

## **EPISTLE TO PASTORAL LEADERS CONCERNING ECOLOGICAL CRISIS**

To my sisters and brothers, faithful servants called by God, who, in face of climate catastrophe are weary in the labor of pastoral ministry and stand confounded by the ecological crisis through which creation is now groaning in travail. I share in your grief and lament over the state of the earth as you struggle to perceive God's call upon the church. Are we not right to despair over the escalating desolation and future of the earth? Or have we misunderstood the promises of God? Even the psalmist declares that God turns rivers into a desert, springs of water into thirsty ground, a fruitful land into a salty waste (Psalm 107: 33-34). By the word of God heavens existed long ago and an earth was formed out of water, but by the same word the present heavens and earth have been reserved for fire (2 Peter 3:5, 7). In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep (Genesis 1:1-2a). Have we carelessly left unheeded *the creatio ex profundis*, the depths, the chaos, the monsters there in the beginning and ever in our midst? Have we not been told that creation was subjected to futility and stands in bondage to decay (Romans 8:20, 21)? We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now (Romans 8:22).

The future of the earth compels us to query the meaning of the revelation of God in a *living* Christ, the tenacious and enduring puzzle of the Christomorphic relation between hope and history. What are we to make of God-enfleshed, the temporal in the eternal, the revelation of God in history? Environmental racism and dispossession, displacement and forced migration—all these indicate the cruciform nature of the lived realities of vulnerable populations and climate refugees. What is our word to the church? Is solidarity of the suffering Christ consolation or is it terror management? How do we keep our faith from oscillating between nihilism and triumphalism, as if we must choose between the cross and resurrection?

More than one theologian declares the problem of the future is the only real problem of Christian theology (Barth, Motlmann). We know, of course, that God is a God of hope (Romans 15:13). God who is our hope (Colossians 1:27) is always only before us. The future is the strange new world, the startlingly new, the future of the risen Christ. The risen Christ announces God's future in the world in terms of promise. The resurrection reinstates the promise by confirming it. The hidden future exerts its influence on the present through a hope that awakens a posture of anticipation and expectation. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for (Hebrews 11:1). The resurrection is an event that opens a new future, not the temporal manifestation of eternal being—hope not in history but for history. Hope's statements of promise stand in contradiction to the present reality illuminating the reality that is to come. To hope against hope is the very nature of hope (Romans 4:18). We hope for things unseen (Romans 8:24-25). The meaning of the resurrection abides in the future, in the death of death.

But what is to prevent this kind of hope from sinking into either complacency or futility and the temptation of a nihilistic cultural mood? If the form and content of our faith is hope in God, what does this mean for hope in the world's future? What does it mean to hope against hope (Romans 4:18)? The Christian discourse of Christ's ultimate victory over death is the very discourse that undergirds triumphalist expressions and violent forms of denial.

Hope itself turns violent when it assumes the form of denial masked as optimism. Climate change denial is underwritten and financed by socially constructed illusions that function as habits of mind and draw nations into massively destructive and violent behaviors. Through the pervasive refusal to accept the cost of environmental degradation, outrageous fantasies become materially realized. And all the while, illusion's cruelty to us is largely hidden. We have inherited a tradition of violence ruled by the intention to preserve itself. What form should our Easter preaching take when we are living with repressed dread, untapped terror lurking beneath the surface of our so-called hope?

The question posed to our pastoral ministry is complicated by the fact that dominion is written into the creation story. The very first concrete description of human existence is God's declaration that the human creature is to have "dominion over all creation" (Genesis 1:26). Human arrogance and tyranny with respect to the natural world is the ideological-turned-theological basis for imperial expansion and extraction, human exploitation of creation not only of the earth, but of *other* humans, gateways to ecocide and genocide. It never occurs to the architects of the Western imperial project that dominion is not a permission slip for tyranny. Christianity's entanglement with claims of ecological dominance appears as a permanent indictment against the promise of hope.

Seized by the warnings of annihilation and species extinction and feeling powerless to contest imperial illusions of denial cloaked in optimism, we cry out with the psalmist, "I am put to shame in my hope" (Psalm 119:116). In a social order where promises of freedom and justice are always beyond reach, a politics of hope escapes temporality and retreats to the not yet. Have we been duped by "the trick of the indefinite future" (Calvin Warren)? We confess the enticing allure of nihilism.

The life of faith is radically precarious and brings along with it a peculiar urgency, sometimes downright panic, holding on for dear life to the smallest sense of assurance. Pastoral ministry seeks a God beside whom we may stand with certainty about our sense of place as fire and flood make the ground collapse beneath our feet. Perhaps the certainty we are after is itself destroying that which we seek. By striving to pin God down, we seek to possess God thereby unraveling the fabric of faith. We fail to understand that the proper stance before the God of hope is a stance of dispossession, a posture of humility that relinquishes the quest for the power and presumption of certitude. Divine revelation is not confined by our blueprint or the demands of our faith.

What if the task of pastoral ministry is to unmask the need for security and protection behind the preaching of reward and consolation? After all, the requirement of happiness is not at our disposal and the security of knowing the future of the earth is not

something we may acquire. Recall the apocalyptic prayer: “The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come.’ And let everyone who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift” (Revelation 22:17). What if this is more than a summons to find rest in the providential care of God? What if this language of gift is also an accusation against the impulse to possess the earth and its future?

That the church is called to bear witness to the future of Christ is indeed a vocation of agony (Martin Luther King Jr.). We beg for the destruction of the destroyers of the earth. We expect a conquering lion, yet the one who is sent is a slaughtered lamb (Revelation 5:5-6). We ask for God’s powerful vengeance against evil with the justice of retribution, and instead we are given one who suffers death and breaks the economy of sacrifice. The absurd logic of hope is the much more of the gift of grace through Jesus Christ. The much more cannot operate without the in-spite-of—a resurrection that does not deny the cross but bears its marks. Hope occurs in the very place where I am deceived. This act of despair is already an act of hope, hope as an act of renunciation, an embrace of a radically unprogrammable future. Pastoral ministry must then dwell with earth’s grievability and call the church to lament.

When we wonder about God’s place in all this, we are bound to consider God’s elusive presence if not apparent absence. Indeed the ascension of the resurrected body entails the disappearance of Christ. The body of Christ is lost from sight, perceived as absent. We must recall that the risen Christ remains unrecognizable to the disciples. This means most significantly that we do not possess the body of Christ, that we cannot control or order bodies based on some Christic ideal that we have in view. The resurrected Christ eludes our perception and our grasp. When we forget this, our representations of the God of hope become idolatrous and violent (Lin Tonstad).

In praying Come, Lord Jesus! the petition indicates that Jesus is not to be handled as an available object, the Christ event is not to be possessed or controlled. The coming of Jesus Christ is promissory not possessive. So Christian speech about hope is not some form of apparatus for controlling the destiny of the world’s future, it is supplication. The Christian prayer, “Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus!” is a prayer that invites, expects and commands us to do what is fitting in light of the action of God to whom we pray, to resist the imperial seduction of complacency. The promise is fulfilled not as a result of our obedience, activism or fervor.

The point of faith and hope rests in the difficulty. Our lives are pried open by the coming of the other, by the risen Christ coming from beyond the horizon of foreseeability. Resurrection hope therefore demands renunciation and welcomes lament. How then may our pastoral ministries lay bare the grievability of the earth? Only when the hope of God is born of lament, only then may the climate catastrophe we inevitably and imminently face become hope’s ultimate refusal.

Amen.