

SERMON - Deb Robinson, November 15, 2009

We usually think of nature as peaceful and quiet – where we go to calm our souls or to be refreshed. But this earth can also be very destructive. Floods, hurricanes and typhoons, tornadoes – earthquakes, volcanoes. The earth has many ways to create havoc, to destroy, to kill.

When these events occur – we focus on the death and destruction – and are awed by the power. Particularly when humans are killed or their homes destroyed, we feel the pain of the destruction. We also feel the pain when animals are killed, or landscapes that had been home are changed forever.

But this destruction is the momentary reality. New creation, new life begins so quickly. At Mt. St. Helens, small animals who lived underground were able to climb up through the ash. Some seeds survived the heat, and soon began to sprout and grow. And life in ice covered lakes were untouched. Even elk soon returned, found food and thrived in the new land.

If we look at much longer term, we can see the crucial creative power that volcanoes and earthquakes play in the life of the earth. Mt. St. Helens sits on the collision of two of the earth's plates. As one slides over the other, earthquakes and volcanoes result. This process creates mountains. The Rockies and Himalayas are results of these collisions. Our own Green Mountains are shorter and more rounded – because they are old. Over time, they have been worn down by weather and by plants and animals. The great variety of landscape this is the earth we know only exists because of earthquakes and volcanoes – and thus the varied habitat that creates the multitude of species that share this planet with us. In order for earth to carry the life and variety we love (and are a part of). Earthquakes, volcanoes are an essential part of the creative life of our home.

My Dad was a minister in the Methodist Church, so I was a PK (Preacher's Kid). This meant that we moved quite often, and I do not have a hometown. The community that did remain with me was the church – those people I met through church activities and continued to meet no matter when we lived. When I chose to go into the ministry, it was returning to the only community that had ever been my home. For several years, this was a good place to be.

Several years into this life, I was reading a book on Feminist Theology. In the Christian faith, the central event is the death and resurrection of Jesus. Holy Week focuses on the last days of Jesus life – and his death on the cross. Easter is the celebration of his resurrection to new life. This book raised a question. It asked, what would be different if a religion was focused not on a story of death, but on a story of birth? This question hit me hard. But in my mind's eye, I took the question, put it up on a shelf and closed the door. I knew that if I thought too much about it, it would become very hard to preach in a Christian pulpit.

A few years later, as I worked on various issues within the church, I came to see the power structures that existed and that kept the church from supporting the kinds of ministry that I felt were necessary to support people in our congregations. As I came to see the way power was given out and used, it became clear that it was not a place that I could use my skills and abilities in ways that supported my values. I knew I needed to leave.

But it was two years before I actually walked away. During those two years, I fought the sense that I needed to leave. I kept trying to imagine a way that I could work within the church and be faithful to who I was. I would come to believe it was possible and then realize it would never work. But I kept

trying to imagine a way to stay. I got angry at the people in the church. And I found it hard to talk to my friends about it, since they did not or could not share my perspective. For two years, I had this internal battle – but I finally left.

Once out of the ministry, I was surprised at how I began to change, to be more free to be myself, and to find other passions and ways to live that were true to me. But without allowing one part of me to die – the new sense of me could never have grown.

The process of moving out of the church felt like an earthquake to me. The ground had moved under my feet – but I found new ground that I could walk on – which is a better place to be.

On a regular basis we hear of the effects of climate change. The poles are melting, and polar bears and penguins are losing their homes. People in Bangladesh, who live on water are finding it rising from their rivers and now the sea. Droughts in Africa are prevalent and long-lasting.

And then there is the disappearance of cheap energy. Prices have gone up, and though many are working on new sources, long term answers are still not there.

And what about the economy. Unemployment though slowing is still climbing, while human services are cut. Some of our neighbors struggle with the loss of jobs. Others who work for social services have more people with needs and fewer staff to help. Meanwhile Wall St continues to receive obscene bonuses. And the problems that caused the crisis have not been fixed, while bankers lobby hard to keep it that way.

It feels to me like an earthquake in human society. So many of the structures and systems we have created to sustain our human community - are no longer sustainable. And they are collapsing around us. We know we need to make significant changes to slow the climate change already in process. We know we need to reduce our use of energy, and to find new ways to produce the energy we need. We know that an economic system that makes some people poorer and poorer and others richer and richer does not meet the needs of human beings.

In such a time, what can we learn from our Mother Earth – from those dramatic events that change the shape of the landscape?

Though our immediate reaction is to see the destruction, that is not the full story. Just of some life survived the eruption, and were able to thrive in the new environment. New life - new ways of thinking and living are already growing among us.

Picture of earth from space. This picture did not exist when I was a girl. I remember when the astronauts sent this back to us. It was shown on TV over and over, and many conversations included reactions to it. One of the comments I remember hearing several times was that there were no national boundaries in this picture. Prior to this, we had globes – which clearly drew the political map that humans had made over it. Now we had a very different picture. As a human species, we began to see this planet in a new way – as a single orb that we share together. I believe that without this perception of the planet earth, it would have been very difficult for us to grasp the concept of global climate change –that it would have been very hard to understand how cutting down trees in the Amazon could cause polar bears to lose their home, that burning coal in the US could cause drought in Africa. But that seed was planted years ago in the human psyche by a picture.

Another seed growing among us – people have been thinking about renewable energy for many years, and have been testing out new systems. The knowledge they have gained is now being used to help us move forward in the new energy systems we need for the future. Others have thought about alternate economic systems that could meet our need to provide goods and services to people. Coops have been around for years – systems that are owned and controlled by the people they serve, so do not enrich people outside the community. Many more people are growing their own food, and finding ways to market locally grown food.

With the crises of the past year, these activities have become more visible and are growing. Seeds of new life among us.

As I went through the transition out of the Methodist church, I went through internal conflict. Grief kept me from walking away, and fear made it harder to move forward. This is a normal reaction to earthquake events. Today we can see that same conflict within the human community. Some do not want to lose what they have had. Some are afraid, not knowing what the future holds. Some express this grief and fear with anger, which sometimes becomes violent. For me it is helpful to remember that fear and grief are normal in such times – and to respect the need to people to express those feelings.

Life – for us individuals and within the communities in which we live – often is dominated by patterns that don't change a lot. But times come when change happens – sometimes it is our choice, sometimes it is forced upon us. In such times, seeing the long view can be helpful – to help us keep our feet on the ground, even when that ground is moving. It helps us to be patient with our own feelings of fear and grief – and of others. It can help us find the seeds of new beginnings, to see to envision the new place to which we go, and to find ways to help build the new life which calls us.