

Westgate Baptist Community
Lent 3 14 March 2004
"Creation Birthing"
A sermon by Geoff Wraight

What's Lent got to do with The Ecological Crisis?

Purpose: To introduce the theme of Renewing Creation. To see the link between Creation and Redemption in Christ as a central part of our faith. To see the connection between and participation in the renewal of humanity and the environment is part of our reflective journey to the cross.

March 7 – Outdoor Service: Creation Groaning

March 14 – Creation Birthing – reflection on Gen 1 as a story of birth – creation theology.

March 21 – Creation Reconciled – reflection on the invitation to be reconnected with the environment and to see that resurrection is a symbol and reason for hope for the earth.

March 28 – Creation Renewed – the vision of a new reality – happening already

Introduction and Re-visiting of where we began.

If ever there was a current example in Australia of the creation groaning and yet waiting and hoping for healing and renewal it is the old growth forests in Tasmania's south.

Only discovered in 2002, El Grande was a *eucalyptus regnans* in south East Tasmania with a 19-metre circumference. Last autumn, it was killed when a regeneration burn went wrong. (show photo?)

But the irony of this pales in the face of recent happenings in the famous Styx valley where this tree was located among some of the most awe-inspiring old growth forests in the world.

Joan Masterman operates the Freycinet Experience Walk, a trek through the magnificent national park on Tasmania's east coast. Travelling to the park from Hobart, her customers often pass up to 12 trucks loaded to the hilt with giant trees heading for the woodchip mill.

A French guest recently told one of Masterman's guides: "In Tasmania, you have your forests on wheels."

Tasmania sells itself to the world as "The Natural State" —but its slogan jars with its continuing clearance of virgin forests, not to mention the poisoning of animals that often accompanies the process. Tourism and logging — one bringing in record numbers of visitors, the other with near-record levels of woodchipping — are increasingly at odds with each other. Not only clear felling and woodchipping but also the use of 1080 poison baits to kill wildlife and prevent them eating new plantations in the cleared areas.

In the Savage River rainforests, Australia's largest, Richard Summers and Maree Jenkins want to build the Tarkine Wilderness Lodge. They fought to stop clearfelling of a hill in their viewscape. After resorting to a public protest, they lost the logging area, or coupe, but saved the view in negotiations over the treeline. The Creation groans and the creation waits..

There are two quite radical ideas presented in this almost poetic piece of the apostle Paul's writing

The first is that Creation is not some lifeless mass of matter that in some sense is disposable and in need of replacement. Creation is depicted as a **subject** with an inner longing.

The second is that Creation is **included** in the hope for renewal and liberation from bondage.

Creation has been waiting and longing for the day when it will be free from the curses and bondage it has suffered as a result of being estranged by humankind and treated as a thing to be exploited or dominated instead of loved and cooperated with.

We reflected on the so called mechanistic view of creation where The Earth or the World is understood to have been zapped into existence out of nothing and set going like a giant clock.

The traditional dualistic world view and its consequences...OHP diagram 1

Revisiting Gen 1 Creation Narrative..

The impression that everything was created in a flash as God spoke is common literal understanding that some take from Genesis 1.

But a closer look at this wonderful story of creation suggests that the image of birthing is also present – in two ways.. as Norman Habel explains...

First.

If we look at verse 2 we see that before day one of creation, three things were present – Earth, water and spirit. Earth was beneath the deep waters, hidden in darkness. Across these waters God’s creative Spirit moved.

On day one God introduces light into the darkness. On day two God separates the water by creating a ceiling called the sky.

On day three something quite different happens. God does not say, “let there be Earth!” Rather, God says, “Let the waters part (or gather together in one place) and let the land appear!” The waters part as in childbirth and the land emerges from within the waters. Earth is born!

There is something special about the Hebrew word used for appear in the literal reading of verse 9. It ‘appears’ or ‘it is revealed’ is the same verb used in other places of God ‘appearing’ in a vision or revelation to certain people. So there may be a sense here that the earth itself is a sign or symbol of God’s very being.

The Second example of where the image of birthing comes through is found on day three.

After God causes the land to emerge from the waters, God speaks again. God does not say, “Let there be trees, plants and vegetation.”. Instead, God uses Earth as a source of life. God calls on Earth to bring forth vegetation. And on day six God calls on Earth to bring forth animal life.

So we begin to a different picture here of Earth as the child of God’s birthing. But of Earth itself as a kind of parent of other living things. Earth gives birth from the beginning of creation. So the creation story suggests that birthing is a way God once used and still uses to create, to cause life to emerge. And to maintain life...

The Implications of the Birthing Model

How does this view change our world view. How does it change our idea of how we think about the creation and environment?

The realisation of the Earth and creation emerging out of God’s very being has led some theologians and eco-spiritual thinkers to the idea that the very creation itself is equivalent to God.

OHP 2 - God and World as indistinguishable.

I think that this view while radically different does have some problems.

I think it is difficult to understand the otherness of creation in this model. Being other than God and yet made in God’s image is an important Christian idea.

I think too, that this model in its extreme form can lead to “pantheism”. That is, the worship of nature and the worship of God are the same thing. When you hug a tree you are hugging God.

But the birthing model is more like God-World in vital and interdependent relationship

OHP 3 God and World in “Symbiotic” relationship.

(These diagrams are very inadequate and remind me a bit of the “four spiritual laws”) but we are trying to get a Biblical understanding of the how God and the World are related.

God gives birth to the World and yet is still different.

The Earth and God are in an essential relationship - God is continuing as the creative energy and source of life in the earth.

God’s image (Relationship being the key characteristic of the Triune Christian God) is seen in all the creation.

Parent-child illustration: There is something even more special that this diagram can’t really show. The idea that the Creation is in a Parent/child relationship of love with the Creator.

My Son Tim here is my son as a result of my part in his conception and birth (yes I was there holding his mum’s hand – suffering with her...) . Most people say it is easy to see he is my son because he looks like me and is handsome and intelligent too!! Whether he likes it or not – he will always be my son – even if he might deny it at some point the relationship is part of his very identity and was established at the point of his creation as a human being...

When he is in pain – I feel it too. When he is responding in love to my love for him - I am filled with pride and joy..

There is something wonderful about this idea expanded to illustrate the essential relationship that the whole creation has with the Creator. The Creation is in pain. Human beings have become estranged from their creator yet they can never sever their essential connection and dependence on their creator whether they like it or not. Nor can they sever the relationship they have with their siblings , the animals, the plants the earth itself....

When we reflect on the Creator God’s relationship with the Earth as characterised by love we can begin again to see the connection all this has with the Lenten and Easter story...

The story of Jesus as the Christ the one in whom God dwelt in all his fullness is a story of the pain of God and the love of a God who cannot but be involved intimately in his Creation and with its creatures made in his image.

Through the acting out of his love, God who we understand as being in God's very self a trinity of love, reaches out to us through the spirit, participates in our pain and intimately in human pain through the cross – and invites to acknowledge and participate in the healing of ourselves and the restoration of the earth.

Creation is indeed a birthing in origin and in progress. In many ways this leads us back to Romans 8 again and to the idea that the creation waits and groans and hopes for a re-birth. We as human beings have the opportunity and calling to restore the relationship of love between ourselves and the earth we share.

In conclusion lets return to a couple of real and close to home situations that can both be a place where the practical reality of re-birth can be applied..

In the early 1800's the overlanders brought the first sheep and cattle onto the flood plains of the mighty Murray River system (or Murrundi – Ab. Name) which began to have a negative impact on the delicate balance of the river and landscape.

Further harm came in the 1860's as the paddle steamers moved wool from stations to ports. Paddle steamers consumed enormous amounts of timber taken off the flood plains, and snags and trees were taken out of the water for ease of navigation. This took away the habitat of the Murray Cod and other species. Because the Murray has a variable flow, there were dry years when boats couldn't operate. A government agreement in the 1920's saw the building of the locks and weirs that prevented the drying-out phase, necessary for regrowth and spawning of the fish. The locks raised the river level that was connected to the ground water level under the flood plain. This in turn raise the water table and the salt rose up, killing trees in lower parts of the flood plain.

In 1969 European carp arrived in the river. The carp destroy aquatic plants, snails leeches and birds, dramatically impacting on the food chain, as well as making the water very muddy with less light for plant growth. From the 1980s to the present day, there has been massive growth in irrigation, diverting water from the river, reducing the frequency of small floods which nature uses to trigger spawning and breeding. Last year saw yet another massive die-back of redgums.

The River Murray is struggling to give birth again to the life it once brought forth.. The birth pangs of creation are happening now..

Since the 1980's, a great body of information has been built up, with excellent understandings of River Murray issues. The Murray-Darling Basin Commission and

other bodies are working towards strategies that will enhance the health and well-being of the Murray.

One excellent example is found at Banrock Station near Kingston on Murray in SA. BRL Hardy (wine growers) have taken some very good initiatives to counter the damage done by not working with the river in the past. Their management plan for the property includes education by way of an Interpretive Centre, walking trails, and consultation with local Aboriginal groups. Restoration of wetland areas is a priority and is happening through revegetation, and the best possible irrigation systems that achieve low water usage and no drainage.

Water is a great resource and one of the key issues in this driest continent. The EPA engineer I talked to about the contamination of the land here at High St expressed the opinion that the reason plants have died in the past is probably due to them not being the right plants and the salt level rather than poison.

(mention plans to recreate our own garden of native plants – storm watering system etc.)

These are real and practical symbols of renewal – may they be not just signs but continuous expressions of God's renewal of our hearts, our lives our church community, our local neighbourhood and our world..