

**The Wisdom of Creation**  
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**Toronto United Mennonite Church**

Scripture: Jeremiah 4:19-26a, Colossians 1:15-23, Job 12:7-10

I want to open my sermon today with an excerpt from the poem “Damage” by Wendell Berry, who is an American writer, farmer, and ecological activist. It’s about a pond that he had dug on his farm to create a water supply for his cattle:

“The pond appeared to be a success. Before the bulldozer quit work, water had already begun to seep in. Soon there was enough to support a few head of stock. To heal the exposed ground, I fertilized it and sowed it with grass and clover.

We had an extremely wet fall and winter, with the usual freezing and thawing. The ground grew heavy with water, and soft. The earthwork slumped; a large slice of the woods floor on the upper side slipped down into the pond.

The trouble was a familiar one: too much power, too little knowledge. The fault was mine.

I was careful to get expert advice. But this only exemplifies what I already knew. No expert knows everything about every place, not even everything about any place. If one’s knowledge of one’s whereabouts is insufficient, if one’s judgment is unsound, then expert advice is of little use.

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In general, I have used my farm carefully. It could be said, I think, that I have improved it more than I have damaged it.

My aim has been to go against its history and to repair the damage of other people. But now a part of its damage is my own.

The pond was a modest piece of work, and so the damage is not extensive. In the course of time and nature it will heal.

And yet there *is* damage – to my place and to me. I have carried out, before my own eyes and against my intention, a part of the modern tragedy: I have made a lasting flaw in the face of the earth, for no lasting good.

Until that wound in the hillside, my place, is healed, there will be something impaired in my mind. My peace is damaged. I will not be able to forget it.”<sup>1</sup>

In this short passage, Berry puts his finger on so much of what is happening in our world right now: there is so much damage that humanity has inflicted upon the earth, there are so many “wounds” like the one Berry speaks about, so many “lasting flaw[s] in the face of the earth, for no lasting good,” that it can be overwhelming to think about. And like in his experience, this damage has not always been intentional – our efforts to improve human life on this planet are partly responsible for the damage we’ve caused, and our ignorance about the particularities of different places, about the effects of the actions we’ve taken and not taken. How could we have known that a few hundred years of industrial farming, mining, logging, fishing, and “advances” in transportation and technology – to name just a few earth-altering human activities – could drastically and dramatically alter the weather cycles of our planet, resulting in the extreme weather and stronger storms which we’re now seeing all over the globe, including the long, bitter winter we’ve just experienced here?

And this is just one sign of a larger, bleaker problem. Waziyatawin, a Dakota writer who contributed to the recent book *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry* (about the relationship between Mennonite and First Nation communities), describes it this way: “We are now facing a global catastrophe, with CO<sub>2</sub> emissions threatening runaway global warming – one recent study said that by 2100 global temperatures will have increased by sixteen degrees Celsius [but scientists agree that even two degrees would be devastating for all climates] – and through environmental destruction on such a scale (think tar sands and fracking) that our planet may become uninhabitable – think 90

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<sup>1</sup> Wendell Berry, *What Are People For? Essays* (New York: North Point Press, 1990), 5-6.

percent of large ocean fish gone, think ten times as much plastic in the ocean as phytoplankton, think two hundred species gone forever every day.”<sup>2</sup> The extent of the destruction is truly staggering, making Berry’s statements about the “damaged peace” between human beings and creation seem like an understatement.

So as people of faith, where do we turn when faced with this kind of grim reality? It might be tempting for us to think that this is a modern problem, and therefore that it’s something for which we don’t find much guidance in the Bible. But actually, once you start to look for it, talk about God’s creation and our relationship with it is *everywhere* in the Bible, from the opening verses of Genesis outlining God’s careful and loving creation of the world to the beautiful imagery in Revelation of Jesus Christ as the Lamb of God and the tree which bears fruit for the healing of the nations, and everything in between. Maybe some of you have had a chance to have a look at the “Green Bible,” which highlights all the passages pertaining to creation in green ink<sup>3</sup> (a variation of the classic “red-letter” Bibles which highlight the words of Jesus). Leafing through the Green Bible for the first time this week, I was struck by how much green ink I saw! (And I brought a copy if some of you want to have a look at it after the service.)

Parts of our passage from Jeremiah for today are in green ink, and I for one can’t help but think of global warming and environmental degradation when I read this passage. It opens with the “anguish” of the prophet Jeremiah at the coming destruction; he states, “My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain! Oh, the walls of my heart! My heart

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<sup>2</sup> Waziyatawin, “A Serpent in the Garden: An Unholy Worldview on Sacred Land,” in *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry: Conversations on Creation, Land Justice, and Life Together*, ed. Steve Heinrichs (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2013), 215. See also Heinrichs’s introduction, page 17.

<sup>3</sup> *The Green Bible*, New Revised Standard Version (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008).

is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent” (Jer. 4:19a). He sees destruction coming like a “war” and speaks of the stupidity of the people who have turned their backs on God by doing evil instead of good, even by becoming “skilled in doing evil” and forgetting “how to do good” (vv. 19b-22). And he describes the destruction in such a way that it echoes creation, but in reverse; it’s the undoing of creation:<sup>4</sup> “Disaster overtakes disaster, the whole land is laid waste.” He states, “I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light. I looked to the mountains, and lo, they were quaking, and all the hills moved to and fro. I looked, and lo, there was no one at all, and all the birds of the air had fled. I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert, and all the cities were laid in ruins” (20a, 23-26a).

These days we have other words to describe these phenomena: we talk about natural disasters, “desertification,” “deforestation,” the extinction of animals. But the visceral anguish of it and the uninhabitable quality of the land at the end are tragically familiar. Of course, I’m not claiming that Jeremiah had a vision of the environmental problems which would plague the twenty-first century; I realize that in his context (around 600 B.C.), he was talking about the people of Israel, their worship of idols and their forgetting of the goodness that God called them to, which led to the Babylonian exile. His vision of utter desolation is a vision of the consequences they face for turning away from God’s path – and notice that for an agrarian society, utter desolation means the destruction of fruitful farmland. But just because Jeremiah did not intend to speak to the ecological issues of our time doesn’t mean that we cannot hear God speaking to us through his ancient words. Like the ancient Israelites, we too have become “skilled” at the evils of environmental destruction, which, unlike in Berry’s case, is not always just a

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<sup>4</sup> *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: NRSV with the Apocrypha*, 3rd edition, 2001.

matter of unintentionally damaging the earth, but rather of systematically destroying whole ecosystems and species of animals without thinking of the consequences; in other words, in our day and age, we're damaging the earth *despite knowing better*. Even in our everyday lives, we manage to convince ourselves that environmental destruction is somehow not our problem, as, for instance, we urban dwellers often fail to feel that the "desertification" or contamination or even just plain paving over of farmland directly affect us and the food we place on our tables and eat daily (aren't *all* societies agrarian, in this sense?). Of course, at the end of the day, one glaring difference which remains is that in our passage, Jeremiah is describing a vision, whereas for us, this is increasingly becoming our reality.

So often, in the face of the current ecological crisis, we wonder, "what can we do?" There are so many books and resources and lists of how to "go green" in terms of organic and local food, public or human-powered transportation, renewable energy, recycling and composting waste, etc., that I won't get too much into that aspect of things here, important as it is. But I want to suggest that part of what we have to "do" is to reorient our *theology* in such a way that we face the reality of what is happening to our home planet and start (or continue!) working and praying and living toward the healing of creation. It's pretty simple, really: how we think about God impacts how we treat the earth, and I'd guess that most of us tend to separate God from God. You see, we tend to think that only God (traditionally known as "the Father") is Creator of the universe, and that Jesus, "the Son" is somewhat disconnected from that aspect of the divine nature. Since Jesus is the one who is our example for our lives of faith, the importance

of creation and creativity tends to fade somewhat. Well, our passage from Colossians for today turns these ideas on their heads.

We read in Colossians 1 (another green-inked passage in the *Green Bible*) that Jesus Christ “is the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, all things visible and invisible . . . all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things and in him all things hold together” (vv. 15-17). According to my *Oxford Annotated Bible*, this first part of our passage is actually an excerpt from a hymn to the Old Testament figure of divine Woman Wisdom (or Sophia), someone who prefigures Christ, as she too is a street preacher, host of a feast of bread and wine, and, most notably, God’s firstborn child who was present at creation (see Prov. 8:1-9:6). Listen to this passage from Proverbs 8, which parallels and fleshes out Colossians 1: Woman Wisdom states, “The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of [God’s] acts of long ago. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water. Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth – when [God] had not yet made earth and fields, or the world’s first bits of soil. When [God] established the heavens, I was there, when [God] drew a circle on the face of the deep, when [God] made firm the skies above, when [God] established the fountains of the deep, when [God] assigned the sea its limit, . . . when [God] marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside [God], like a master worker, and I was daily God’s delight, rejoicing before [God] always, rejoicing in [God’s] inhabited world and delighting in the human race” (Prov. 8:22-31).

Through this parallel, we see that Colossians places Christ with God “before everything” at the very beginning of creation, as God’s very first creation or firstborn child, and one who, in addition, has a central role in the creation of the rest of the world. Remember that in the poem of Genesis 1, God created through speaking, so, as God’s Wisdom or Word, Colossians is implying that Christ was *that through which God created*, God’s tool, so to speak, in creating everything in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible. So God’s Wisdom – Christ – is that which accomplished the creation of creation, and that which holds it all together, infusing it with the loving presence of the divine.

And that’s not all. Colossians also speaks about the ways in which the work of Christ in his Incarnation was meant not only for humanity, but for all of creation. We read that through Christ “God was pleased to reconcile to [God]self all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross,” and that this comprises “the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven” (vv. 20, 23). Here we are told that God has made peace with all of creation, and that this gospel or good news is meant for every creature, not just for humanity.<sup>5</sup> Here Jesus Christ, who is our example of human faithfulness, is shown to be profoundly linked to creation, even dwelling within it as divine Wisdom. In short, here our Christian anthropocentrism, our human-centred outlook, begins to unravel, setting in motion a shift in our theological thinking to include the rest of creation.

And with this shift in outlook, we begin to see that this thread of Jesus’ identity as the Wisdom of God, intimately connected with creation, was in the biblical narratives

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<sup>5</sup> Incidentally, the covenant with Noah is made with all the animals as well. See Genesis 9:8-17.

about him all along. In other words, this isn't only some strange idea that Paul comes up with; it's very clear in the Gospels as well, and not only in John's Gospel, which opens with a similar hymn about Jesus as the Word of God through which everything was created. Have you ever noticed how Jesus used a lot of plant and animal imagery in his parables and teachings (think of the parable of the mustard seed, the seed and the sower, the birds of the air and the lilies of the fields, etc.)? Or Jesus' powerful connection to natural phenomena (calming the storm, cursing the fig tree)? Or the way he would withdraw sometimes to regain his spiritual, mental, and physical strength and equilibrium in the *wilderness*? Here is someone who is profoundly in tune with the natural world, an insight which I think changes the way we read Scripture, so that we begin to see the centrality of creation throughout its pages, something which we've tended to overlook – with disastrous results.

But this shift isn't something innovative that Jesus came up with, either. As the link with Woman Wisdom suggests, this was an aspect of the ancient Jewish worldview. Let's return, then, to the Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures, to a book in which God is at one point described as speaking out of a whirlwind, a fitting image for the purposes of our theological reorientation toward creation (Job 38, 40). In our passage from Job 12 for today, we are elicited to learn from creation, to listen to the Wisdom of creation. Job states, "But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In [God's] hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human



being” (12:7-10). Ask the animals? Ask the plants? This passage really overturns our human-centredness, asserting that the animals, birds, plants, and fish are wiser than human beings in their knowledge of God. Here creation is intimately in tune with the Wisdom of the Divine, and if human beings are willing to listen, they can learn that Wisdom from their fellow creatures.

What a profound assertion – and one which, interestingly, sounds a lot like the traditional perspectives of First Nations peoples. Seriously – how many of you, if this passage hadn’t been identified as biblical, might have guessed that this was a quote from an Indigenous elder? The similarity is striking, and points us to a key ethical implication of our theological shift: the need for dialogue and conversation between Christians and First Nations people (sometimes in the same people, namely, Christians who are First Nations and vice versa!). You see, as so many of the authors in the book *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry* point out, the destruction and desecration of God’s good creation has gone hand in hand with the European destruction of genocidal proportions of First Nations peoples, and the denigration of First Nations cultures and traditional outlooks, which are so in tune with the divine Wisdom present in creation; the clearest example of this denigration in our Canadian context is the devastating, horrific, and *ongoing* legacy of the residential schools, which tried to eradicate Indigenous cultures.<sup>6</sup> As we try to recover a reverence for creation and respect for Indigenous wisdom, it’s almost a cliché to say that Christians of European descent or “settlers” like myself have much to learn from First Nations peoples, but it’s nevertheless true. Of course, there is always the danger of settlers trying to adopt aspects of First Nations cultures or trying to reduce First Nations people to resources for settlers to try to deal with their troublesome

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Heinrichs, “Introduction,” 16.

colonial history (both of which are actually perpetuations of colonialism, as they further exploit First Nations people for the benefit of settlers). But what more genuine and difficult and indispensable conversations like that in *Buffalo Shout*, *Salmon Cry* suggest to me is that in really listening to one another (especially when settlers are doing most of the listening!), something transformative happens.

I can only speak from the settler side, here, but I think part of what happens in these transformative conversations is that we begin to see our own tradition with new eyes, realizing that a profound reverence for creation, and impetus to care for it and learn from it about balance, generosity, interconnectedness, and God's deep love, has also existed in *our* tradition all along, as we've seen in our Scripture passages for today. And this is a major place where the fruits of our theological shift can really be seen, I think. In these transformative conversations with our First Nations brothers and sisters, we cease to be "us" and "them" – that is, we cease to be people from drastically different cultures, the "settler" cultures, which have no resources for creation-care, and the Indigenous cultures, which are full of such resources, because we come to realize that Christianity and Judaism *also* call us to turn to creation to learn the Wisdom of God – an orientation toward creation is in fact common ground between our cultures, not something that divides us. This insight leads us firstly to greatly lament our blindness and utter unfaithfulness to this aspect of our calling, particularly for all the harm to the creation "for no lasting good," which could have been prevented. But it also calls us to radical repentance involving a renewal of our covenant with God and everything God has created, a covenant which binds us to our Indigenous brothers and sisters in

remembering the sacredness of the earth and its creatures, and working, praying, and living toward the healing of the peace between humanity and the rest of creation.

But despite the hopefulness of this language, and the life-giving nature of this calling, I don't want to suggest that this theological shift leaves us in a very comfortable position – it's not easy to hold together lament and repentance with hope for the task ahead, which is sure to be arduous. I want to close this morning with an excerpt from another poem, one which I think captures this ambiguous place of being in the midst of lament, repentance, and hope all at once with regard to our broken relationship with creation and our Indigenous brothers and sisters. It's from *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry* and it's by Rebecca Seiling, a Mennonite writer who lives in Waterloo, Ontario. It's called "Unsettled":

"Whose lands are these? Yours? God's? Settler? Indigenous?  
Every division a fragile line...  
if this is your home, where is mine?

Ashamed of skin and story,  
Every identity a sorry embarrassment  
I carry guilt, anger, a muted voice,  
claiming: this is not my story.  
This was not my choice.

But these were my people.  
My ancestors: settlers.

I'm unsettled.  
Listening  
to creation's moans and groans  
to the violence in silence  
sifting  
through broken pieces  
molding, shaping, holding a new story  
of home  
of land shared  
of people who dared  
to reconcile

We are connected.  
We all fall down, ring around roses,  
pockets full of poppies, bleeding hearts, forget-me-nots,  
arms outstretched  
bodies to earth  
listening  
sharing our stories of loved-lands, lost and found  
hearing  
knowing  
living  
another story

Create in me a clean heart, O God.  
Unsettle my soul and renew a right spirit within me.  
Unquiet me to shout this story's whispers  
so that I won't settle for less than your kingdom come  
on earth as it is in heaven."<sup>7</sup>

AMEN

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<sup>7</sup> Rebecca Seiling, "Unsettled (continued)," in *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry: Conversations on Creation, Land Justice, and Life Together*, ed. Steve Heinrichs (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2013), 58-59.