

“The Plagues of Creation”
Sermon by Pastor Tom Warren
Peace United Church of Christ
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Seventeen years ago, in 1997, a new reality TV show called “Survivor” hit the airwaves. In this show, contestants are dropped into an isolated wilderness area where, through a process of progressive elimination, contestants compete in a series of survival-skilled events, where they slowly vote off weaker contestants until there is one sole survivor left who wins the game and the prizes that go with it.

While the show remains on TV to this very day, in its early years, it was a huge hit. Everyone was watching “Survivor”, but there were critics of the show who pointed out that “Survivor” simply celebrated a survival of the fittest mentality. Critics of the show said it was a show that was reflecting back to us and celebrating the “kill or be killed” ethic that had taken over our social and economic systems, but “Survivor” as a TV show was long ago and, while survival-themed shows are now a dime a dozen, the underlying impetus for these shows has changed. New shows include Bear Grylls in “Man vs. Wild”, Cody Lundin in “Dual Survival”, or the extreme show called “Doomsday Preppers”, and the newest survival show called “Naked and Afraid”. In this show, a man and a woman spend 21 days out in the wilderness alone with no supplies and no clothes. The dangling hint of the show is that there might be some fooling around, but they never get to that fooling around stage. These new shows all have an underlying, and sometimes unstated, assumption that survival skills will be needed by all of us in the very near future, and the question is, what is it that we will need to survive, and why are these shows so popular.

Elizabeth Kolbert is a staff writer at The New Yorker magazine, who recently published a highly-acclaimed book called *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*. It is about the current health of the planet and documents, in great detail, the mass dying of species that is currently underway, and this mass dying, which is now widely identified by scientists in a variety of fields as the “Sixth Extinction”, brings to the reader’s attention of this book that, in the course of the earth’s history, there have been five other mass extinction events, so 440 million years ago, there was the Ordovician Extinction which was the extinction mostly of small sea creatures because 440 million years ago, our earth was mostly water.

Three hundred seventy-four million years ago was the late Devonian Extinction, when $\frac{3}{4}$ of all species on earth died, again most of these species in the shallow waters of the earth.

Two hundred fifty-two million years ago was the Permian Mass Extinction, which is called, by scientists, The Great Dying, in which 96% of all species died. In fact, all life on earth today is descended from the 4% of the species that survived this mass dying.

Two hundred million years ago was the Triassic-Jurassic Extinction event, and 65 million years ago was the K-T Extinction event called the Cretaceous Tertiary Extinction which was triggered by a massive impact of an asteroid that hit in the Gulf of Mexico. Most of us are familiar with this extinction event because this is the event that led to the extinction of the dinosaurs.

Now, why it is important to lift up these extinction events is that, first of all, if you are like me, you were not informed of these events and did not know about most of these extinction events. Second of all, all of these five historical extinction events were caused by environmental phenomena. These events were, if you will, naturally-occurring events, and the sixth extinction, which we are facing now, is the direct consequence of human activity, so we, as a human species, are in trouble, and God’s created order is in jeopardy because of our human activities. The question for us is where do we, as people of faith, turn for understanding and direction in this critical moment of history?

In the seventh chapter of Exodus that we read from today, we begin a cycle of readings that is called the Plague Narratives, where we find that God is in an epic battle with Pharaoh over the future freedom of the Hebrews, and these Plague Narratives are, for many of us, an embarrassment because, in our efforts to make God into a feel good, warm and fuzzy God, we cannot imagine that God would be the architect of plagues, but such thinking reveals the reduction of biblical faith into only pastoral or psychological categories, as if the only hymn we have written was “Jesus Loves Me” when, in fact, the biblical faith deals with huge historical themes of creation and worldly powers and the ever looming threats of chaos, so what we have in these Plague Narratives is an incredible symbolic story of a cosmic struggle—a cosmic struggle between earthly powers symbolized in Pharaoh and Egypt, and the struggle is with the God of Israel known as Yahweh.

What lies behind this struggle and this narrative is that, in Israel and the ancient Near East as a whole, there was an understanding that the just ordering of society, as reflected in its laws and institutions, was closely intertwined with the well-being of creation, so a breach in societal order was a breach of the created order, and it had dire consequences for the realm of nature, so ethical order and cosmic creational order were closely aligned and intertwined. The power of life was always threatened by the power of chaos.

In the Bible, symbolically, chaos is represented by darkness, so if you heard Rosina’s reading about the creation of the earth at the beginning, there is only darkness and chaos, so the Plague Narrative is a picture of the creation gone berserk because Pharaoh’s moral order is bankrupt, thus he becomes the object of divine judgment, and what I like about these Plague Narratives is that, while we want to always talk about God as a loving, sort of warm and fuzzy figure, God actually kicks butt. God whips Pharaoh’s butt in this narrative. This is the God that we have. God gets in there and tussles with the forces of chaos and darkness, and this is the God that the church has lost—this God who is in there tussling for the future, so as we see this against this background, Pharaoh’s oppressive anti-life measures against Israel, against the Hebrew slaves, are, at the same time, anti-creational. So, as the great Old Testament theologian Terence Fretheim has said, he writes “The plagues must be understood as the effect of Pharaoh’s anti-creational sins upon the cosmic order”, thus the deliverance of Israel is ultimately for the sake of the entire creation.

To put it in other words, for God’s mission in the world to be accomplished, the world must be teaming with life. The world must be just overflowing with the power of life, with the beauty of nature, with the health of the waters, and so forth and so on, like when we walk around Greensboro today and we see a glimpse that nature is alive.

So, a healthy environment, a healthy creation, will be proof of God’s intension for the world coming to fruition, but if Pharaoh persists in his anti-life policies, then God’s very purposes in creation are being undermined. This, of course, is all being worked out through the story of Israel’s exodus from Egypt so that the plagues become ecological signs of potential historical disaster. The plagues are ecological indicators of coming historical disaster.

If we were to read the entire cycle of plagues (and there is a bunch of them), within the plague narratives, there is an ongoing tit-for-tat competition between God and Pharaoh’s magicians. It is in the Plague of the Gnats (that is plague #4), the magicians of Pharaoh’s court can no longer keep up, and they confessed to Pharaoh, what Jane read. The magician said “This is the finger of God,. This Plague of Gnats is the finger of God and we cannot keep up with it, Pharaoh”, so the Egyptians’ pseudo-religious scientific establishment has failed, and while Pharaoh defiantly presses on in a few more rounds with God, the game is up, so God and God’s creation will win at least this battle and I suspect that we, as human agents of God’s realm, are caught. We are caught between fully wanting to be for God’s moral order, for a creation teaming with life, while, at the same time, being hooked in and seduced by Pharaoh and his magicians, who consistently violate creation.

So, we are at an incredibly powerful, difficult and scary point in history but we, through our declared faith, are children of these Plague Narratives. We are in the battle with Pharaoh aligned with God, aligned with the create order which God has called good, so we, in this age of the sixth extinction, are called forward in an act of faith to find ways to defend creation because, if we defend creation, we are defending our God.

There are an increasing number of signs that tell us it is time to defend our God, to defend creation—if not for our own sake, for the sake of our children and our grandchildren because we are in trouble, and the church offers one source of inspiration. Because of our holy scriptures, the church offers one source of inspiration, one body of faithful people who are called to do this, to be engaged with defending creation, so we are challenged as people of faith to make recycling not only central to our lives but the beginning point of how we act on our faith, of how we defend God's creation, so we are called as people of faith to be informed, to educate ourselves, to act with courage, and to know that, as we act with courage to defend creation, God is with us and we are with God, so we pray and we go forth knowing that the creation which God has made is ours to enjoy, ours to use responsibly, and ours to defend when it is abused. May God be with us in this struggle. Amen.