

Theology and Church Basements
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Hebrew Scripture Reading—Psalm 65: 5-13

With awesome acts You justly answer us, our rescuing God. You are the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the far-flung sea. By your power, You established the mountains. You are girded with might. You quiet the roar of the seas, the roar of their waves, and the tumult of nations. Those who dwell at earth's farthest bounds are awed by your signs. You make the gateways of the morning and the evening shout for joy. You visit the earth and water it, You greatly enrich it. Your river is full of water. You provide the people with grain, for so You have prepared it. You quench the thirst of its furrows, settling its ridges, softening it with showers, and blessing its growth. You crown the year with your bounty. The tracks of your wagon brim with richness. The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy.

Around the age of thirteen, I went with my parents to a dramatic performance being presented in the basement of a local church. The basement was much like Bradford Hall, only smaller. I don't remember much from that evening, but what I remember with certainty is that the performance told the story of a Latin American male who had experienced horrific violence. I remember being surprised by the graphic descriptions. My father at the time was deeply involved in working with members of other churches on issues related to our nation's complicity in the violence taking place at that time in countries like Nicaragua and Guatemala. Part of my father's involvement entailed an interest in liberation theology. The performance in the church basement that night was undoubtedly part of the theological milieu.

As I look back upon my childhood and youth, I don't remember ever having any profound revelations about God, but, at some unconscious level, I believe experiences like the one in that church basement played an important role in my own theological development. Amid teenage crushes and an obsession with becoming a pro-football player in the mold of Barry Sanders, the idea somehow got planted into my head that God is a God who sides with the poor and the oppressed in their struggles. Even though I preferred watching gangster movies like the Godfather over attending church, this particular belief somehow rubbed off on me. Thank goodness for church basements and patient parents.

All of these thoughts came back to me recently when I was at a workshop for the coal free Washington campaign. Participants were asked to tell the story of how they came to be involved. We were to focus on the values and experiences that led us there. It might not be immediately apparent, but in some ways, my story began in the basement of that church, because it was in places like that basement where the theology that directs much of my life to this day began to be formed. This morning I want to share with you the story of my own evolving theology, and I want to invite you to think about what your own story is, how your thinking about God has evolved over time. I want to also invite you think about whether there is

anything from your own story and your own core beliefs that you would want passed onto our kids today in our own church basement.

As I indicated, my own story began amid a family and community that cared about the suffering of others and that believed God cared as well. Over time that core belief has remained, but has also expanded and adapted itself as I've learned more. Nowhere has my theology evolved more in the last couple of years than in relation to the natural world of which we are apart. From the time of my first sermonette in high school to my arrival here, all of my sermons were what scholars might call anthropocentric. They were all focused on the problems of humans with little to no reference to our natural world. It wasn't that I didn't care about our natural world. It was that I didn't know how to articulate a theology that not only encompassed this world but also resonated with me.

After I arrived here, I knew that would have to change. I was going to have to address environmental issues if I wanted to stay relevant to our times. One of the early turning points for me can be summed up in one word: the Lorax. Early on here, I devoted a series of children's sermons to the Lorax. If you'll remember, the Lorax is essentially a book that is designed to evoke a sense of sorrow and outrage over the cutting down of Truffula trees. I am not sure I know anyone who can read "The Lorax" and not at some level feel that cutting down those Truffula trees is simply wrong. There is something about being human that leads us to care about life regardless of what form it takes: human, animal, or plant. My favorite part of the Lorax comes at the end when the Once-ler tells the little boy, "Unless someone like you cares a whole lot. Nothing is going to get better. It's not." That simple story helped me make the leap from thinking about a God who cares for humans to a God who cares for all of creation. Intertwined with that ethic of care is a conviction that all of life is sacred and compels a certain sense of obligation. "The Lorax" may be a seemingly simple children's book, but I think it was an important part of my brain rewiring itself as I began to think differently about God.

As my brain became re-wired my life slowly became re-wired. A theology that cares about creation can't just be a matter of holding certain beliefs. "Care" is a verb, so it requires action. It requires doing something. My problem was that I didn't know what to do. Then, one day I got an email saying that there was this statewide campaign to transition our state away from its one remaining coal plant. I called the person who sent the email. One thing led to another, and soon we were hosting the campaign's first Vancouver meeting in the basement of our church. One of the principal organizers for the campaign in this state attended one of our later meetings and was very enthusiastic about our meeting in Bradford Hall, a place she had never been. She began citing all of these examples of famous movements all over the world that were born in church basements.

Now, when the campaign initially captured my interest, my theology was actually not big enough to fully interpret its significance. How does one think of God in relation to things like CO₂ and the earth's atmosphere? I had come to believe that CO₂ emissions were causing global warming, and I knew the coal plant in Centralia was the largest source of CO₂ pollution in the state. While new technologies and policies could reduce the plant's pollutants, the fact remains there are no existing technologies that would reduce the plant's CO₂ emissions to the target levels set by either scientists or our government. All of this I understood in a secular way, but I never really knew what the theological ramifications of it were.

The chemical composition of our earth's atmosphere was just part of a whole host of issues that I was starting to confront theologically for the first time. In our state, the coal plant is also the largest source of mercury pollution, which we know is particularly dangerous for

children and expectant mothers. Moreover, a recent medical study tells us that coal pollution is linked to four of the top five causes of death in the United States: heart disease, cancer, stroke, and chronic lower respirator diseases. Finally, the coal plant has a huge negative impact on Mt. Rainer and eleven other wilderness areas. I am being brief here, and I realize some of you might defend the coal plant and have counter arguments. I am not assuming everyone's jumping on the bandwagon.

What I want to focus upon, however, are the theological issues at stake. The common cliché is that we are all interrelated. One of the analogies sometimes used is that of the mobile that parents often hang above their child's crib. The infant looks up and sees all of these objects dangling in front of his or her eyes with these amazing shapes and colors. The objects are all connected. Eventually, the child reaches up and touches one of those objects. Suddenly, the whole mobile is set in motion. In that moment, the child is learning something in his or her brain for the first time. "If I touch one part of this, the whole thing moves."

If we think of our ecological system as a bunch of interrelated parts, then at some point we realize that our actions for better or for worse can have a huge impact on that system. The theological question is where is God in that system. Last week in our adult education class we talked about how people often go through various evolutions in their thinking about God. As kids, some of us might have literally believed the Bible when it describes God as living in a home above the clouds. Later in life, we might have started to question that belief when we saw rockets shoot to the moon and we learned about the broader universe. And, then, still later in life, we may have decided that we can reject certain literal beliefs while still appreciating the poetry of scripture and what it says about God. We can still appreciate our reading for this morning, even if we don't think that God literally stands above the earth with a watering jar.

Given that appreciation, where does our scripture point us today? To God, the psalmist declares, "Those who dwell at earth's farthest bounds are awed by your signs. You make the gateways of the morning and the evening shout for joy." When we think about this big world of nature of which we are apart, God may always be a mystery just beyond our fingertips. We may never see some heavenly parent standing above the mobile making it all move. What we do see, however, are signs. In everything that lives, we can see a trace of the divine. We can see a dimension of the sacred. We can see this in the Columbia Gorge, and we can see it right outside our door. We can see it all around Mount Hood, and we can see it in our garden. We can see it almost everywhere we look.

When I think of the poetic celebrations of nature found in our scripture, I realize that this is something I want us to share with our kids. Even though I like church basements, we may need to take our kids outdoors to teach some of these lessons. Outdoors we can teach them that caring for creation is one of the most profound ways in which we can get in touch with God. We can teach them what it's like to experience the divine in nature when all of its parts are moving together in harmony. We can read the psalms and point to the signs of that harmony. We can point to the wilderness overflowing with goodness, the hills girding themselves with joy, the meadows clothing themselves with flocks, the valleys decking themselves with grain. We can point to all of creation shouting and singing together for joy. Amen.