

Paying attention to Pharaoh's dream

Genesis 41:14-40, 45b

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Earlier this week I stopped on the sidewalk to watch a robin building her nest in a boulevard tree. Little by little, she gathered small twigs, bits of dried grass, and shreds of plastic and carried them in her beak up to a little fork in the branches of a maple tree. There she mashed them into place before dropping down to the ground to gather more stuff. Her building materials were unremarkable, her environmental impact negligible. Blessed are the birds. They neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, but God provides them with what they need. Neither do they soil their own nests.

Our lives, however, are more complicated.

In his book *Plan B 3.0*, Lester Brown of the Earth Policy Institute walks us through both the alarming and the hopeful in describing what he calls a plan of “mobilizing to save civilization.”¹ One thing he does is to draw a parallel between Enron and larger social and political systems. In early 2001, Enron was seen as one of the most valuable corporations in the country. Later that year when people started to examine Enron's books more closely, it was discovered that many costs weren't being taken into account. When all of that fully came to light, Enron collapsed. Brown warns us of ecological costs that we're not factoring into calculations of the way we live.

Take gas, for example, now rising well past \$3 a gallon and headed for 4. If we were to calculate the price based on more than what it takes to find, pump, and extract the oil, refine it and get it to the pump—if we were also to factor in such things as climate change, tax subsidies to the oil industry, the military costs of protecting access to oil in the Middle East, health care costs for respiratory diseases caused by breathing polluted air—we'd have to add another \$12 or so to the price. Only then—at \$15 to \$16 a gallon—would we be paying a price that reflects its cost. And just because we're not paying it at the pump doesn't mean those costs go away.

Most of us have either seen or heard a lot about the film *An Inconvenient Truth*. One of the most memorable parts of that film was its portrayal of melting glaciers and the vanishing snows of Kilimanjaro. *Plan B 3.0* takes that a step farther. The problem is not only rising seas and the loss of cultural landmarks. Himalayan glaciers that feed the rivers that irrigate the rice and wheat fields of India and China are also melting at an alarming rate. When those glaciers are gone, where will the water come from to grow the crops that feed billions? Nothing happens in isolation.

Geographer Jared Diamond wrote in his book *Collapse* about the decline and eventual failure of civilizations as different as the ancient Sumerians and the Maya of what is now Guatemala.² He traces both collapses to environmental degradation. The Sumerians, in the Fertile Crescent of what is now Iraq, built their civilization in significant part on their irrigation system, which allowed a steadier production of food and the storing up of surpluses, building a more complex economy and

¹ Lester R. Brown, *Plan B 3.0*, Copyright © 2008 by Earth Policy Institute, p. 10. I draw on Brown's book in this sermon. There is a copy in the church library. Many of the details and statistics in this sermon are gleaned from Brown's book, which is extensively footnoted.

² Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. Brown references Diamond at several points in his own book.

freeing people for other kinds of work. But the Sumerians' highly advanced irrigation system also led to a rising water table and extensive evaporation, drawing salts up into the soil. The Sumerians tried to adjust by switching from growing wheat to barley, which is more salt-resistant. But salinization via evaporation continued, and eventually the topsoil was so salty that it could not produce what the Sumerians needed. Food insecurity leads to a wide range of social problems. Eventually the civilization collapsed like the productivity of the land. An archaeologist has written of the area that was ancient Sumer: "Tangled dunes, long disused canal levees, and the rubble-strewn mounds of former settlement contribute only low, featureless relief. Vegetation is sparse, and in many areas it is wholly absent... Yet at one time, here lay the core, the heartland, the oldest urban, literate civilization in the world."³

The collapse of the Mayan empire has puzzled historians through the ages. More and more are seeing deforestation and all the problems that brought on as a key factors in the Mayas' decline.

We've heard so often that the United States is the world's biggest consumer. It's not something we're proud of exactly. But there's another problem here: It's not completely true anymore. China consumes more grain, more meat, more coal and steel than we do, though we still burn more oil. And with rising standards of living in China, per capita consumption of all these things is on the rise. It's estimated that if the Chinese follow our example in relying on the automobile, by 2030 they'll have to have built enough roads to pave over as much of their country as they now plant in rice. Their demand for oil will outstrip current levels of oil production, which may have already peaked. Yes, there was news about a huge oilfield under North Dakota and Saskatchewan the other day, but continued reliance on oil with all its destructive side effects will only doom us. Our addiction to oil is a bigger problem than how much is left.

In the 1950s and '60s, a bushel of wheat and a barrel of oil had equivalent value on the world market. The price of a barrel of oil has risen dramatically since the '70s and shot up like a rocket recently. With oil prices so high, more and more corn is being dedicated to ethanol production. And this in a time when in seven of the past eight years, grain production has fallen short of consumption. Stores are falling. Corn prices nearly doubled and wheat prices tripled between late 2005 and late 2007. And in the midst of this food crisis, we are shifting more and more of our grain harvest from food to ethanol—doubling the amount from 2006 to 2008. People are starving and bread prices are rising, but at least we'll be able to drive to the store.

Back in the '70s, Jimmy Carter lectured against using food as a weapon—the issue was actually cutting grain sales to countries as a form of political leverage—but current policy surpasses that in short-sightedness.

How appropriate then that the story of Joseph and Pharaoh's dream was in part about fat and withered ears of grain. The teaching there was that God had warned Pharaoh in a dream about the food insecurity that was to come. If Pharaoh had not sought and found wisdom regarding the long view, people would have starved. The language wasn't there at the time, but nowadays we speak of failed states—countries that are under such stress from food insecurity and environmental degradation that they fail or collapse. But unlike with the Maya of a millennium ago, a collapsed nation does not fade away in isolation anymore. A failing state is a breeding ground for extremism and chaos, an incubator for terrorism, especially in a global political economy marked by such

³ Quoted in *Plan B 3.0*, p. 10.

inequality. Joseph and Pharaoh were wise enough to come up with a plan and implement it. God gave them a sign, the story says. Will we heed the signs that come to us, not in dreams, but in scientific study and political awareness?

From the beginning of our sacred story, in its genesis we find God giving humankind stewardship over the creation. Adam and Eve are called helpmates to God and to one another. To use contemporary language (language admittedly tinged with hubris), we are *co-creators* with God. We're not passive puppets in human history or the life of the planet. What we do shapes the world around us—deliberately and through unintended consequences. But if we raise our eyes and look ahead, we can see a lot of where we're headed.

After the terrible flooding in the Yangtze River valley in 1998—damages exceeded the value of China's rice harvest—China banned logging in the Yangtze River basin. In a far-sighted move, they calculated the economic value of a standing tree as three times its value in lumber. (Though that doesn't mean they didn't buy more lumber from other countries.) South Korea, once nearly barren, is now two-thirds wooded through reforestation. Flooding and erosion are largely restrained, and the environment is more stable. When the environment is stable, huge pressures are taken off the body politic.

In the midst of his stories of collapse, Jared Diamond also provides the exemplary tale of Icelanders recognizing that they were overgrazing their land. Farmers came together and determined how many sheep the land could support sustainably and limited the size of their flocks accordingly.

This was 600 years ago. Can we be as far-sighted in the 21st century?

Take time after worship today to visit the booths that the Environmental Action Team has set up in Pilgrim Hall. Join the First Church Energy Challenge. Calculate your carbon footprint and resolve to reduce it. Recalculate it a few months and a year from now to make sure you're moving in the right direction. Read Brown's or Diamond's book. Learn more about how environmental, political, economic, and military issues are intertwined. And demand that political campaigns and the media pay attention to issues larger than who wears a flag pin on their lapel. This is all becoming more urgent with each passing season.

We can each do something individually, but we also have to make fundamental changes as a society. We lag most of the rest of the world in owning up to our responsibility as stewards of God's creation. What we co-create makes a huge difference, not just to the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, but also to ecosystems and nations under stress. In an ecological age, pollution and instability are not stopped by national borders.

Earth Day falls in Easter season. Let us humbly strive to co-create with God and our neighbors a resurrection both of the earth and of vulnerable nations that we have come close to crucifying.

May God grant us wisdom, and may God grant us courage, for the facing of this hour.

For the time is now upon us.