

# “Creation Care – Devastation and Renewal”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – August 18, 2024*

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Leviticus 26:3-4, 14-22

Ezekiel 47:1-12

## *Introduction*

Today marks the end of our summer series looking at what the Old Testament teaches us about humanity’s call to creation care. We have looked at chapter 1 of Genesis and chapter 38 of Job, two readings that reveal God at the center of creation, bringing order out of chaos and abundance in the variety of the created world. Two of the Psalms, 65 and 104, remind humanity of our interconnectedness with the waters of the seas, the sun, moon and stars in the sky, and the birds, fish and animals of the earth. All these have been granted us not just for survival, but also that we might enjoy life and give glory to God.

This morning’s first reading, from Leviticus, was given to Moses as a part of God’s new covenant less than one year into the people’s Exodus journey. Having just escaped from slavery and economic oppression in Egypt and heading toward a new land and ordering of their society, the people are given a vision of what life will be like if they follow or ignore the commandments: either abundance and prosperity, or anxiety and destruction.

We turn now to the words of the prophet Ezekiel, written many centuries later during the exile of the Hebrew people from their promised land, of a vision presented by an angelic-like messenger who leads the prophet on a tour of the renewed creation.

## *Read Ezekiel 47:1-12*

Maybe, if you are like me, when you hear news or engage in conversations about creation care and environmental issues, it can seem overwhelming. Climate instability, rising sea levels, deforestation, air and water pollution, micro-plastics, and more. How can I, as one person, or we, as a small community in a vast world, make any substantive difference in helping bring about the renewal and restoration of creation?

Not all of Ezekiel is so hopeful. For most of the book, the prophet pronounces judgment upon the people of Israel for failing to faithfully follow God’s commandments. They have not acted mercifully, pursued justice, or worshipped God alone. According to the prophet, Israel’s failures have led to the destruction of their temple and dislocation from their land.

But now, Ezekiel is being shown this vision of renewed life. From the temple, water has started to flow; it begins with only a trickle but as they walk farther from its source, the waters grow deeper. After a thousand cubits (about 1500 feet), the water is ankle-deep; after another 1500 feet, it comes up to the waist. Walking yet another 1500 feet, still less than a mile from the temple, it has become a river so deep that it no longer can be crossed.

Along the banks of this river, life has started to be renewed. Trees grow that give fruit in every season, and even in the Arabah (the Dead Sea) fish and other sea creatures will spring forth in waters that have been transformed from stagnant to fresh. In a place that previously supported no life, fishermen will now stand on its banks and can fill their nets as if they were at the Great Sea (the Mediterranean).

The renewal of this land – the very land from which the people of Israel had been taken into exile – provides an inspiring vision of healing, renewal, and hope. Along their journey, the angelic figure asks Ezekiel: “Mortal, have you seen this?”

As those currently engaged in the realities of and conversations about global climate change and devastation – rising temperatures, drought and disease, and others – we might have trouble envisioning a hopeful future. Often, our experience more closely mirrors the warnings spoken in Leviticus: of seed that is sown in vain, bearing no crops; of skies that look like iron and the earth like copper. In our land, we have seen lawns browned out by lack of rain and trees felled by storms. The air we breathe is polluted by forest fires hundreds of miles away and the waters of our lakes and streams are filled with toxins.

In Leviticus, the people of Israel are given a choice: if they follow the commandments of God, rains will come and the land will produce; but if they fail to be faithful to God, the waters will be withheld, and crops will not grow. Their enemies will not be held at bay, and even the wild animals will pursue their children and livestock.

Again, these are the words of the holiness code provided to a people who had just been set free from their bondage in Egypt; imagining what life would hold for them when they came into a land flowing with milk and honey. God was leading them toward a place of abundance and grace. In previous chapters, the people are instructed that on the seventh year (the Sabbath) they are to let their fields lay fallow and trust God to provide; that when they glean their fields, they should leave the edges unpicked so that food would be available to the poor and the stranger.

Thus, the threats of disaster are warnings to motivate better behavior. God has established a creation that will support life and human enjoyment. If the

Israelite people enter the Promised Land with a belief in God's abundance – practicing the Sabbath and showing generosity toward others – then they can thrive. If, instead, they fall back into the habits of scarcity and anxiety learned during their captivity in Egypt, it will produce conflict and devastation. Dangers will emerge from enemies and even wild animals will pursue them.

If we fast-forward from the Exodus to the exile, we find a people that failed to be faithful and a land that has, indeed, been devastated. The hope of the exiled Israelites is for a return to the land and a rebuilding of the temple. As is revealed to the prophet Ezekiel, from the temple a river will flow; one that starts with a mere trickle but, as it moves, grows deeper, wider, and more life-renewing.

Here, waters that once were so brackish that no life could be supported are transformed so that fish can live in them. Notice, though, that not all the waters are changed, for we also need salt and other minerals to live and thrive. Likewise, the trees that grow along the river's banks provide fruit to eat but also leaves for healing. In this new creation, there is life and death, there is a recognition of the need to work to provide food and for Sabbath rest, an understanding of both sickness and the possibility for healing.<sup>1</sup>

These are some of the markers of a post-exilic creation; of a world that has experienced devastation as the consequence of human choices. Like the ancient Israelites, we have forgotten that God stands at the center of an abundant creation and calls us to act with mercy and justice in caring for the air, waters, and land entrusted to us. Instead, we often follow the lessons learned in Egypt: anxious there will not be enough, hoarding all that we can get our hands on. We live in a throw-away world which consumes and wastes without regard to what it is doing to our planet.

Many of us feel called to act differently, to repent of our environmental disregard and turn away from the ways of excess. Here at the church, for example, we have converted our most used lights to LEDs, we have stopped using Styrofoam cups and cut down on plastic waste, we have planted a pollinator garden and started using food scraps for composting.

This summer, we have hosted children for three days of learning about Caring for God's Creation; teaching them that theology and ecology – how we talk about God and treat the world around us – are intertwined. We have invited local farmers and environmental caregivers to our Tables Together meals; learning more about ecological problems and what practices are being employed to address them.

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bible Worm Podcast*

These might seem like small ripples in the vast ocean of climate devastation. Remember, though, the question Ezekiel was asked by his angelic guide: “Mortal, have you seen this?” He witnessed a small trickle of water transformed – gradually, over time and distance – into a deep, wide, and life-renewing river. He saw how, from the temple, God’s transforming hope brings forth fish from the sea and fruit from the trees, to feed and provide meaningful work and heal the people.

It all starts with a trickle: this reorientation of God back to the center of creation and to our practices as a species; this gradual restoration of the natural world to its intended order. These efforts we make might seem insignificant, but – in ways we may not be able to explain – they can grow and gain momentum; when we tell stories of healing and renewal they can inspire and encourage others to perceive the life-giving waters.

And, like the creation in which we live, it is always possible for our relationship with God to undergo renewal; for life to spring forth in new ways; for us to experience nourishment and healing through God’s grace. The choice is ever ours: anxiety or abundance, strife or peace, faithlessness or trust, devastation or renewal, Egypt or the land of promise. The fate of the world that God wonderfully made is in our hands. As God’s people, how will we choose? Amen.