

Christopher Thomas

Sermon for 16th Sunday after Pentecost, Season of Creation, Year A – 9/24/2017

Joel 1:8-10, 17-20

Psalm 18:1-19

“Wisdom of the World,” Harvey Broome

Matthew 3:13 – 4:1

So, it's no great surprise to most anyone who knows me that I am a self-avowed “city boy,” making my home and life in urban jungles that are stamped with the hallmark of cosmos, a very complex and highly ordered system where the stuff of life is thoroughly defined and systematized. It is so much easier to be in control when life is structured and categorized in ways that maintain equilibrium, harmony, and balance. This has been true for me from the very farthest reaches of my childhood.

Now, that's not to say that I didn't have my brushes with the chaotic and yet tantalizing world of the “wild.” I remember my first encounter with something out of the box of cosmos happened in the library of my little elementary school, when I discovered the book, “Where the Wild Things Are,” Maurice Sendak's 1963 children's picture book in which one little boy encounters wilderness. I'd be willing to bet that most all of you have read it, probably to your own children.

The plot goes something like this: Our protagonist, Max, dresses up in his wolf suit and tears about the house, creating mischief and causing chaos of one sort or the other. Now, I'm sure that none of you would do that, and I know that I wouldn't have, being the sweet, well-behaved child that I was. But Max is being such a pill that his mother eventually sends him to bed without his supper. He's prescribed a little “wilderness” time. Max does not shrink from his “wilderness” time, as his bedroom is transformed into an exotic jungle, and he eventually encounters some pretty wild, fantastical creatures, who he eventually tames. However, Max becomes lonely and longs for the home of his ordered life, returning to find the love of his mother in the form of a hot supper awaiting his arrival.

There's a lot going on in this seemingly simplistic childhood tale. The immaturity of wanting to push away from authority, to take control, to live outside the boundaries and laws, and ultimately return to that which beckons us home, love. And it's important that it takes place in wilderness, the location of all that seems so chaotic by my cosmopolitan standard. Wilderness is scary and yet tantalizing; any serious engagement of wilderness usually involves an element of the unknown, and it is this unknowing that is so tantamount to transformation. Max exhibits signs of relief when he realizes that he can have wilderness experiences that challenge and change him, and yet return him to the loving arms of home. As a place and mode of transformation, wilderness is both location, a place to be, as well as an existential condition to be celebrated as God's great incubator of change.

Within the context of our Judeo-Christian tradition, wilderness functions as a multi-layered concept that encompasses both the physical AND the symbolic. Many of the great biblical stories take place in the wilderness, or have some key aspect of wilderness time. Wilderness connotes this unstructured time and space, the stuff of chaos, as a place to reorient, reprioritize, to reset, and reharmonize with that which is our most compelling goal, God's world order. Consequently, most all of the wilderness stories have some component of theophany, some way or ways that God reveals God's self, and people are transformed.

I think it is important, as we celebrate “wilderness” as a part of the Season of Creation, that we continue to lift up the holiness of both the place of wilderness as well as the concept of wilderness, both being integral parts of God’s great gift to humanity. Do we see wilderness as a gift? If so, how do we respond to God’s gifts? What do we do with them?

We find ourselves in wilderness time for a variety of reasons, some borne by our own conscious choices, and some, not so much. In our second reading, Harvey Broome paints an illustration of contentment found through the stepping outside of the bounds and bonds of civilized life, into the chaos of wilderness, thereby providing the space, through freedom and simplicity, to explore and find a new sense of joy. It can be exhilarating to know that we can, through God’s gift of wilderness, make the choice to step outside the world’s existence, into another, a place where we can meet God within the midst of God’s creation.

I had that experience myself last week, as I vacationed with friends in Southern California. We trekked into the desert to Joshua Tree National Park, and got to see God’s great works in creation in ways I had not here-to-fore experienced. It was incredible for me to see how, in God’s unfettered hands, life can flourish in the most unlikely of settings. It was easy to see God’s hand in the beauty of the most simple and mundane – from the masses of cactus and rock, to the radiance of the most gorgeous sunset imaginable.

But more often than not, wilderness experiences are preempted by our need as humans to be in control, to push away or run from the love that God so willingly and gracefully supplies. We make choices, but our choices resemble the one our friend Max makes, as he seeks to create his own world in which he can be the king. We want to be the center of the universe, and we want God to fulfill our needs and wants, and as such, we abuse God’s gift of wilderness and creation.

You don’t have to look further than the book of Joel to see the havoc poor choices in the wilderness have bestowed on God’s creation. It’s a fascinating study of the effect of poor choice, of cause and effect. The people have turned from God, abandoning their relationship with God in favor of the system and way of the world, and as such, death and destruction follow.

The New Interpreter’s Study Bible commentary puts it this way:

In the Old Testament’s understanding, the natural world is a gift from God, and Israel’s land is the primary gift. But the land did not belong to Israel. Israel was merely the steward of the land, responsible to God for the care and cultivation of its gifts; such is the meaning of human “dominion” over the earth in Gen 1:28. Israel was expected to be a faithful steward of the land and its gifts, and if Israel was unfaithful, the land would be taken away from the people. Above all, the people were expected to worship and obey God, the giver of the land.¹

Israel’s disobedience in its choice not to worship and obey God brought despair and dismay not only to themselves, but to all the creatures that are a part of creation. The ecological cries that you hear are a product of our own failure to be faithful stewards of God’s creation.

¹ “The Book of Joel: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” by Elizabeth Achtemeier, in “The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes,” ed. by Leander E. Keck, et. al. (Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 1996), p. 309.

The natural world is a gift from God. But it doesn't belong solely to us; rather we are to be stewards of the land. And our own need to dominate, to use as we please, to satisfy our own selfish wants, all of creation, including innocent animals suffer for our sin. The animals groan. Herds of cattle wander about. Sheep are dazed. Our use of wilderness for our own egotistical interest has left it desolate and destroyed. Paul says, "The whole of creation groans under the burden of human sin waiting for redemption." (Rom 8:22)

Oh my gosh, what would we do without grace? The path toward destruction would be irretrievable. We made the choice to turn in that direction, to go out of relationship with God and God's creation, and we can make the choice to return, just like Max did, toward and to God. The juxtaposition of our readings from Joel and today's psalm point to none other than God's saving grace. King David revels in God's deliverance in this song of thanksgiving. We keep hope alive by proclaiming the reign of God in circumstances that seem otherwise insurmountable. God is our source; the world of humanity is not our source. Our choices and decisions must be based on God's world order, not what we see around us, which fuels our own selfish desires.

We've been literally, spiritually, and emotionally flooded in the past few weeks with scenes of nature inflicting havoc on innocent populations. All across our nation and the world, natural disasters headline every single evening of news coverage. Three hurricanes in one week; a massive earthquake in Mexico. It might lead you to wonder, "What is going on?" "Where is God in all this destruction, in all this upheaval of life?" "Is God in the wilderness, or have we been abandoned?"

Now, there are religious types out there who are quick to inform us that some aspect of our culture has enlisted the wrath of God upon creation. Could be anything. Maybe it's the homosexuals, or the gambling, or acceptance of smoking pot. Who knows what has upset God and drawn God's ire.

Or maybe it's something a little more concrete, something we as humans actually have some choice and control over in this co-creative process, the intimate dance that we do with God and with nature. I read a fascinating article in the Dallas Morning News regarding human choice shortly after the massive flooding and destruction in the city of Houston. Now, remember, I am a Houstonian, and I love the city and all things Houston. It resonates to my core, because I came of age in Houston. Huge, sprawling metropolis where anything is possible; the first word from the moon was "Houston." Free choice, and free will, and no zoning make any and everything seem in reach.

In response to massive floods in 1929 and 1935, which lay waste to large swaths of the city, government officials enacted an intricate drainage plan that included a system of two dams and accompanying reservoirs, the Addicks and Barker, to control future potential flood events, sparing loss of life and property. Sometime between the 1940's and today, thanks to lack of zoning, somebody or bodies, decided that it would be a good, profitable idea to build houses in those reservoirs! "Oh, it will never flood to that extent." But it gets better. In 1996, engineers drew up a plan to deal with the massive flooding that they knew would again overtake the city, particularly in light of all the concrete which had been added to the city, creating unmanageable torrents of water flow. They planned to build channels underneath the reconstructed Interstate 10 that would carry water directly from the reservoirs to the Houston Ship Channel. That was voted down. At \$400 million, there simply wasn't enough money.

Fast-forward to August 26, 2017, and the arrival of Hurricane Harvey, along with \$180 billion in damage to property. Now, make no mistake, this was a storm of epic proportions. Flooding would

have occurred no matter what had been done. It really was an 800-year flood. And that's when we turn to God, and suddenly say "God, save us from our own mistakes, from our own poor choices." "Don't leave us in this wilderness!" "What could we have possibly done that brought this wrath down upon us?"

Was it the homosexuals, or the gambling, or smoking pot, or the loss of the super bowl that led to God's wrath? Or was it bad human choices that were precipitated by greed and self-interest? I'm not sure God had anything to do with it. We make choices to build in low-lying areas. We make choices to do things that harm wetlands, thereby removing the buffers we have from terrible storms. We put chemical plants along the coastline. We build houses in areas that we know are earthquake prone, or tender traps, or have mudslides. We make those choices to abuse nature for our own self-interests, and then we have the audacity to cry out to God to save us! Save us from our own poor choices!

Make no mistake; there are millions of innocent people (and the rest of God's creation) that suffer as a result of the self-interests of a few privileged people. Socio-economic inequality makes places like the 9th ward in New Orleans inevitable. The people who bought those homes in the Addicks and Barker reservoirs did so not because they wanted to live in a reservoir, but because they could afford them. What's wrong with this picture?

We've got to turn back. Thankfully, we can turn back. We can embrace nature and all that we hold dear in God's gift of creation to humanity. We're supposed to be stewarding the wilderness, not abusing it. The best thing that we can do to celebrate creation is to treat it with the respect that it deserves. It is our lifeline, and we need to demand nothing less.

You may say, "Well, what can I do?" "I'm just one person." You can make a difference, in ways big and small. It's all about your choices. Your carbon footprint is everywhere. Do you need that light on? Can you combine driving events to conserve carbon production? And equally as important, can you elect people to public office that hold your views on how creation should be preserved and maintained? We, as individuals, and as a community must demand that systems of socio-economic injustice that force the poor and oppressed into harms-way be dismantled.

Yes, my friends, you can make a difference. Each one of us can make a difference. And each one of us needs to return, just like Max, home to that hot supper, the love of God, that awaits. God's awaiting our arrival at the banquet.

AMEN