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“Crossing Boundaries and Bound Together”

Psalm 148

The psalm we just heard speaks in rapturous language about love and gratitude. These are closely connected to the boundaries we experience them with. Many of us in our work and in our life strive to erect boundaries so that we can live more intentionally and fully. A friend of mine once said, “boundaries are something that can be stressful to erect, but so much more stressful to live without.” Boundaries allow us to live in ways that nourish us.

Looking at this psalm, I was drawn to the language of bounds in verse 6. The Hebrew captures a sense of “statutes that one shall not pass.” Nan Merrill interprets this as “Setting the pattern of creation”. In its time, this referred to the all-encompassing and meant-to-be-beautiful law of the people Israel—that humans and earth and all realms of creation are bound in covenantal relationship. As with many parts of our lives today, boundaries existed in their worldview so that one could have fuller life.

To my ear these days, I hear in this the limits we are hitting in our human-environmental ecosystem. Our planet functions with an incredibly precise network of interconnections. This network is resilient and always changing, but there are, as the psalmist says, some bounds one cannot pass.

We have exceeded the bounds God has set in how creation functions. A closely interconnected web has been cast, and when one piece shifts, others unravel.

Look at our oceans. They regulate so much of life on our planet, whether we are near them or not.

I remember a environmental studies class in college where we learned about the large effects that small changes can have on sensitive creatures like shell-builders. As Carbon dioxide increases and is absorbed into the oceans, our acidifying oceans wreak havoc on the shells of bottom-of-the chain animals like shellfish and zooplankton, whose Calcium Carbonate based shells degrade in the more acid water. This can trigger a collapse up from the creatures who depend on these organisms for food, all the way up to human economies that depend on fisheries. These changes represent a thread that, as it begins to unravel, others around it do too. All life functions more or less together, on macro levels. And with small shifts come great consequences.

Our planet as we have come to know it is changing. In a drastic change from much of history, there is now a NW passage! That strait that explorers long searched for and died looking for now, due to melting polar ice, exists. Explorers for centuries sought to shave that 4000 or so miles of travel from Europe to Asia, and now cruise ships go through it. Small towns that used to be, if not landlocked, at least icelocked, are now ports of call for cruise ships. The world is different.

A recent NYT article described a new dark age we may be entering in the next 100 years. For centuries, humans have made observations about how seasons, land, and animal migration is patterned. This knowledge is passed along, accumulated, and improves human living on earth. But we’re losing that reliability.

The author William B. Gail, founder of the Global Weather Corporation, writes, “IMAGINE a future in which humanity’s accumulated wisdom about Earth — our vast experience with weather trends, fish spawning and migration patterns, plant pollination and much more — turns increasingly obsolete. As each decade passes, knowledge of Earth’s past becomes progressively less effective as a guide to the future. Civilization enters a dark age in its practical understanding of our planet.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Weather patterns are different, and extreme.

This change is dangerous and deadly, especially for those most vulnerable creatures, lands, and people first. They are the ones who will feel these effects the most.

And we are told that, even if we were to halt carbon emissions completely, the trajectory is set for a substantial global climate shift, changing most systems of our world, ecological or social, along with it.

It’s easy to feel overwhelmed. And there is much we are not in control of.

We can burn out, or get mired in cynicism in trying to change things we just can't. But the energy and hope is in where we find courage and conviction to change the things we can.

In the tradition of the serenity prayer, we are called to find serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

How can we accept, perhaps with some appropriate grieving, what can’t we change? and what courage can we find to change what we can?

This weekend at Earth Day events, I was heartened by the people who are each contributing something—whether it is shifting consumption habits, advocating at a legislative level, or offering perspectives that encourage others to keep going. And even if we feel like a drop in the bucket of a huge issue, most important shifts in history have happened because of a vocal minority working for change.

Rabbinical wisdom reminds us that, even when we may feel overwhelmed with the enormity of grief in the world, there are small things—do justly. Walk humbly on this earth. Love with mercy. We are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are we free to abandon it.

As the psalm reminds us, we are but one part of creation. And all of creation, cedars and bugs and rivers and humans, are all bound up in life together. We rise and fall together. We must take the boundaries of our world seriously, so that we can continue to be bound together in fullness of life.

And when we can be bound together, we can live out the fullness of our reverence and gratitude for the whole earth. The psalm calls all cedars, wild animals, domestic animals, massive mountains and raging waters, roaring fires and soaring eagles along with people, exalted and humble, to praise God. Besides poetic license, can these animals, these elements, praise God?

By letting them be naturally themselves. I think of the way the White Salmon River has been re-wilded in the last few years, removing the dam and literally, allowing it to sing—allowing it to praise, and be its natural self. Our mountains can’t mountain when their sheerness, their promontory that makes them so much mountain, is stripped away. Our prairies, grassy oceans who sequester the soil that feeds so many, cannot prairie when we blow up their depths to release fuel. One of my favorite quotes from the whole of the Christian tradition comes from St. Iraneaus, who said in the second century, that “the glory of God is the human being fully alive.” So too, I believe, is the glory of God in rivers, mountains, prairies, being full of the glory of God when they can most fully be alive, as they are.

At its best, the natural world reflects gratitude. Even the silent mountain shouts glory by being naturally all that it is. When we are all, human and plankton and river alike, Bound together and boundaried, all may fully live. When we are grateful and care for the earth, the world and her rivers, mountains, creatures, give gratitude right back.

1. Gail, William B. “A New Dark Age Looms.” http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/19/opinion/a-new-dark-age-looms.html [↑](#footnote-ref-1)