

“LISTEN. WHAT IS GOD SAYING RIGHT NOW?”

Job 12:1-11

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April 26, 2020 | Earth Day Celebration

My family laughs at me for saying what we've all heard so often among our leaders and science experts... that this is an unprecedented time. It IS an unprecedented time. In our generation, many of us have not seen life come to a halt to such a degree for reasons due to health... the playing field has been evened out. This virus knows no racial, socioeconomic or faith lines... although some populations are more at risk and are affected more than others.

All of our lives have been interrupted... with many of us kicking and screaming. Being told to stay home, not to work or go to school or do anything beyond our personal needs, has been excruciating for some of us... of course, there is good reason. We are staying home to halt the spread of the virus and to protect those who are vulnerable in our families and our communities — that is, if we have the privilege of staying home. Many thanks to our health care workers and workers in essential businesses who are keeping us fed and protected. At this time, we see, perhaps more than ever before, what we do individually really DOES affect our neighbors. **And what we do – and don't do – affects our earth as well.**

Some interesting data have been emerging over this time. As much of life has come to a halt... as the industrial pumps have stopped, as cars and airplanes have been grounded... there has been less air, water and noise pollution... and the earth... has been breathing a sigh of relief... (a big sigh).

An unexpected gift of this time has been... that our beloved Earth has gotten some much needed sabbath rest.

And the result? Countries which have been under the cloud of pollution for ages are actually clearing... Major cities, such as New Delhi, Seoul, Wuhan and Mumbai, that suffer from the world's worst air pollution, have seen reductions of deadly particulate matter by up to 60% from the previous year, during a three-week lockdown period. Los Angeles saw its longest stretch of clean air on record, over 18 days from March 7 to 28. That period could have significant affects since according to the WHO, air pollution accounts for over 7 million deaths worldwide each year. At least, it serves as a wake-up call... that what we do to our environment affects others.

There was a story out this week about a 93-year old man in Italy who had recovered from COVID-19. Upon his departure from the hospital, the man was asked to pay the cost of the respirator for a day and reportedly the man began to cry. The doctor advised him not to cry over the bill. What he said, made all the doctors cry.

The man said, "I do not cry for the money I have to pay, because I can afford all this. I cry because I've been breathing God's air for 93 years, but I never paid for it. It takes 500 euros to use the respirator in the hospital for a day. Do you know how much I owe God? I have never thanked God for this before."

Today, we thank God for the air we breathe.

Our passage from Job comes in the midst of back-and-forth between Job and some of his pious friends. At this point in the story, Job has experienced great loss and suffering. Job had been a man of great means. He had land, a huge amount of livestock, a large family, whom he loved, and he was devout in his faith... he was even considered blameless...

then, out of the blue, disaster struck. He lost everything... his family died, he lost his land, his livestock... signifying his wealth, and then he lost his health... but somehow, he never lost his faith.

Sure... Job was devastated... and understandably so. He struggles with God. Why has this all happened, he wonders? Then his three pious friends come, and one by one, they try and explain what's happening to him... and fail miserably, even suggesting that this is happening because of something Job DID. The reality is... There was no reason for this to happen. Job was not being punished; God did not do this TO him...

Our passage comes after one friend offers yet more platitudes in the face of his fear and powerlessness... he didn't have answers to the horrors his friend was facing, and so he tried to blame Job...

To which Job responds, somewhat sarcastically, but with a call to go deeper... ask the animals and they will teach you; the birds of the air and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth and they will teach you; who among the hand of the Lord has done this? In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being.

So, what does the Earth have to tell us in THIS time? What can it teach us, as so much has been stripped away? Making us feel vulnerable and powerless.

Think of some magnificent scene in nature you have personally witnessed. Where was it? Was it in the mountains or at the seaside? Was it in a forest or desert? Was it in this country or another? What was it about that experience that called you beyond yourself...?

Poet Wendell Berry says this: The Divine communicates to us primarily through the language of the natural world. Not to hear the natural world is not to hear the divine.

On my recent walks and runs I have chosen to listen to the sounds of the earth... to put the music away, even if it does help motivate me to chug along up the hills. I've been particularly drawn to the trees along the way...

Peter Wohlleben, German forester and author of *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel and How they Communicate* was interviewed two years ago for an article in the *Smithsonian Magazine* by Journalist Richard Grant.

Wohlleben takes Grant on a tour of some of his friends... in the forest, the trees.

Grant says, "He points up at their skeletal winter crowns, which appear careful not to encroach into each other's space."

"These two are old friends," Wohlleben says. "They are very considerate in sharing the sunlight, and their root systems are closely connected. In cases like this, when one dies, the other usually dies soon afterward, because they are dependent on each other."

Grant says, "For young saplings in a deeply shaded part of the forest, the network is literally a lifeline. Lacking the sunlight to photosynthesize, they survive because big trees, including their parents, pump sugar into their roots through the network. Wohlleben likes to say that mother trees "suckle their young," which both stretches a metaphor and gets the point across vividly...

Once, he came across a gigantic beech stump in this forest, four or five feet across. The tree was felled 400 or 500 years ago, but scraping away the surface with his penknife, Wohlleben found something astonishing: the stump was still green with chlorophyll. There was only one explanation. The surrounding beeches were

keeping it alive, by pumping sugar to it through the network. Quoting Walleben he says, “When beeches do this, they remind me of elephants,” he says. “They are reluctant to abandon their dead, especially when it’s a big, old, revered matriarch.”

Do Trees Talk to Each Other? The *Smithsonian Magazine* March 2018

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/the-whispering-trees-180968084/>

In this time of coronavirus, one of the consequential “gifts” has been that we have been given the time to let the earth breathe again... and we have been given a “beat” to stop and to listen. What are you hearing? What is the earth saying to you as your hurried pace has slowed for some and sped up for others?

Wendell Berry answers the question this way:

*What does the Earth desire? I will put it in a few short sentences...
To be admired in her loveliness, To be tasted in her delicious fruits;
to be listened to in her teaching; to be endured in the severity of her
discipline; to be cared for as a maternal source from whence we
come; a destiny to which we return. It’s very simple.*

Alleluia! Amen...