

Season of Creation 4: Respect September 25, 2016

Jeremiah 32: 1-3a; 6-15; Luke 16:19-31

A Reading From The Mystics: From St. Hildegard of Bingen, "Symphonia Armonie"

Let me tell you a story about a neighborhood about 4½ miles from where I used to live in Niagara County, NY. It was called Love Canal. By the time I lived there in the late 80's early 90's, it was a ghost town. What happened? In a nutshell, an entrepreneur named William Love bought the land at the turn of the 20th century, believing that a canal there could be used to generate electricity. Technology outpaced Love's dream and in the 1920s the canal was turned into a dumpsite for toxic chemicals. In 1953, Hooker Chemical covered the canal with dirt and sold it to the city of Niagara Falls for \$1 and homes and schools were built on the site. Over the decades, the containment barrels rusted and the chemicals inside escaped into the clay and seeped into the earth. Spring floods helped to spread them. In the 1970s, people began to discover black sludge in their basements and pools of chemicals in their backyards. Rising numbers of miscarriages, cancer and birth defects finally caused the story to go national. Local government denied there'd ever been any negligence, but President Jimmy Carter finally took action. More than 800 families were evacuated and reimbursed by the federal government for the loss of their homes.

I thought of all this when I read the Jeremiah passage. I knew Love Canal was one of the first Superfund cleanup sites. And although complete streets had been permanently bulldozed around the canal, those immediately north and west were refurbished following the \$230 million cleanup that involved capping the canal with clay, a plastic liner and top-soil. Beginning in 1990, homes were given new vinyl siding, roofs and windows and sold at prices well below market value. The neighborhood was renamed Black Creek Village; people began moving back in. Optimism was high in the depressed city of Niagara Falls.

This reminded me of Jeremiah because the Old Testament prophet of doom and gloom himself had taken an uncharacteristically optimistic action. He bought some land in Jerusalem, which in his context would have seemed like a very foolish thing to do. Babylon had overtaken the city leaving a trail of death and destruction in its path. Buying property would be pointless when the entire population was about to be killed or deported.

Yet Jeremiah's action of buying land symbolized hope – the kind that is visible only to those who have a vision beyond the present reality. Jeremiah saw it as a sign that God would some day reverse Israel's fortunes. God had neither forgotten them nor left them to their own devices. Putting his deed safely in a clay pot, he took steps necessary to assure that it would outlast war and destruction.

So I saw the return of property owners to Love Canal as a sign of hope. It had taken a long time to clean up the mess, but recovery was possible. But it turns out I was wrong. Return to Love Canal has been as problematic as the return of the Israelites from exile.

In their case, the land had simply been neglected; their troubles were more with the people who had moved into their homes and with their religious beliefs and practices. And, of course, disputes over that land continue to this day. In the case of residents of Black Creek Village, toxic sludge has appeared and physical maladies are again being reported.

The history of post-exilic Jerusalem and post-toxic Love Canal would seem to warn us that having land is not a simplistic thing. There are implications and complications, struggles and controversies. Take the squabble over the Dakota Access Pipeline. Oil companies and their supporters claim the project will create greater energy independence for the US. and create thousands of jobs, and millions of dollars in state and local taxes.

Protesters, including representatives from 280 Native American tribes, say the pipeline will contaminate the water supply, as well as destroy sacred lands. The encampment at Standing Rock is being called the largest, most diverse tribal action in at least a century. In all of these stories, land is central. Who owns it? Who gets to say how it's used?

To answer these questions, we can go in one of two directions. We can go the route of the Enlightenment philosophy of the 18th century, which is still largely in operation today. Now, there were many good aspects of the Enlightenment, also known as the Age of Reason, which sought to illuminate human intellect and culture after the "dark" Middle Ages. Concepts such as reason, liberty and the scientific method were elevated. Enlightenment philosophy was influential in ushering in the French and American revolutions and constitutions.

However, one aspect of Enlightenment philosophy has not been so helpful. That is its dualism and hierarchy, which sees a separation between us and our environment and claims that human beings are in charge of the environment; we have the right to shape, control and use nature for our own purposes. As Francis Bacon wrote, "Let the human race recover that right over nature which belongs to it by divine bequest." That dualism included the relationship between men and women. Bacon likened nature to a wild and untamed woman who must be tamed by man and become obedient: "she is put in constraint, molded and made as it were new by art and the hand of man; nature takes orders from man and works under his authority."

That philosophy, which also became part of our theology, might sound pretty antiquated, but it survives to this day. Conservative Christian Ann Coulter quoted herself in her book, "God gave us the earth. We have dominion over the plants, the animals, the trees. God said, 'Earth is yours. Take it. Rape it. It's yours.'" Appalling, yes. But the seeds were sown in the Age of Enlightenment. Thankfully, many evangelical Christians have been joining the ranks of those who care for creation, but this theology has been hard to replace.

We must take a different route of answering the questions of who owns the land; who gets to say how it's used? Although if we do that, it gets more complicated because there won't be a hierarchy of power or a one-size-fits-all answer. Of course, the question of who owns the land is a silly one for indigenous people, who would say that no one owns the land. Although, in a broader sense of ownership, they would assert *cultural* claims to their ancestral lands and say that there are rights and responsibilities that go along with occupation of the land.

Familiar quotes:

“What is this you call property? It cannot be the earth, for the land is our mother, nourishing all her children, beasts, birds, fish and all men. The woods, the streams, everything on it belongs to everybody and is for the use of all. How can one man say it belongs only to him?” – Massasoit “One does not sell the land people walk on.” - Crazy Horse

We are finally beginning to think about creation in a way that is much more aligned with the wisdom of indigenous people. How long will it take until that becomes the philosophy that informs our political decisions, governmental polices, and our individual practices? I don't know, but we have to start somewhere. The Dakota Access Pipeline protest just might be a watershed moment in the movement away from human domination of nature. It may be our return from exile – not to a perfect place where there are no problems, conflicts, or where there are simple solutions – but still a place of hope, a place where God works with us as we work together.

Way back in the 12th century, Hildegard of Bingen coined the word “veriditas” and used it as a guiding theme in her writings, poetry, and music. And it's an excellent word for us on our evolution from domination of the land to respect for it. Veriditas has been variously translated as freshness, vitality, fruitfulness, creative power of life, growth. But my favorite word for it is “greening” from its joining of two Latin words: green and truth. This “greening” runs through our being, As a metaphor for our spiritual and physical health, it's what enlivens us and enables us to make wise choices as co-inhabitators of the land.

You might remember Kermit the frog famously singing, “It's not easy being green,” and he's right. We all have some big adjustments to make. But when our spirituality and our philosophical view of the world become green, the rest will follow. And there's hope, as Hildegard wrote, “even in a world that's being shipwrecked.” But hope often has to be a participatory event.

I'm sure you've heard the story of the man, who was a firm believer in the power of God. And one day, when it began to rain very heavily and the water began to rise very quickly, he climbed up on the roof of his house, trusting that God would save him. It kept raining and the water reached his waist. A boat came by and a guy said: “Jump in. We'll take you with us.” “No thanks”, said the man. “God will save me.” The boat went away.

It kept on raining and the water reached his neck. Another boat came by and a woman in the boat said: "Jump in; we we'll take you with us".

"No", said the man. "I'm a firm believer that God will save me." The boat left.

The water had now reached his mouth when a helicopter flew over and someone in threw down a rope and said: "Climb up. We'll rescue you".

"No", said the man. "I know that God will save me. "The helicopter flew off.

Finally the man drowned. When he died, he went to heaven and stood before God. He asked: "Where were you. I waited and waited. I was sure you would save me. I've been a firm believer all my life. So where were you when I needed you?"

God looked confused and answered: "I don't get it either. I sent you two boats and a helicopter. What more were you looking for?"

Just like that man, we have to get on board: theologically, philosophically, spiritually, and practically. Veriditas – in the words of Hildegard, when she prayed -

"O most honored Greening Force,
You who roots in the Sun;
You who lights up, in shining serenity, within a wheel
that earthly excellence fails to comprehend.
You are enfolded
in the weaving of divine mysteries.

This is the greening spirit that will enable us to do so.

Amen

Jeremiah 32: 1-3a; 6-15

The word that came to Jeremiah from YHWH in the tenth year of Zedekiah ruler of Judah, which was also the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar:

At that time the army of the ruler of Babylon was besieging Jerusalem, and the prophet Jeremiah was imprisoned in the court of the guardhouse attached to the residence of the ruler of Jerusalem. Zedekiah the ruler imprisoned him after demanding, "How dare you prophesy the way you do?

The word of YHWH came to me and said, "Hanamel, the son of your uncle Shallum, will come to you and say, 'Buy my field in Anathoth. As next of kin you have the right of redemption to purchase it.'" And just as YHWH foretold, my cousin Hanamel came to me in the court of the guardhouse and said, "Buy my field at Anathoth in Benjamin. You have

the right of redemption to purchase it as next of kin. So why not purchase it?" I knew that that this was the word of YHWH.

So I bought the field in Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel, and weighed out the money—seventeen shekels of silver. I signed the deed and sealed it, had it witnessed and then weighed out the money on a scale. I took the copies of the deed of purchase—both the sealed copy containing the terms and conditions and the unsealed copy—and gave them to Baruch ben-Neriah ben-Mahseiah in the presence of my cousin Hanamel and of the witnesses who had signed the deed and all the people of Judah who happened to be in the court of the guardhouse. I gave Baruch these instructions in their presence: "Thus says YHWH Omnipotent, the God of Israel: take these deeds, both this sealed deed of purchase and the unsealed deed of purchase, and put them in a clay jar so that they may be preserved for a very long time. For this is what YHWH Omnipotent, the God of Israel, says: Houses, fields and vineyards will once again be purchased in this land."

A READING FROM THE MYSTICS

From St. Hildegard of Bingen, "Symphonia Armonie Celestium Revelationum"
(Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations)

O greenness of God's finger
with which God built a vineyard
that shines in heaven
as an established pillar:
You are glorious in God's preparation.
And O height of the mountain
that will never be dispersed
in the judgment of God,
you nevertheless stand from afar as an exile,
but it is not in the power
of the armed man
to seize you.
You are glorious in God's preparation.
Glory be to the Father and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit.
You are glorious in God's preparation.

Luke 16:19-31

"Once there was a rich man who dressed in purple and linen and feasted splendidly every day. At the gate of this man's estate lay a beggar named Lazarus, who was covered with

sores. Lazarus longed to eat the scraps that fell from the rich man's table, and even the dogs came and licked Lazarus' sores. One day poor Lazarus died and was carried by the angels to the arms of Father Abraham. The rich man likewise died and was buried. In Hades, in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham in the distance, and Lazarus resting in their company.

"‘Father Abraham,’ the rich man cried, ‘have pity on me! Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue, for I am tortured by these flames!’ But he said, ‘My child, remember that you were well off in your lifetime, while Lazarus was in misery. Now Lazarus has found consolation here, and you have found torment. But that’s not all. Between you and us there is a fixed chasm, so that those who might wish to come to you from here can’t do so, nor can anyone cross from your side to us.’

“The rich man said, ‘I beg you, then, to send Lazarus to my own house where I have five brothers. Let Lazarus be a warning to them, so that they may not end in this place of torment.’ But Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them.’

‘Please, I beg you,’ the rich man said, ‘if someone would only go to them from the dead, then they would repent.’

‘If they don’t listen to Moses and the prophets,’ Abraham replied, ‘they won’t be convinced even if someone should rise from the dead!’