

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
“Alive in the Spirit of God: Creation Renovation”  
The Rev. Dr. John Judson  
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Ezekiel 47:1-12; Revelation 22:1-7

They had trashed it. That was the only way to describe what I saw when I walked into the church manse. For those of you unfamiliar with the term, the manse is the church owned home in which the pastor lived. In times gone by most churches had manses because they could not afford to pay a pastor enough to own a home. My former congregation had a manse and it was located at the edge of the church parking lot. Cindy and I lived there twice, but when we finally were able to afford a home of our own, the manse sat empty...until one of our members asked if his son, daughter-in-law and grand-children could live there. The son was leaving the navy after more than ten years and was looking for a place to stay. The session was more than happy to let them live in the house. After maybe a year or so, they told us there was a problem with the disposal, something I could fix. So I went over to the house, walked in and was stunned. The carpets had become a place of their dogs to soil. The wood corners of the doorframes had been eaten away. The children had painted on the walls with colored glue. And it looked as if it had never been cleaned. They had trashed the house, and now we had to decide if it was worth repairing. It was a heart-breaking moment.

This past week I have wondered if this is how God felt after Charlottesville? And actually not only about Charlottesville, but after the last several thousand years. God must daily look at creation and say, “They have trashed it. They have taken my marvelous creation and trashed it.” We have trashed it with racism, nationalism, tribalism, sexism, anti-Semitism and all the other isms. We have trashed it by hating and demeaning those who are different; who have different sexual orientations, different religious affiliations, different languages and different cultures. We have trashed it by enslaving other human beings, not only in the past but today. We have trashed it by refusing to ensure that all people have access to good education, clean water and a roof over their heads. We have trashed it by polluting our air and water. We have trashed it with trash...including that floating trash pile in the Pacific larger than the state of Texas. We must wonder if God is heart-broken. We must wonder if God has given up on us and on this creation. Fortunately, while the answer to the first question is, God is broken hearted, the answer to the second is that God has never given up on us. We know this because of our two scriptures this morning.

We know God has not given up on creation because the background for both stories remind us that God is ever present, acting as a general contractor on God’s creation renovation project. The background of the Ezekiel creation renovation project is that God’s glory has returned to Jerusalem. One of the great images of Ezekiel is that the glory of God, meaning the presence of God, traveled with the people into exile in Babylon. Even though the Temple was destroyed and their nation devastated because the people had trashed it, God did not leave them. God went with them and brought them back. The marvelous images of a new creation are possible because of God’s presence. In the same way, the background of the Revelation story is that Jesus has returned and brought with him a renewed heaven and earth. The story in fact makes reference to this when it speaks of throne of God and of the lamb being present in the midst of the people. We know God has not given up because God is ever present and at work in the world.

We know God has not given up because God has given us a blueprint on what this renovated creation is going to look like; a description we find in these two stories. The first part of the blueprint is that creation will be a place of peace. Each of them speak of healing. In Ezekiel it is personal healing; healing from pain, disease and death. It is a reversal of the death that had come from Adam and Eve's disobedience in the garden. In Revelation this concept has been expanded to include the healing of the nations. This refers to universal peace, in which there is no more war or conflict. The second part of this blueprint has to do with all people having enough; enough to eat and enough to drink. Ezekiel offers us an image of clean water flowing, fishing nets full, fruit hanging from trees and marshes that produce salt for all. It is a world of abundance that is accessible to all.

We know God has not given up because God promises that the work will be completed. This is probably for many of us the most difficult aspect of these stories. It may be the most difficult because there are moments when this creation appears to be coming apart more than it is being put together. When the KKK and white supremacists once again march in our cities. When we are once again faced with the possibility of nuclear war. When we are faced once again with mass migrations of people fleeing war and starvation. When we are faced with these recurring reminders of the fallenness of creation we wonder if it will ever end. We may feel like members of my former congregation who in the middle of their home renovation had the house flooded. They wondered if it would ever be done. But both of our stories are promises that there will be an end. They are promises that God's blueprint will become a reality. So, the question is, what does this mean for us?

First it means that we are to be a people of hope. In the face of hopelessness and despair, we are to be those who believe that God is indeed present and at work in the world. We are to be those who, both individually and collectively, do not give up even in the face of what appear to be recurring and intractable problems. We are to be in fact, a community of hope into which people can arrive in fear and leave in courage. We are, once again, to be Pollyannas who have a seemingly unreasonable optimism in the face of overwhelming odds. Second, we are to continue our work as God's subcontractors. For whatever reason, God has chosen to do most of this restoration work through us. Just as a general contractor organizes and hires sub-contractors, God has called us to be those on the ground tearing down the old death-dealing ways of the world and installing the new life-giving ways.

Now, a word about Charlottesville. For many people, what happened there seemed to have come out of the blue. It shocked us. But it shouldn't have. In the last six months there are have been more than one-thousand, yes one thousand incidents of racial and anti-Semitic intimidation reported in the United States. Some even at Seaholm high school. Let's be clear this morning that racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, and intolerance have always been with us. They have not been wished or washed away. Like wood rot, fed by the slow drip, drip, drip of fear which turns to hate, they can undermine the structure of nations, churches and communities. Our task as subcontractors is to peel away their veneer of acceptability and shine on them the light of the love of God in Jesus Christ. It is to proclaim to all that every human being is a child of God; beloved as those created in the image of God. It is to proclaim that we are all one human family, one community intended to live together in this new creation in which there is peace and enough. It is to never be afraid but to courageously speak the truth of this love, because my friends, only love conquers hate. Only love conquers prejudice. Only love conquers bigotry. It is to shine this love in our homes, in our places of work, and in our neighborhoods. Love is the light that the darkness cannot overcome.

My challenge to you this morning comes from the end of a letter to the Dr. Al Timm, the Executive Presbyter of the Presbytery of Detroit:

- To commit to be advocates for peace, justice, equality and the elimination of racial hate, prejudice and bigotry
- To educate my friends, family and community of faith to recognize hate and injustice and to work for justice and equality in America.
- To reach beyond the boundaries of comfort in ethnicity and race to strive together for the beloved community of harmony as preached by Jesus Christ.
- To challenge hate, injustice and inequality anytime, anyplace, and anywhere<sup>1</sup>.

So, I challenge you and me, to do this work of being subcontractors of the love of God in Jesus Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from Rev. Dr. Allen Timm, the Presbytery of Detroit August 17, 2017