

Easter V, April 24, 2016

4/24/2016 Karen Barrows

Acts 11:1-18

Psalm 148

Revelation 21:1-6

John 13:31-35

Creation Care Sunday

A sermon preached by Karen Barrows at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Port Townsend, WA.

"I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem.....see, the home of God is among mortals."

Three months ago Inky the octopus escaped from a gap at the top of his tank in the New Zealand National Aquarium; according to the news report, Inky apparently slithered across the floor to a six-inch-wide drain, then squeezed his football-sized but malleable body into the opening, which happened to lead directly to the Pacific Ocean. While Inky has not been seen since, it is quite evident what happened: there were imprints of suction cups along the floor from the tank to the drain, telltale tentacle tracks that were unmistakably Inky's.

I do not know for certain the nature of heaven, but when I picture heaven from here, it always looks a lot like the most beautiful places on Earth, and it is filled with the very best animals, plants, people, and landscapes I can imagine. If scripture suggests that the "first heaven and the first earth" pass away, might we have a part in bringing about a new heaven and a new earth? It seems that we don't get one without the other.

Humans stand at a crossroads now on this planet-home, and it is at this juncture that we must either choose a new earth (and in doing so thereby, perhaps, choose a new heaven, a new destination), or we will die with the earth that is passing away. The central problem is that the so-called "wealth" humans have created has come at the expense of the wealth God created. The industrial economy on which we depend for jobs, money, goods, and services, has become a mass killing machine. It is destroying not only living things, but the life support systems that we all require to survive and thrive. A ten-minute search on the internet about the state of physical systems today so saturates the reader with fear, depression, and helplessness that I will not subject you to it today. The terrifying, impossible truth, which we are not hearing from our leaders or through major news outlets, is that the global industrial economy must be completely dismantled; it must not continue to grow, which is its perpetual mandate; instead, it must be eliminated if we and the other cohorts of species sharing the planet with us are to survive. The consequences of our failure to do so thus far are not way off at the end of the century or beyond; they are here and now, and they are increasing in severity each year.

When I think about such things, I need some sort of help to cope with them. Autumn (Rilke) The leaves are falling, falling as from way off, as though far gardens withered in the skies; they are falling with denying gestures. And in the nights the heavy earth is falling, from all the stars down into loneliness. We are all falling. This hand falls. And look at others: it is in them all. And yet there is one who holds this falling Endlessly, gently in his hands.

I drank heavily when I was young, becoming alcoholic as a teenager. In my late twenties, near the end of my life, I finally heard God's voice very clearly, and the message was this: "I love and forgive you for what you have done, but we have to *do* something about this problem." The answer to my prayers for help hinged on my willingness to take action. If I refused to take action, it really was hopeless; I sensed that if I died I would be safe in arms of God, but I also knew that I would die with all my potential, all the good work I could do, tragically unmanifested.

Modern culture is very much like the addict I was. It knows deep down that it can't keep going on like this, that so-called "progress" is leading to extinction, not to ease, much less glory, and yet the addiction whispers, "Just one more day/year/decade/century/dollar/paycheck...." We must find a way to let go of the idea that a financial system is essential at all. It actually is not. Every single thing that money has given us is achievable without it, because what is needed are the fruits of the Earth, the gifts physics gives us, and those were in abundance when we began the modern project. Even knowing that, however, poses another problem, which is that people are stuck; we can't do without the economic system, because our very lives and the lives of all we love are also inextricably bound to it. How can any of us dismantle a system on which we depend, even if we could?

I've been working at the paper mill, subbing for a woman in Customer Service who is on maternity leave. I left at quitting time one afternoon last week and headed to the parking lot, along with other workers leaving at the same time. As I approached my car I saw a long, healthy earthworm rippling steadily along. I looked in the direction it was headed, and realized that the creature had little chance of making it across the vast expanse of dry asphalt remaining before the pavement gave way to grass. I felt bad for the worm, but embarrassed to pick it up in front of the mill workers. As soon as I got in the car, something got me back out again, and I bent down to pick up the worm, doing so as inconspicuously as possible. As I walked to the embankment and tossed the worm into the grass, I realized how afraid I was that other workers might see and scorn me for trying to help the earthworm. On the way home I was shocked by my sense of shame for living in accordance with my highest values of love, compassion, and recognition of another's plight.

I suspect I am not alone in this struggle. I suspect that the real problem humans face is that our true selves spend a lot of time living in secret. That's why we are stuck. All our lives now depend on bringing our secret selves out into the open. The most important thing I did in the nine hours I was at the mill that day was the loving interaction with the earthworm. Jesus said, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." He also said that the kingdom is within us, and our acceptance of the fact that God's

kingdom flourishes also within all our kin, human and non-human alike, is what will really save us in the end. God's intent on Earth is obvious, and we can see it, all around us in springtime: abundant life, on this fecund jewel of the universe. We were born to celebrate life on this beautiful Earth; we were not born here to toil as slaves of an insatiable beast of our own making. There is a spiritual and moral imperative to address what we have done, no matter how unwittingly or inadvertently we did it.

When Inky the octopus saw a gap in the top of his tank left open by careless maintenance workers, he quickly developed a plan of action. He let the first heaven and the first earth pass away, and he headed for Jerusalem, in the direction he knew led to Reality. Inky's whole being knew the truth. With people in the modern world, it is the secret self who knows the way there. Our moment now is bitter, painful, terrifying, paralyzing, hopeless, and grief-stricken. This moment is also the single greatest opportunity humankind has ever had to join our Creator as creators ourselves. The four generations alive today have, if we will seize it, the chance to bring the human species to a level of goodness and joy never before imagined in all our history.

Several years ago on one of the space shuttle voyages, Sultan bin Salman al-Saud, one of the astronauts who was part of an international crew, said that during the first few days in orbit, everyone tried to spot their own countries. By the third day they were just identifying continents, and after five days, all they saw was Earth. It took only five days for a group of ethnically and linguistically diverse people to develop a shared perspective on reality. Follow the Voice within you, the Voice that makes your heart sing. The new heaven and the new earth lie in that direction.