

What shall I cry?

A sermon for Osler Mennonite Church - November 14, 2021

By Curtis Wiens

Isaiah 40:6-9; Mark 15:37-16:8

Firstly, it's a privilege to be invited to speak here this morning as part of your creation care focus. The intersections of faith and ecology, of God and the world, are ideas that have been near and dear to me for some time, piquing my interest and stirring my innermost energies and passions. So when I hear of a church focusing on some of the same themes, I am both honoured to take part and excited to dive into the work with you.

In recent times, the urgency of ecological concern has been increasing as the effects of things like climate change, species extinction, and loss of natural ecosystems have begun to be more dramatic, observable, and (importantly) close to home. However, concern for the relationship between humanity and the rest of God's creation is not new. For decades, marginal voices have tried to bring ecological themes to the attention of others, including Christian brothers and sisters. In fact, a right relationship between humanity and the entire community of creation is established in the biblical text as a sign of God's shalom in the peaceable kingdom.

What I'm getting at here is that addressing the themes of creation care in church and society has often been a prophetic task. To cut through the noise of all the other legitimate discourse or the myriad of distractions is no easy feat. Even once a problem is recognized, the prophetic role is not finished. Acknowledging a problem and actually making meaningful progress towards action to redress said problem are two very different things. The prophetic nature of ecological concern carries the burden of these two realities: being heard and engaging hearts and minds and bodies in action.

Fortunately (even though it may raise our heart rate just thinking about it), the church is no stranger to the prophetic role. It seems to me the people of God should rightly occupy this space and through careful discernment of God's will, be a leader shining a light on the path to healing and hope where there is brokenness and despair.

Which brings me to the big question of the day and it is found in Isaiah 40 and also found in my heart.

"A voice says 'cry out' and I said 'what shall I cry?'"

In Isaiah's case, the voice must be God's. In my case, the voice is Patty, asking me to speak about creation care. But the voice for me, and for all of us in this prophetic movement, is also the voice of the almighty God manifest as a stirring within that cannot be silenced. That stirring says "cry out!"

And so I wonder, what shall I cry? For of course there are a great many things one could cry out. A great many things that call attention to the brokenness and despair prevalent in our world. A great many things that might lead to healing and hope. What shall I cry?

There are a few things which I have heard others cry. Maybe I will try out one of those lines. One of the lines I have come across, one deftly uttered in order to grab the attention of the hearer is to say "the planet is literally on fire."

Of course this is true.

The scale and severity of forest fires seems to be trending upwards as a response to environmental factors. This is concerning. Furthermore, some of these fires are set deliberately to clear ecologically sensitive land like the amazon rain forest in order to get a few years of palm oil production. This is concerning. Some fires threaten people's homes and livelihood. This is concerning.

However, we know that fire among natural ecosystems like forests and grasslands is not only historically common, but also necessary in order for the ecosystem to function in a healthy way. Crying that the planet is literally on fire seems to obscure some of this. It discounts the nuanced-type of discussion which might sort out good fire (which still burns and destroys) from bad fire (which could either be deemed so because of location, purpose, or scale).

I have heard this cry in a few places including, most recently, among a document calling for our very own Mennonite Church Canada to step up its urgency in response to the climate emergency. Perhaps you have come across this cry in your life, maybe uttered by a youth or posted online someplace. I decide this cry, for all its merits, is not what I will cry. It feels too sensationalist and obscures an important truth about the role of fire. Let's keep thinking.

With the recent COP26 conference in Glasgow, Scotland, the eyes of the world have been drawn to people with something to say about the very topic. One of the voices once again in the spotlight is Swedish activist Greta Thunberg. I have a lot of admiration for Greta and the momentum she has been able to generate from a position outside of traditional power structures.

While she has a number of memorable slogans and sound bites, I think it is fair to say that one in particular carries the core of her message: listen to the science or just listen to the science. This is excellent advice. There is ample scientific evidence pointing toward a fairly grim reality - that unless we change our lifestyles pretty significantly, humanity will have caused irreversible effects on the climatic dynamics of this planet and this carries a whole host of other secondary consequences, most all of them bad. This is concerning.

Given that the many of these scientific conclusions have been around for decades, it is somewhat baffling that the response from the greater global community has been so lukewarm. Could it be that listening to the science is not sufficient to achieve the collective human response that is required?

In a 2019 article posted to the website of the Johnson-Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy - an affiliate of the UofS, director Jeremy Rayner takes up this very question. As a policy

expert, Rayner notes that knowledge does not lead to action on the part of governments and those with their hands on the levers of power. Even strong scientific consensus is not typically enough to move the needle from status quo to change. After studying the trends and data, he quips that the assumption that more knowledge leads to more definitive or co-ordinated action is "so obviously wrong that its staying power is remarkable."

Rather, he notes three factors, two of which I won't detail here but they predictably involve political motivations. The one I find most compelling is that the science spurs action only when it coheres with values and culture. So the science is unable to persuade people to change course because it is being trumped by values.

Rayner concludes:

So we should ignore the science, then? Of course not. Science remains our best guide to understanding natural systems and will continue to play a role in developing and assessing the technologies that will be critical to reducing emissions. What science cannot do is frame the debate itself... What we make of the scientists' message will depend very much on who we are and where we stand.

While I admire Greta's bravery to stand up to some very powerful people and industries and ideologies, I decide that "listen to the science" will not be my cry. I need something which cuts closer to the heart of the matter. I'm going to suggest to you this morning that the people of God, in that prophetic position, have an important role to play in finding that cry.

I was recently reading a book where OT scholar Walter Brueggeman describes the important Biblical archetype of exile - and he relates that condition of exile to the post-Christendom cultural landscape the church now finds itself navigating. Beyond that, he suggests that the framework of exile can be useful to describe a host of situations where the power to set the terms of life is beyond one's control - like maybe a global pandemic for one example? Ecological degradation, rapidly accelerating climate change, and widespread biodiversity loss are crises beyond our individual control. Even with a collective effort, the church's power feels insufficient to right these wrongs.

So what does Brueggeman have to say about applying this lens of exile to our own situation out of which there is no apparent road? Under these types of circumstances, the greatest threat to the community is *despair*. This despair comes from two main sources.

- One is to doubt the fidelity of God, to suggest that God does not care about God's people and has abandoned them. This is a powerful narrative which is an easy trap to fall into.
- The second is to doubt God's power, to suggest that God hears the cries and suffering of the people but is unable to do anything about it in a meaningful way. Even though God knows things are bad, there is nothing to be done to transform the situation in the manner we would want.

The Biblical tradition forcefully counters these blackholes of despair. The Exodus narrative of God delivering the people Israel from bondage after hearing their cries is the definitive narrative evoked throughout the OT writings as this despair-in-exile creeps in.

Furthermore, the utterance of God's fidelity and power in remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt gives temporary shape and structure to a reality that is presently unseen. While we can't see from our perspective the intervention of God to our situation, we can summon in word and song and imagination the very presence of God who has delivered, will deliver, and is currently in the process of delivering.

The author of the book of Hebrews reminds us of this dimension of life in God's kingdom community: Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. This is what begins to distinguish my cry from the one to listen to the science, for example. While the science is extremely helpful in describing the various phenomenon we are observing around this planet; it is entirely based on observable information. It is trust in the things that are seen, and heard, and weighed and measured. It is good to trust these things but, in order to recover the trust in the fidelity and power of God, we also are asked to step beyond that, in faith, towards the things not seen, the things hoped for.

This is a risky move. And I'll tell you why I think it will work out. Because the faith here described is not based in a blind optimism that things will somehow work out in the end. It is rooted in a powerful, all-time great story of a God who loves the world so much, a son was anointed to come to earth to dwell among the people. This story has many twists and turns and is rich in moments for learning and inspiration but it culminates in the remarkable act of making life out of death.

This is why I asked Alex to read the text we typically only hear at Easter. It is the fundamental, central narrative which is the foundation of our faith - that God is able to take a situation that is impossible to escape from, where all control is taken away, where there is no way this story turns out well and emerges from that dark place of death in the glory of new life. This is the story that grounds my cry.

The account of the resurrection found in Mark ends with an empty tomb. There is something so edgy about this, so daring - to leave the story unfinished - as if it has yet to be completely wrapped up. To that end, we find ourselves participating in the story of the risen Christ - finding new life where otherwise it is only possible to see death.

When I was asked to speak today, when a voice said "cry out," I read the words of Isaiah 40:6-7 "all flesh is like grass and the grass withers and the flowers fall." Death is simply part of our reality as mortals, that is a good thing to remember, to make part of our cry. BUT, if we are able to fend off despair because of God abandoning us or being unable to rescue, we are able to recall the mighty acts of God making life *out of* death. This is our incredible hope.

So, what shall I cry? I'm going to take a line from Isaiah 40, where after asking the question and reminding about mortality summons those who have good news to share with the people of God, say it from a high mountain loud and clear:

The God who died and was raised to new life, the God who brought the people out of Egypt, the God who, though unseen, makes life out of death and despair. Here is your God.

There is a kind of eschatological dimension to this claim, that God is able to make life out of death. The unfinished business of the empty tomb has a cosmic consummation that is yet to be revealed. All of what we know, the concerning, the hopeful, is yet to be brought under the banner of God's peaceable kingdom. For me, the urgency to cry out, the bold declaration "here is your God," these things would feel hollow if I didn't fully believe that God is not yet done turning death to life, that there is more to come.

Until such a time when the dwelling of God is once again with his people
Until such a time as the glory of God descends to right the many wrongs in a new way
Until that time when we will see face to face the God who set the foundations of the earth and
watches over the storehouses of snow and hail waiting to fall,
Until that time we groan with all creation, we rest our frail hope in things unseen.