

*Creation in Reverse?*  
A Pentecost 16 Sermon  
Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28  
Sunday, September 16, 2007  
by Dr. Frank Trotter

[Pastor's Note: As I read the text, I am holding a large inflatable earth. At several points, I stop, pull out the stopper from the ball and squeeze it causing it to deflate some each time. When I finish reading the text, I place the slowly deflating earth on the chancel floor near the pulpit for the rest of the service.]

If you are a fan of *The Simpsons* television show, you may have seen *The Simpsons Movie* this summer in which a full blown environmental crisis forms the backdrop for the story line. It seems that Homer Simpson triggers the crisis when he dumps an entire silo of pig manure into an endangered lake near his hometown of Springfield. Before long, in a hilarious and poignant way, the ramifications of his selfish decision cause the entire community to be quarantined and targeted to be “nuked” in order to save the wider environment. When the news finally gets out that it was Homer's actions that caused the catastrophe, everyone turns against him including his family who sneak out of town and head for Alaska.

At a dramatic moment an ominous object that looks strangely like a flying saucer appears in the sky over Springfield. In the panic that ensues over its appearance, the people in one of the town bars run screaming into the church while at the very same instant the people in the church run screaming into the bar. That mixture of irony, humor, and awareness of environmental issues has long been a hallmark of *The Simpsons*. In almost every episode, selfish decisions have consequences not only for the individual but also for all those in the wider community – and that happens to be a basic message from the Holy Scriptures.

Because of humanity's disregard of creation at worst, or careless and sloppy regard for it at best, we can see the evidence of crisis all around us. This month the World Conservation Union released its updated list of the world's most endangered life forms. “It's called the Red List, and it's widely viewed as the world's most authoritative guide to the status of disappearing plants

[and] animals.”<sup>1</sup> Jane Smart, one of the organizers, says, “We get very excited about the release of the Red List and perhaps we shouldn’t be, because actually it’s a very bad news story... But for those of use who work in the field, I feel that the only way we are going to get society to pay attention to what’s happening to our species is to tell everybody.”<sup>2</sup> According to the 2007 report, there are 41,415 rare and threatened animals and plants – the most ever listed, with 16,000 of those described as “endangered.” Among those on the list are “almost every species of chimpanzee, orangutan and gorilla. Russ Mittermeier, head of Conservation International, says people don’t realize how rare these apes have become. ‘If you took all of the world’s remaining great apes, all of the remaining individuals would fit into two or three football stadiums, and that’s it,’ [he] says.”<sup>3</sup>

The San Diego Zoo<sup>4</sup> held a press conference last December in which they addressed the issue of the decline in the wild polar bear population. In an effort to convince the public that their red alert is genuine, the Zoo is sponsoring a week long trip to Winnipeg next month so that concerned citizens can see first hand what global warming is doing to the polar bear habitat.<sup>5</sup>

If you “google” “National Geographic,” you’ll see that they’ve added a new tag line to their main heading – “inspiring people to care about the planet.”<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the Geographic was considered to be merely a travel magazine at some point several decades ago, but serious readers and advocates know that it has aggressively stepped to the forefront in an effort to educate the world community about the perilous state of the planet’s health.

Why is it so difficult to get our attention? Why has it taken so long for the federal government and many state governments to acknowledge that while global warming may be cyclical there are dynamics of the problem that

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<sup>1</sup> John Nielsen, “‘Red List’ Sheds Light on Species Extinction Crisis,” *Morning Edition*, National Public Radio, Thursday, September 13, 2007, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=14345694>. For the complete Red List, go to <http://www.iucn.org/themes/ssc/redlist.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> “San Diego Zoo Holds Press Conference Addressing Polar Bear Population Crisis,” Conservation and Research for Endangered Species, December 13, 2006, [http://cres.sandiegozoo.org/about/news\\_061213\\_polar\\_bear\\_conference.html](http://cres.sandiegozoo.org/about/news_061213_polar_bear_conference.html).

<sup>5</sup> “Polar Bear Plunge,” San Diego Zoo, [http://www.sandiegozoo.org/zoo/ex\\_polar\\_bear\\_plunge.html](http://www.sandiegozoo.org/zoo/ex_polar_bear_plunge.html).

<sup>6</sup> National Geographic, <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/>.

relate to human behavior that cannot be brushed off as being merely the fluctuations of nature?

I listened to an interview on the radio yesterday in which Senator Christopher Dodd talked about a new book he is publishing about his famous father, Thomas J. Dodd. The senator's father was a Connecticut lawyer during the 1940's who was recruited to go to Nuremberg, Germany at the conclusion of World War II to be a "staff prosecutor of the most infamous Nazis for crimes against humanity. A few years ago the senator found a collection of letters that his father had sent back from Germany to his wife, Grace. Those letters have now been published – *Letters from Nuremberg: My Father's Narrative of the Quest for Justice*.”<sup>7</sup>

In the interview Senator Dodd talks about his father's most well remembered moment during the trial when he held up a human skull that was labeled as Exhibit USA254. He said, "It was in December 1945. The trial wasn't going well. Hermann Goering<sup>8</sup> was holding forth and gaining some credibility with the international press sort of making the case, 'Look, wars are ugly. People die. Terrible things happen.' So my father suggested this case wasn't being tried. It was just boring recitation of some data but without any captivating moment to crystallize what these people were really like. He places [the skull] on a table in the center of the courtroom with a cloth over it and begins to describe what he's going to show the judges that will tell you exactly who these defendants are. Then he has a young corporal pull the sheet back and there in the middle of that table is the shrunken head. It was the paper weight of the commandant of Buchenwald. And he said, 'That's who they are. That's who they are.' [The Senator concluded,] That's the moment everything changed. From that point on, the defendants knew, and Goering knew, that they were going to face a very strict judgment.”<sup>9</sup>

Why is it necessary, do you think, for the corpse to have to be held up before we can acknowledge that there is a problem? In the lesson from Jeremiah that we have heard this morning, the prophet tells the people of Israel that

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<sup>7</sup> Scott Simon, "Sen. Dodd Recalls Father's Role at Nuremberg Trials" by Scott Simon, *Weekend Edition Saturday*, National Public Radio, September 15, 2007,

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=14442270>.

<sup>8</sup> Hermann Goering was "a German politician and military leader, a leading member of the Nazi Party, second in command of the Third Reich, and commander of the Luftwaffe" (quote from Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hermann\\_G%C3%B6ring](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hermann_G%C3%B6ring)).

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Dodd, *Ibid*. Mr. Dodd is the Senior Senator from the State of Connecticut.

that they may soon be dealing with another kind of corpse. He tells them that a hot, destructive wind sweeping in from the desert heights will bring great destruction to the land. “I looked on the earth,” he cries out, “and lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light. I looked at the mountains where earthquakes were threatening to bring them down into rubble. I looked for the people and there were none. I looked for the birds of the air, but they had fled. I looked for the bountiful fields but they had become deserts and the once inhabited cities were laid in ruins.”

Theologian Walter Brueggemann ponders the implications of this passage in an essay in which he examines the traditional concept – a “disaster of biblical proportions.” He notes that the prophet “imagines a step-by-step dismantling of creation that correlates in detail with the step-by-step creation described in Genesis 1. The poet invites us to watch creation as it is assaulted by God; the social context of Jeremiah provides ample motivation for the debilitating rage of Yahweh.”<sup>10</sup>

In other words, it seems as if the creation which God so lovingly put together is being dismantled, step by step – creation in reverse. If the first thing that God creates in the first chapter of Genesis is light, now there is no light in this frighteningly apocalyptic landscape. The mountains and hills are no more; nor are there any visible creatures, not even humankind, the crown of creation.

Whose hand is it that lies behind the destabilizing of the entire creation? Australian theologian Howard Wallace says that Jeremiah’s prophecy makes it clear that the cause of the destruction is laid “at the feet of the people, who do evil and do not know how to do good.”<sup>11</sup> He says, “This is a very bleak passage, where there is little to distract or turn the reader aside from the destruction that is in sight here. [It] is not an easy passage to dwell on. There are no easy answers here, no straightforward turn either to redemption or to the possibility of resurrection. This poem is an invitation to stand in

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<sup>10</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “A Disaster of ‘Biblical Proportions’?”, *The Christian Century*, October 4, 2005, p. 23 ff. The article is also printed at Religion on Line, <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=3293>. Dr. Brueggemann is professor emeritus of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia.

<sup>11</sup> Howard Wallace, “Year C: Pentecost 16,” <http://hwallace.unitingchurch.org.au/WebOTcomments/OrdinaryC/Pent16Jer4.html>. Professor Wallace, an ordained minister in the Uniting Church of Australia, is Professor of Old Testament in the Centre for Theology and Ministry of the Uniting Church, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania.

silence, the silence where no people live, and no birds sound, and contemplate the possibility of complete destruction.”<sup>12</sup>

It was because of this deeply disturbing vision from Jeremiah that I went out this past week and bought a copy of Cormac McCarthy’s novel *The Road* that was published last fall. As a literature major, I’m always interested in prominent authors like McCarthy who also wrote *All the Pretty Horses* as well as *No Country for Old Men* which has been made into one of Hollywood’s most highly anticipated films to be released in mid-November. But I didn’t want to read this book, *The Road*, even though it won this year’s Pulitzer Prize for fiction. It’s about the end of the world, a story that could come right out of Jeremiah or from any of the other biblical prophets, and I honestly haven’t wanted to read a book like that even if it may be the best work of fiction in several years.

William Kennedy, who reviewed the book for the *New York Times*, writes that “McCarthy has said that death is the major issue in the world and that writers who don’t address it are not serious.”<sup>13</sup> And perhaps that might be said of all of us: that *we* cannot be taken seriously if we do not look the most serious issues of life and death in the face and wrestle with them.

The setting for *The Road* is in the southeast United States in the near future. It is a time of true apocalypse where billions of people have died along with almost all of the plant and animal life. We never know what causes the apocalypse – whether it is nuclear war or a destabilized environment pushed over the edge by human selfishness and greed. What remains seems like the unstructured chaos that swirls through the unshaped universe before God began the process of pulling it into form and shape as described in the first chapter of Genesis.

The protagonists in the story are a man who is his late 40’s and his son who is 10. The man’s wife has committed suicide before the narrative begins rather than try to survive in such a world, and as she died she mocked him for his decision to live. Slowly, the man and boy follow a road through the

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> William Kennedy, “Left Behind,” *New York Times*, October 8, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/08/books/review/Kennedy.t.html?pagewanted=1&ei=5070&en=ec01356cf382acad&ex=1190001600>.

southern mountains on the Tennessee-Georgia border to get to the Gulf Coast where they hear life is possible.

If Jeremiah is bleak, this story is, too, and yet I found myself mesmerized by the simplicity, power, and even the extraordinary beauty of the writing. If there is a word of hope in Jeremiah, it comes in a single sentence when the Lord says, “The whole land shall be a desolation; yet I will not make a full end.” Even at the brink of disaster, there seems to be a bit of a breathing space, no matter how small or fragile.

And in *The Road*, novelist Cormac McCarthy likewise pulls back from total despair. In William Kennedy’s words, he “changes the odds to favor the man and boy, who for a decade have survived death by fire and ice...”<sup>14</sup> Beneath the harshness of a world where there seems to be no hope, McCarthy is saying that God is not yet through with creation.

Can it be possible that a handful of people, even the impossibly small number of 2, can make a difference?

Patrick Miller, Professor of Old Testament Theology at Princeton Seminary, says, “The search for the one person whose just and faithful actions will elicit God’s pardon of Jerusalem ... is part of a major thread that runs through the Scriptures: the one for the many, the innocent one who saves the guilty. There are various ways in which this theme is played out...God’s openness to holding back judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah if even a few righteous or innocent ones could be found. Even earlier, the righteous and blameless Noah does not save the rest of corrupt humanity, but God’s protection of him becomes the start of a new humanity. The clearest manifestation of this theme in the Old Testament is, of course, the servant of the Lord who suffers, despite his innocence, for the sins of the many and whose life and death are a successful intercession for the guilty. Finally, the pardon of the many through the one righteous person is central to the meaning of the death of Jesus in the New Testament. As Jeremiah and other Old Testament witnesses testify, that move on God’s part should not surprise us. It is one example of the many ways in which the Lord of Israel is ‘bent’ toward that community of creatures whom God brought into being and has loved throughout the ages. The story of judgment is always capable of being

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<sup>14</sup> Kennedy, *Ibid.*

blown open, of being nullified by the faithfulness and innocence and justice of a single person.”<sup>15</sup>

Last October, Michelle Gardner-Quinn, a student at the University of Vermont, wrote an essay for her environmental studies class at the University of Vermont. Two days after completing it, she was abducted and murdered in a random crime. Somehow the words she wrote did not disappear. Somehow the affirmation of faith by a dedicated young woman has survived and they were read on National Public Radio in early August by Cecilia Danks, the professor who made the assignment.

Michelle Gardner-Quinn wrote: “I believe in upholding reverence for all life. I believe that humanity has a responsibility to the Earth and to the life that we share our experience with. As a child, I found joy digging in the dirt, examining the miracle of life. Everything creepy-crawly was fascinating to me, and I spent countless hours in my backyard exploring what wonders lay beneath. Although some people might be repulsed by this notion, these creatures did not represent slimy pests to me. Rather, such experiences in the natural world taught me about the diversity of life that could be found in any microcosm...

“I believe that my connection to all life forms prevents me from sitting back and watching this catastrophe. I believe that we should understand our place in our regional ecosystems and communities, as well as pledge our allegiance to the Earth as a whole. I believe that all creatures, whether they are found in my backyard or halfway around the globe, should not suffer as a result of human greed. The reality of climate change is here and now; it is the environmental battle of our generation and generations to come. In honor of all life, I am dedicating myself to preventing this worldwide ecological crisis.”<sup>16</sup>

Well, she only lived 2 days after writing these words. But I heard them and now you have, too.

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<sup>15</sup> Patrick D. Miller, “The Book of Jeremiah: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. VI* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 630. Dr. Miller is Professor of Old Testament Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary in Princeton, New Jersey.

<sup>16</sup> Michelle Gardner-Quinn, “A Reverence for Life,” *Weekend Edition Sunday*, National Public Radio, August 5, 2007, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=12444698>.

Without sharing the resolution of Cormac McCarthy's powerful novel, *The Road*, I can tell you that he does not leave the reader hopeless. And the unnamed narrator says this: "Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery."<sup>17</sup>

What's left to do this morning? Lots of confession, certainly, over the fragile state of this glorious creation God has placed in our hands. But also more than a few words of thanksgiving that we are still here, against all the odds. If Jeremiah's vision has any power for us it is to wake us up, to disturb us, to rouse us, perhaps there's still time to renew that partnership with the Creator. After all, there's humming the ancient mysteries.

[Pastor's Note: As the sermon ends, I pick up the half-deflated earth and with all the enthusiasm and intentionality I can muster pump several big burst of air back into the earth. A simple act of commitment.]

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>17</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Vintage International / Random House, 2006), 286.