

Scripture Summer School 2020

6. “The Earth Groans” Earth’s story in the Prophets

Romans 8:18-25

¹⁸ I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰ for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; ²³ and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

God’s Covenant with the Earth

Genesis 6:5-8

⁵ The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. ⁶ And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. ⁷ So the LORD said, ‘I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.’ ⁸ But Noah found favour in the sight of the LORD.

Genesis 8:20-22; 9:8-17

²⁰ Then Noah built an altar to the LORD, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt-offerings on the altar. ²¹ And when the LORD smelt the pleasing odour, the LORD said in his heart, ‘I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.

²² As long as the earth endures,
seedtime and harvest, cold and heat,
summer and winter, day and night,
shall not cease.’

...

⁹ ⁸ Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹ ‘As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, ¹⁰ and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. ¹¹ I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.’ ¹² God said, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: ¹³ I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴ When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵ I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶ When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.’ ¹⁷ God said to Noah, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.’

The Exile is also suffering and hope for Earth

Going into Exile: Jeremiah 4:19-31

My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain!
Oh, the walls of my heart!
My heart is beating wildly;
I cannot keep silent;

for I hear the sound of the trumpet,
the alarm of war.

²⁰ Disaster overtakes disaster,
the whole land is laid waste.

Suddenly my tents are destroyed,
my curtains in a moment.

²¹ How long must I see the standard,
and hear the sound of the trumpet?

²² 'For my people are foolish,
they do not know me;

they are stupid children,
they have no understanding.

They are skilled in doing evil,
but do not know how to do good.'

²³ I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void;
and to the heavens, and they had no light.

²⁴ I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking,
and all the hills moved to and fro.

²⁵ I looked, and lo, there was no one at all,
and all the birds of the air had fled.

²⁶ I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert,
and all its cities were laid in ruins
before the LORD, before his fierce anger.

²⁷ For thus says the LORD: The whole land shall be a desolation; yet I will not make a full end.

²⁸ Because of this the earth shall mourn,
and the heavens above grow black;
for I have spoken, I have purposed;
I have not relented nor will I turn back.

²⁹ At the noise of horseman and archer
every town takes to flight;
they enter thickets; they climb among rocks;
all the towns are forsaken,
and no one lives in them.

³⁰ And you, O desolate one,
what do you mean that you dress in crimson,
that you deck yourself with ornaments of gold,
that you enlarge your eyes with paint?

In vain you beautify yourself.
Your lovers despise you;
they seek your life.

³¹ For I heard a cry as of a woman in labour,
anguish as of one bringing forth her first child,
the cry of daughter Zion gasping for breath,
stretching out her hands,
'Woe is me! I am fainting before killers!'

In Exile: Isaiah 7:18-25

¹⁸ On that day the LORD will whistle for the fly that is at the sources of the streams of Egypt, and for the bee that is in the land of Assyria. ¹⁹ And they will all come and settle in the steep ravines, and in the clefts of the rocks, and on all the thorn bushes, and on all the pastures.

²⁰ On that day the Lord will shave with a razor hired beyond the River—with the king of Assyria—the head and the hair of the feet, and it will take off the beard as well.

²¹ On that day one will keep alive a young cow and two sheep, ²² and will eat curds because of the abundance of milk that they give; for everyone that is left in the land shall eat curds and honey.

²³ On that day every place where there used to be a thousand vines, worth a thousand shekels of silver, will become briers and thorns. ²⁴ With bow and arrows one will go there, for all the land will be briers and thorns; ²⁵ and as for all the hills that used to be hoed with a hoe, you will not go there for fear of briers and thorns; but they will become a place where cattle are let loose and where sheep tread

Coming out of Exile: Jeremiah 31:1, 27-37

At that time, says the Lord, I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people.

²⁷ The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. ²⁸ And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the Lord. ²⁹ In those days they shall no longer say:

‘The parents have eaten sour grapes,
and the children’s teeth are set on edge.’

³⁰ But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge.

³¹ The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³² It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. **33** But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. **34** No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord’, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

³⁵ Thus says the Lord,
who gives the sun for light by day
and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night,
who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar—
the Lord of hosts is his name:

³⁶ If this fixed order were ever to cease
from my presence, says the Lord,
then also the offspring of Israel would cease
to be a nation before me for ever.

³⁷ Thus says the Lord:
If the heavens above can be measured,
and the foundations of the earth below can be explored,
then I will reject all the offspring of Israel
because of all they have done,
says the Lord.

God’s solidarity with the covenant partner

Isaiah 42:13-16

The LORD goes forth like a soldier,
like a warrior he stirs up his fury;
he cries out, he shouts aloud,

he shows himself mighty against his foes.

¹⁴ For a long time I have held my peace,
I have kept still and restrained myself;
now I will cry out like a woman in labour,
I will gasp and pant.

¹⁵ I will lay waste mountains and hills,
and dry up all their herbage;
I will turn the rivers into islands,
and dry up the pools.

¹⁶ I will lead the blind
by a road they do not know,
by paths they have not known
I will guide them.
I will turn the darkness before them into light,
the rough places into level ground.
These are the things I will do,
and I will not forsake them.

Questions to think about:

1. How are our own story and Earth's story interwoven?
2. Is the image of childbirth a helpful one for reflecting on how newness emerges?

A final reflection:

1. What stays with you from our 6 session journey with the Hebrew Prophets that could impact on your own faith journey into the future?
2. What wisdom do the prophets' offer us for living now?