

Revolutionary Patience

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Genesis 28:10-19a
Romans 8:12-25

This past several days I have been privileged to take part in the Annual Conference of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America. It was a week full of reunions with old friends, and meetings with new friends, workshops, lectures and worship services, and of course, of course, the occasional escape to the woods behind the college campus.

The theme of our gathering was “One Creation”, and with the help of a First Nations (Native American) Bishop, an Anglican activist from Ontario and an African American theologian from Texas, among others, we reflected on the ways in which our usual approach to creation threatens to destroy the earth and the air and the water...and ignores that we are one with creation as a whole, not separate privileged masters of a human destiny magically separated from the creation of which we are a part.

Earth and wind, fire and water: these are the four elements which ancient people and the elders of the indigenous peoples of Canada see as making up the creation, as they make up our bodies! Environmentalists, pastors and others reflected with us how our treatment of these elements, and how our treatment of the people of the land must change.

Of course people spoke to us from many angles. One of the most compelling for me was Eleazar, an indigenous person, from Chiapas, a seminary student, already deeply engaged in ministry. Native people coming from area around Chiapas, Eleazar and his people know what it is like to be on the losing side of history. And the crisis is as new as it is old. Eleazar spoke of how in recent times, his people have become fearful of the changes to the earth and plants around them. The earth is starting to behave differently. Recently, he said, the moon even shone red like blood—a sign that some interpreted as meaning the End was near. Protestants in that part of Mexico, many of them, he said, were interpreting this as a time when they should grab hold of a rope to climb to heaven. Don't worry what is happening to the earth, they said. The End is coming. Get ready. But others he said, looked back and remembered the old ways, and they were concerned for their children too. We must have hope, he said. And we are all in it together. Somewhere between those trying to cling to the hope of heaven, and those concerned for the earth and the trees and the air, we must find hope together.

Hope: hope is not easy. Hope for the redemption of the earth we humans have been polluting, ransacking and exploiting in the name of progress—such hope is not easy. Hope—hope for the redemption of our history, following centuries of oppression and attempted elimination of native peoples on this continent and others—hope is not easy. But hope we must!

Let us insist on hope. Said the apostle Paul, in an earlier time when folk felt the loss of the world as they knew it, and saw their lives and livelihoods destroyed: “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?”

As we reflected together in the quiet beauty of a Canadian college campus this past week, fresh evidence of our human capacity for destruction broke out in Israel and Palestine. Many of us grieved as we heard news of the bombing of Gaza, the killing of children, the unholy ground war that has resumed in a land deemed holy by people of many faiths. As we listened to the accounts of the violence I remembered the dream of Jacob. IF you read back in the story you will find out why Jacob was on the rung—He was running from his brother, whose birthright he had stolen. As Jacob fled from his own fear of the brother he had cheated, he had to sleep sometime. And so he put his head down and went to sleep, his head laid upon a stone pillow. Jacob Dreamed: he dreamed of a ladder descending from heaven, the angels walking up and down. In the dream, he received assurance that there would be land for him and his descendants to dwell in, and that the descendants would become a blessing to all of humankind, to all the nations.

How often we remember the promises of God for a land to dwell in and mistake it for exclusive possession! How often we forget the call of God to be a blessing, not simply to our own, but to all the nations! In the name of that promise we kill; in the name of that promise we destroy the very land and water needed to live in; in the name of that promise we humans become inhuman to each other.

The ladder in Jacob’s dream of is not a one way ladder to reach for a disembodied spiritual promise in heaven: the angels go up and they come down this stairway to heaven—the dreams of heaven’s doors are at best dreams for peace and coexistence on earth. The promise made to one tribal Israelite at the dawn of history is not intended simply for a few, for one nation or another, but for a blessing for all, all who are children of God—and we are all, ALL children of heaven.

All around us is the environmental and human evidence: the earth itself suffers, creation groans and calls out from the abuse done in the name of limitless supplies for a consumer culture. Around the world indigenous folk are threatened by cultural annihilation and great human need caused by the theft of their birthright. In our own neighborhoods, in this wealthy nation, mothers struggle to feed their children. Go figure. And it is overwhelming. And we are tempted to cynicism and numbness. As we listen to the news of human cruelty and war, we are tempted to throw up our hands helplessly, or make excuses for the friends we love.

And yet we dare not give up, dare not hide in indifference. To be Christ’s peacemakers today, each in our own little ways, means finding the hope to reclaim God’s promise that earth as a dwelling place for all God’s children. My house is your house. It means to insist with not only words but the way we live, on blessing and healing rather than curses and war. It means to claim our little places as an integral part of God’s creation, knowing that when we are silent, the rocks themselves will cry out. And it also means to insist, in spite of death and inhumanity, insist on

joy. It means to find joy in the little things, right where we are. It means to claim joy in the stones and joy in the hills, joy in the valleys and joy in the rivers. We insist on joy: we will treasure the blade of grass, the wind in the trees. We sustain hope: the hope of creation redeemed.

To be Christ's peacemakers today is to insist on hope. But it is something more too. God invites us to work patiently for a revolution of values, a revolution of relationships, a revolution that brings to an end the things that make for human mutually assured destruction—human madness.

To be Christ's peacemakers requires a revolutionary patience—patient labors starting right where we are, patient proclamation, patient announcing of the good news of the gospel we receive from long ago. With the apostle Paul, we dare to claim the hope that all this struggle, all this apparent defeat is but the birth pangs of a creation renewed and set free. We wait with patience, wait for the revealing of the children of God! We wait with patience for a groaning earth to give birth to a new humanity, and a healed nature. We wait! But this is not passive waiting! We aren't here to stand in an earthly train station, waiting for the express train to heaven. We work while we wait! And it is patient work.

Christian faith is not easy happiness but deep joy. Our conviction is not denial of what is around us—the evidence of suffering. But we look what is square in the eye, while we hope: hope that something better is possible, even when we cannot see the big picture—or see our own way clear.

On Friday morning at our Baptist Peace meeting, a group of several visiting Cuban Baptists broke into song—if you have faith like a mustard seed, they sang in Spanish, you can move mountains. Give us this mustard seed faith, God, they sang. If you have faith like a mustard seed, you will yourself be moved—and you will move, you will move, you will move. Give us this mustard seed faith, God, they sang, and let us move.

How shall we move? How shall we exercise this patient love and revolutionary witness? For one it may be planting a garden with food to share, or tending the beauty of a church garden in an urban neighborhood. For another it may be writing a letter for Peace' sake. For one it may be protesting a pipeline; for another it may be reaching out to organize with families and children facing deprivation and hunger. For yet another it may be offering the refugees of war a hand of compassion and blessing, in a land with plenty of space for us all. It doesn't depend on any one of us alone—but it invites all of us together.

Thirty years ago and more, Dorothee Soelle, a German poet, a feminist theologian, published an English translation of some of her poems entitled Revolutionary Patience. I want to close by sharing with you one of those poems, entitled "Credo", which means "I believe" in Latin.

"Credo"

I believe in God
who did not create an immutable world
a thing incapable of change
who does not govern according to eternal laws
that remains inviolate
or according to a natural order
of rich and poor
of the expert and the ignorant
of rulers and subjects
I believe in God
who willed conflict in life
and wanted us to change the status quo
through our work
through our politics
I believe in Jesus Christ
who was right when he
like each of us
just another individual who couldn't beat city hall
worked to change the status quo
and was destroyed
looking at him I see
how our intelligence is crippled
our imagination stifled
our efforts wasted
because we do not live as he did
every day I am afraid
that he died in vain
because he is buried in our churches
because we have betrayed his revolution
in our obedience to authority
and our fear of it
I believe in Jesus Christ
who rises again and again in our lives
so that we will be free
from prejudice and arrogance
from fear and hate
and carry on his revolution
and make way for his kingdom
I believe in the Spirit
That Jesus brought into the world
In the brotherhood of all nations
I believe it is up to us
what our earth becomes
a valley of tears starvation and tyranny
or a city of God
I believe in a just peace

That can be achieved in the possibility of a meaningful life
for all people
I believe this world of God's
has a future
Amen

[Dorothee Soelle, *Revolutionary Patience*, translated by Rita and Robert Kimber (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1977), pages 22-23.