warning that soon we will be paying for that greed. He writes,

Those who will not learn
in plenty to keep their place
must learn it by their need
when they have had their way
and the fields spurn their seed.

Nearly forty years later we are beginning to feel the impact of our overconsumption and wasteful living. Just this week our world news has been filled with stories of deadly fires on the west coast of the United States and the smoky haze that now covers southern British Columbia.

Of course, on top of the climate crisis, we are also in the midst of a global pandemic. In many ways humankind is currently experiencing our own wilderness journey. Like the Israelites, we are in a time and place filled with fear and uncertainty. Like the Israelites, we struggle to know whether we can trust our leaders to move us out of this scary place. And like the Israelites, we have no idea when we will reach the end of our journey or what our “Promised Land” will look like.

But, like the Israelites, even in the midst of this pandemic, we are experiencing glimpses of light, miracles of creation. In the spring we heard stories of wild animals appearing in urban areas, of disappearing smog over our cities and of fish returning to the canals of Venice. On the website, *Science Direct*, I found the following words:

COVID-19 is a global pandemic and serious threat to human health which halts economic activities, however it is also considered as a “Blessing in Disguise”, where pollution is reducing and nature is reclaiming itself. This positive impact on the environment may be temporary but governments and individuals should learn from this lockdown on how to reduce pollution on a long term basis.

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0048969720323378>

It is often in the midst of wilderness journeys like this that we are able to learn some of life’s most important lessons. So what are we learning this time? What lasting changes can we make in our own lives to reduce our footprint on mother earth? What new legislation should we be asking our governments to create? What will our “new normal” look like?

“Earth, tremble before your Maker.” But this time, tremble with hope, with expectation, with new possibility. Let’s take these miracles of creation as signs of the renewing power of God working in our midst and let us use that power, the power of Love, to heal our planet.