

## **Making the Most of Time**

Genesis 41: 14-16, 25-36

Romans 8:18-25

If Joseph had the benefit of the New Testament, he might have paraphrased his counsel to Pharaoh in the words of Ephesians 5: 15 & 16: “Be careful then how you live, not as unwise [people] but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil.” As a matter of fact, he did say something very close to this. He told Pharaoh his dreams meant that his kingdom was living on borrowed time: seven years of plenty would be followed by seven years of famine. And the only hope of averting disaster was to make the most of the next seven years, to take that “borrowed time” and sequester sufficient produce from the bounty of the earth that Pharaoh and his people might weather the storm of seven disastrous years of famine to follow.

I

I invite our focus to this text on a Sunday in which we focus on Creation Care because it summons us all to “make the most of the time” that is available to us. If the days were “evil” on Pharaoh’s horizon, we can easily say as much about our days, ecologically considered. We may not even have the luxury afforded to Pharaoh—seven years of plenty prior to seven years of famine. For the latest reports on several fronts suggest that our “borrowed time” to care for creation is diminishing. The latest news about the now unstoppable retreat of ice in the Amundsen sea sector of West Antarctica is one case in point.

Respected scientists (who may turn out to be Joseph to the rest of us) call attention to a couple of matters that can lead us to make the most of time. First, while this melting of ice is likely to lead to a sea rise of three to five meters that will displace millions of people worldwide (including in North America as well as Southeast Asia), it could take as long as two hundred

years for that rise to be complete. Though there is nothing that can now stop the melt, its pace and scope may yet depend on whether we moderate climate warming over the coming years. So while the rise of sea level is unstoppable, how much and how soon will depend crucially on whether we make the most of time, using this borrowed time to slow the climate disruption that is its source.

If melting ice represents one call to us to make the most of time, to recognize that we are living on borrowed time, the rate at which species are going extinct manifests another. Extinction is of course a natural phenomenon, but only at a rate of about one to five species a year. We are currently losing species at 1,000 to 10,00 times that rate, with dozens going extinct daily. This means 30 to 50 percent of all species may be headed toward extinction by mid-century.

A recent book entitled *The Sixth Extinction* catalogs the manifold ways in which this is happening and comes to the sobering conclusion that we, the human part of creation, are in most relevant ways the cause of this alarming loss of biodiversity—not because of deliberate, intentional action on our part, but because human life has been organized on the planet in a way that turns out to make life precarious for virtually every other species. Author Elizabeth Kolbert puts it bluntly: “If you want to think about why humans are so dangerous to other species, you can picture a poacher in Africa carrying an AK-47 or a logger in the Amazon gripping an ax, or, better still, you can picture yourself, holding a book on your lap.” (p.266)

That’s because as we sit around with books on our laps, we are living in a global system that depends utterly on fossil fuels, including getting us to the bookstore or getting UPS or FEDEX to our door. And in the process, CO<sub>2</sub> is contributed to the atmosphere in a way that traps heat closer to the earth, leading to: the rise in sea water temperatures that melts ice at both poles, increased acidity of the water that devastates coral reefs which in turn undermines

marine life dependent on them, additional water vapor in the air that contributes to disruptive weather patterns, and much, much more.

“Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil.” While it is up for grabs as to how much time we can borrow to ameliorate and/or mitigate the effects of climate disruption, it is clear that we will be foolish not to follow Joseph in readying ourselves for a difficult period in the future by using the present to prepare. Nor should we be stopped by all the voices on the web or talk radio and TV saying that this is just alarmist rhetoric in the service of some nefarious purpose. It is true that catastrophic, large-scale representations of the impacts of climate change (like some of those I have already described) serve to get initial attention and concern, but they do not motivate a sense of personal engagement. So we need to be as clear as we can about what motivates our concern and engagement with what is before us.

It is important for us as Christians to take the scientific evidence with seriousness because future generations, including our children and grandchildren deserve as much from us. Perhaps some surrounding Pharaoh scoffed at or simply ignored Joseph’s rendering of the meaning of the dreams. But Pharaoh chose not to risk the fate of his people to happier, less dire hopes concerning what might follow. And the result was that he made provision for a generation of people who would have been otherwise decimated by famine. So intergenerational concern is one thing that does motivate us. Our children and grandchildren deserve as much from us.

Moreover, God deserves as much from us as well. As John Calvin was fond of saying, creation is the theater of God’s glory. And if we are to glorify and enjoy the God who is manifest in the varieties, terrors and splendors of nature, close attention to the plight of creation is, well,

natural. Care of creation is not a mere option for us. It is heart and hallmark of the faith that sustains us.

## II

How then can we make the most of the time given to us to respond to multiple ecological crises that beset so much of what God has made? Joseph's specific advice to Pharaoh was that he double down on the idea of tithing, setting 20% (not merely 10%) of the food harvest aside in the years of plenty for the coming years of famine. Clearly this was a sacrificial change in near term patterns of food consumption for the sake of survival in the longer term. Can we begin to make the most of time as Joseph did?

Since so much of our environmental turmoil stems from carbon emissions related to energy use, we will make the most of time as we attend to our individual and collective footprints on the earth—seeking at the micro and macro levels to step much more lightly than we have. At the micro level this can involve changes in the way we eat, how we travel, and how we house ourselves.

We are worshipping today less than a block from the weekly summertime scene of the Black Mountain Tailgate Market. This gives us an advantage not as readily available to everyone, that is, an accessible way to eat in a manner that not only sustains us but also other creatures and the earth itself. By buying some of our food directly from local producers, we are lessening reliance on long range, fossil fuel powered transportation systems to get food to our table. And at the same time we are supporting local arts of agriculture from which we are often alienated. And this support I know has led many to recover some of those arts themselves as they try their own hands at growing in community or backyard gardens.

On the other hand, we are less lucky when it comes to travel. Frequently a response to dependence upon automobiles has been an urging of the use of bicycles for at least some of our transportation needs. The problem is that we live in a land of uneven terrain, to say the least. I can easily imagine riding a bicycle down the hill I live on (assuming the bike has decent brakes), but I know that the return trip would be a long, slow upward trudge. Moreover, we live in a region more than in a single city, and frequently find ourselves making trips hither and yon. So while we do not have an easy way to lighten our footprint with transportation, we need to be creative in finding available options, such as: combining trips, eliminating unnecessary ones, carpooling, and perhaps even using public transportation. (Yes, it is possible to get to Asheville and back on the bus!)

One more way we can lighten our personal footprints on the earth deserves mention. The greatest demand we have for energy is likely not our cars but our homes. While we don't heat and cool them with gasoline, we mostly do so with fossil fuels that produce our electricity. And in our region that means mostly from coal. Some of us may be in a position to consider augmenting our homes with solar panels, a clear way to decrease our personal demand on fossil fuel electricity. And those of us who may not be able to manage solar panels can consider innovative options like the one offered by Pear Energy. It charges the renewable energy rate (about 2 cents per kW hour more than conventional rates) and invests in various clean energy enterprises as well as purchases Renewable Energy Certificates in the exact amount of kW hours a home has used in a given month. Such a home thereby puts as much renewable energy into the grid as it uses. And at an even more basic level, we can avail ourselves of the energy audits that have been recently sponsored in our area by "Clean Energy for Us." Such an energy audit can lead to significantly improved energy efficiency for a home with a relatively modest financial investment. And energy efficiency may be one of our most effective ways to make the

most of time in caring for creation. (Listen later for how your own Friends of Creation mission team has carried out just such an audit in your church building.)

But making the most of time at the micro or personal level will not be enough by itself. We need to address ourselves to the broader, public sphere. We need to take supportive note of groups like the Rocky Mountain Institute that are leading innovation in industry and government with a goal of eliminating—not reducing, but eliminating— nationwide reliance on oil and coal by 2050. We need to celebrate business enterprises that are working toward a netzero impact on the environment, chartering themselves to include stakeholders as well as shareholders in making their business decisions. (Later in this service you will hear how your Friends of Creation mission team and the Session have helped our entire presbytery bear witness more publicly.)

By the same token we need to urge others to take into account the way their businesses do damage to the environment (largely by dumping carbon pollution into it) and expect them to pay a tax for so doing. This leads inevitably toward political action. Governors of several states, including California, Maryland, New York and Washington have recently acknowledged dangerous threats to their states' economic and environmental futures. This is frankly an encouraging sign since, as Paul Gilding observes in his book, *The Great Disruption*, "Our political leaders, with rare exceptions, respond at best to what they think the politics allows them to do rather than what they feel they should do." (p. 37)

But to all those other governors, state and federal legislators, and local government officials who are doing the typical wait and see thing, we need to voice a clear message. And the message has to be that we are past the time when we can try to live on a planet in a manner that ignores the how God has created it. As Bill McKibben observed in a *Rolling Stones* article just this week, "there are no jobs on a dead planet." So some of us might want to heed

his invitation to join a demonstration in September when world leaders gather at the U.N. for a climate summit, making sure these leaders understand this as the defining crisis of our era.

Again, we don't know how much time we have to make the most of, but we know that at both the micro and macro levels, we need desperately to be about it. We need to share Joseph's insight that to live into an uncertain future, we have to be willing to make significant and strategic changes to the way we are living now.

### III

So these are some of the ways we may make the most of time, aiming at what our children and grandchildren deserve from us, aiming at what God deserves from us. But the greatest threat to our making the most of time is the immobilization that comes from the fear that what we do will not make a real difference. After all we are not Pharaoh, sitting in a position of authority, issuing orders and expecting results to follow. But, friends, we are children of a God who in the resurrection of Jesus has given the first fruit of what is promised, not just for humans, but for all creation. In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul voiced a scope to salvation that encompasses all of creation when he said it is not only the human family but "the creation itself [that] will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God." [Rom. 8:21]

Here on the sixth Sunday of Easter, the theme of resurrection is as crucial as it was on Easter day. For it is in the resurrection of the crucified Jesus that we discover the true "borrowed time" that will enable us to make the most of time. Jesus' resurrection is the enactment by God of something beyond all human and creaturely possibilities, the establishment of a new creation just where the old creation has come to its inevitable end.

With confidence in this resurrecting God we may trust as Joseph did that God sends us amidst daunting circumstances to preserve life for many. We can live in hope amidst the old creation's climate turbulence, because we live on the time borrowed from the future by the resurrection of the crucified Jesus, the first fruits of what God intends for all creation. To that great God who sustains us through all troubles, trials and snares, "be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen."

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