The Voice of the Earth

In today’s readings we are presented several times with the familiar shepherd motif. The text from Revelation declares that the “lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd” and the gospel reading is about belonging to God, as sheep belong to a shepherd. Perhaps nowhere is this metaphor more tenderly presented than in beloved Psalm 23, which assures us that God the shepherd guides, leads and restores us, even in the darkest of times.

The Bible often refers to political and religious leaders as shepherds. In the Old Testament in particular, bad leaders are portrayed as bad shepherds, while God and the future Messiah are described as good shepherds. Furthermore, it is the voice of these shepherds that lets people know their trustworthiness. Jesus tells us that his sheep will listen to and know his voice. Jesus explains to a group of Pharisees that, “the sheep follow him [the Good Shepherd] because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from them because they do not know the voice of strangers.”

Whose voice is so familiar that you trust? And what is that voice telling you? Today it is perhaps harder than ever to distinguish between voices of the good and the bad shepherds, simply due to the large number of loud, public voices competing for our attention and our loyalty. And furthermore, these voices that attempt to shepherd us through confusing paths often contradict one another. It can indeed be quite
challenging to discern the voice of a trusted guide out of a cacophony of facts, pseudo-facts, speculations, opinions and falsehoods that bombard us every day.

This Easter season we are focusing on Creation Care and there is yet another voice to consider here. This voice is constantly speaking but seldom heard. It is the voice of the earth, and it is groaning. Friday April 22, is Earth Day – the 46rd Earth Day since its beginning in 1970. On this day we honor creation and recognize its groaning. In one sense it is strange that we devote just a single day per year to reflect upon our home – the tapestry of life that allows us to breathe, eat and function. One day only to praise and marvel at the complexity and splendor of life on this earth, and one day only to mourn and repent what we now recognize as the large-scale deterioration of every single system that supports life on this earth, while the other 364 days of the year we condone business as usual in un-creating these complex life systems that God has placed on this earth. I hate to say it but it is true, backed by many knowledgeable scientists that we do indeed walk through a valley in the shadow of death.

The created world is a revelation of God’s power and gracious presence. It is like a beautiful table that God has prepared before us. It is green pastures and still waters, but is also a finely tuned atmosphere and complex network of biodiversity; it is interrelated earth systems that allow life to flourish. This sacred quality of creation demands sharing and moderation, these are part of the remedies for our excessive consumption and waste that end up harming the poor most of all. Rich countries contribute most to changes in Earth’s climate, resulting in catastrophic events like
droughts and superstorms, whose victims are the poorest and most vulnerable, largely in Africa and parts of Asia.

Serving as a good steward of creation means accepting these painful truths, hearing the groaning voices. In the gospel reading today, Jesus says, “I have told you and you do not believe.” Perhaps he was exasperated as he said this, much as today’s many climate scientists, scholars, community and faith leaders are with us. “I have told you – and you do not believe.”

Are we not called, not just to believe, not just to honor creation and hear its groaning, but to act in response. In the face of all of this we might respond by saying I am only one person – what difference can I make? But the truth is that we are never just one, we are never alone. And we must act, alongside our brothers and sisters and the whole church community, because God calls us to be engaged, fruitful humans on this earth.

Where do we begin to act in the face of a seemingly insurmountable crisis? Can we see ourselves in the position of those in Revelation, who will hear the elders explaining that “these are the ones who have come out of the great ordeal”? 

The reading from Acts offers guidance. In this reading, Peter is summoned to a seemingly insurmountable crisis situation: In the town of Joppa, Tabatha, a devoted discipline, has just died. First Peter knelt down and prayed. Fruitful, grounded action begins with prayer. Next, Peter told Tabatha to “get up.”
Then Peter “gave her his hand and helped her up.” Both giving and accepting encouragement are crucial in a long and difficult process to effect change. Finally, Peter “showed her to be alive,” demonstrating to all who were gathered there the good work that had occurred.

And so, as we reflect this day on God’s creation around us and the work that lies before us, we know that in this task we are not alone. We know that God walks with us, that the incarnate Christ joins the earth in groaning, and that there is a way out of this dark valley if we can allow ourselves to be led by the trustworthy voice of the Good Shepherd.

May we be equipped to distinguish and heed this voice, one that guides, cajoles, urges us to follow the paths of goodness and mercy. May we recognize the goodness of the earth’s complex, beautiful systems and feel mercy for those who suffer disproportionately from the effects of environmental degradation. And may we have ears to hear the voice of the earth, one that has been speaking all along and desperately needs our attention.