

Creation Is Not a Marketplace

Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent, March 7, 2021

Readings: Exodus 20:1-11; John 2:13-22; Psalm 19

Sermon text: For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it. Exodus 20

He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" John 2

In his new work of speculative fiction, *The Ministry of the Future*, Kim Stanley Robinson imagines a not-distant future— the early 2030s— in which 20 million people die during a single heat wave in India. That's the opening chapter—hard to read as it is told from a first person perspective. Climate change has become a devourer. People are getting desperate. Lots of efforts at mitigation are underway. I am only half way through. I wonder what will become of humanity. Perhaps that question occurs to you these days during episodes like the Texas ice storms or the California wild fires.

It's a big book, and reminds me of *Moby Dick*, in that the narrative is interwoven with brief discursive chapters on how things work, as Melville did with whaling. Pumping water out from beneath arctic glaciers to slow their roll to the sea; how a carbon currency might work. Like Tolkien he also likes riddles. As when in one short chapter, Robinson describes a small creature, perhaps a pouched marsupial, with a small space, into which people reach, look for different things, bring different things. No two alike—no two equally useful—and so hard to decide where to put or how much to take. Lots of friction. Waste of time. Until the small critter grows, matures, develops a digestive system capable of turning whatever is put in into blood, which moves around as needed. Waste is expelled. But all kinds of things fed. Here's the riddle: "My body worked so well that eventually all things everywhere were swallowed and digested by me. I grew so large that I ate the whole world, and all the blood in the world is mine. What am I?"

I'll get to the answer later.

Let's look at our passages from scripture first. The first lesson is from Exodus, the giving of the Ten Commandments. The gospel reading is Mark's version of Jesus clearing of the Temple. How are they related?

One thing that occurs to me is that the commandment to observe the sabbath and keep it holy—which as Abraham Hershel has famously said, is about time as a sort of cathedral, a sacred space. One day in seven is set apart for God. And what does God set the time aside for? Rest; a conscious refraining from labor. In Exodus the reason given for the sabbath is because God rested after the six days of creation. So humans should do likewise. In the comparable passage in Deuteronomy, Moses explains that God has ordained the sabbath because it is a sign of freedom. In Egypt there was no day off. Slaves are always on the clock. But free people can take a day off. Rest, spend time with the family, worship the liberating God.

Jesus famously resisted certain aspects of the pharisaic understanding of sabbath prohibitions on labor. In particular, he believed it was not only permissible but a duty to heal on the sabbath. The commandment to love the neighbor as yourself does not stop on the sabbath. But that is different than making money. We all (and the text includes all people, even foreigners, even slaves) deserve a day of rest—of rest, relief and of enjoyment. After all, God took a break to admire God's six day work of creation; it was good, very good—and so should we, taking a break to look from the balcony at the dance, to take breath before getting back on the floor, and enjoying for a moment the fruit of our labor. We work to live, not live to work.

Now Jesus entering the Temple sees that the market for exchange of currencies and sacrificial animals has encroached on the courtyard and is closing on the sacrificial sites in front of the Temple proper. You can understand how it happened: Jews coming from all over, with various kinds of currency, needed to buy doves, sheep, cattle and other animals to do the appointed sacrifices—hard to bring sacrificial animals along on a trip after all. And currencies from various places needed to be exchanged. But the market had taken over the sacred space of the outer court and introduced the haggle of exchange into the solemnity of the altar. The routine casualness of trade profaned the sacred place where God's Name was known to dwell.

Jesus was not concerned about preserving the inviolate nature of the Temple space. Indeed, he prophesied it would be torn down in the not-distant future (as indeed it was some thirty years later by the Romans). But no problem, he said, he could rebuild it in three days. “What!”—cue outraged Sadducees—“Rebuild a building that has taken a generation to build, in three days. But Jesus was talking about his resurrection. He would become the new Temple, the new meeting tent for God and humanity.

Not a place, or a time, but a person.

But we need all three, don't we? A place to worship God, where we can gather to pray, preferably a place set aside and consecrated for this purpose, that is beautiful and gracious, a place where prayer has been lifted and God's presence felt. So the Temple. A time to worship, preferably a portion of our busy lives that we can stop what we do on the other days, rest, refrain from business, the Sabbath.

And God, meeting us there.

But the sabbath, the sacred place and the presence of God—Sunday church and faith in Jesus for Christians—are only sacramental instances meant to remind and penetrate all the rest of time and space and our work of living in them. It is not that we but a day to be in the presence of God—but that by weekly reminders we remember we are always in the presence of God. And a sanctified, set aside sacred place reminds us that this whole creation is the body of Christ. All of time and space is holy. None of it is only a commodity, to be measured by utility, priced by the market, and consumed by the buyer.

You may think the Bible countenances this sort of dominion of creation by humanity. After all, God's first commandment to Adam was be fruitful and multiply, and God said to Adam you will have dominion over all the other animals. After the flood the same was said to Noah, with the added permission to eat the flesh of other animals. God also promised Noah to never again release the catastrophic floods, trigger another mass extinction. God won't; but we might. We have so vastly multiplied in number of humans and domestic animals, and so dominated the earth and its life and minerals that we have altered the very patterns of nature. We now live in the Anthropocene Era—which is heading for disaster. We have

made all creation a marketplace. “I am the market” is the answer to Robinson’s riddle. And it is going to hell in a handbag, delivered in a day by Amazon—not the great river basin, cradle of abundant life, but the dominant marketer.

This was not what God intended by dominion. Stewardship—care of creation—is God’s intention, as made clear in the commandments to Adam to serve and protect the garden, and name and know the animals. We have, as in the days before Noah, turned to violence and created injustice and war. We have, as in the days of Jesus, put up the idols of the market in the holy places. We have failed to observe the sabbath as a time of rest and enjoyment—instead using it merely to care for our wounded selves and indulge ourselves. And this is because we have not made a world of justice and dignity that we can look on in satisfaction and joy, and so we try to look away, inebriated but not happy.

Perhaps nature itself is God’s new prophet coming through climate change and fire and ice and flood to warn us to change, change now. The market alone will not fix this. Nor will individual goodwill and piety. We must take the long view, the God’s eye view, planning for generations ahead. Preserving what we can of life. Making a world worthy of being called good and very good.

As I said, I haven’t yet finished *The Ministry of the Future*, but I have gotten to the point where all the ministers and policy people and activists and scientists have acknowledged they still need something more. A new religion, one says. Or perhaps a very old religion.

Hey, we have one right here. One that reminds us that life is far more than hours of labor and pounds of merchandise. One that teaches us to save time for God and prayer. Keep sacred places sacred, and by extension understand all creation and life forms to be sacred—and keep them protected from unchecked market exploitation. Keep your eyes on the stars—so far beyond us yet they show us our place in the cosmos—and walk in the woods, the cathedrals of nature. And through prayer and practices of mercy, love your neighbor as yourself.

In Christ, Amen.

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