



HEARING GOD'S VOICE WHEN CREATION IS GROANING

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DAVE BOOKLESS ASKS WHAT GOD IS SAYING TO US THROUGH CURRENT EVENTS

In January 2020, when many of us hadn't yet heard of COVID-19, I preached in a large London church on 'A 2020 Vision for Planet Earth'. I stated that 2020 will probably be a tipping point for human society. I didn't have a global pandemic directly in mind. Existing long before it, loomed even larger and more destructive waves: a global economy built on destroying the earth and stealing from future generations, climate chaos, and collapsing biodiversity, each more complex and demanding to tackle than any vaccine can fix.

So, what is God saying to us, through the scriptures, through the Spirit, and through discerning the signs of these times of such global upheaval?

Firstly, I believe God is saying 'You are not in control.' A friend, with a well-tested prophetic gift, discerned at the start of the pandemic that God is saying 'We (the human race) are not in control'. He explained: 'We are well educated, live comfortable lives and with the eradication of most diseases expect to live into our eighties. This has led to the development of the myth that we are in control, hiding the reality that life is fragile and depends on the grace of God.'

The myth of continual human progress; of constant growth in technology, lifestyles and ecological footprint has

been shattered by a tiny virus that no economist or politician predicted. In James 4:13-15 we read:

'Now listen, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.' Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.'

The Bible and coronavirus both challenge the myth of human superiority and control. God created us as contingent creatures in an interdependent ecological system. The Christian gospel is profoundly about relationships: with God, ourselves, each other and creation. Ecology is the study of relationships between organisms and their surroundings. In that sense, Christianity is a profoundly ecological faith. When we damage our core relationships, through selfishness and greed, we suffer consequences, because those relationships are deeply interconnected. Our relationship with God, our neighbours in Africa and Asia, and with the soil, rainforests and creatures God entrusted to our care, are all linked. Today, through the unleashing of multiple unforeseen consequences as we destroy the fabric upon which all life depends, we see ecological collapse: all our most important relationships breaking down. God is powerfully reminding us that we are not in control.

Secondly, God is calling us to lament for all that has been lost. Christian music is often dominated by 'praise and worship', but worship without lament is ultimately fake and dishonest, because it fails to connect our relationship with God with the disharmony in our other key relationships. Biblical worship, in over 30% of the Psalms, includes cries of lament, complaint and mourning.

- We should lament as we hear the figures of COVID-19 infections and deaths, particularly amongst the poor and vulnerable, and reflect on how human abuse of tropical forests and wildlife unleashed this pandemic upon us and, scientists warn, may lead to further ones.
- We should lament as we watch stunning nature documentaries delighting in the diversity and beauty of life on earth, but then hear that 70% of wildlife populations have disappeared since 1970. Iconic images of orangutans fleeing burning forests, polar bears on melting ice floes, and albatrosses, turtles and whales starved to death by ingesting plastic waste, should drive us to our knees before God, who created them all 'very good'.
- We should lament as we hear about unprecedented climate-related fires in California and Australia, hurricanes and typhoons in the Caribbean and the Philippines; droughts and floods in India and Africa; failed harvests in Russia and China, and the tens of



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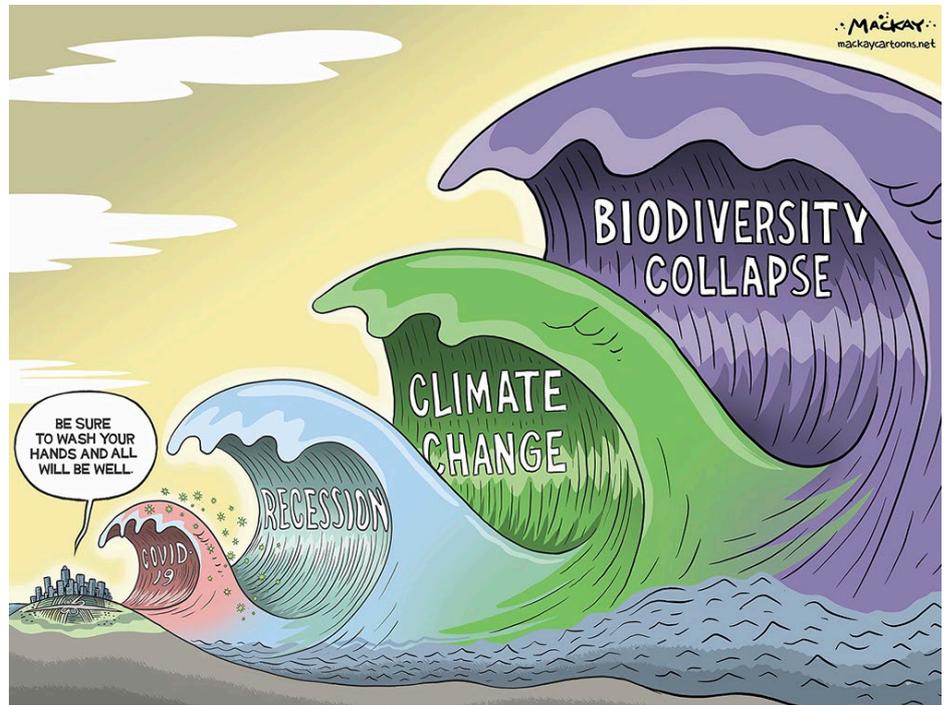


millions of climate refugees seeking safer homes.

Lament is not simply feeling upset or guilty. It is the cry of those who know they are part of the problem, to an almighty, all-loving God who alone can change our hearts. It is a groaning, from our deepest core, at the scale of problems we cannot solve. As we endure our era of ecological collapse let's turn to Romans 8, where lament links to a triple 'groaning'. In verse 22 'the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.' In the following verse we, as believers, 'groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.' Finally, in v.26, God's Holy Spirit 'himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.'

These three groanings are intertwined, through their shared Greek root (*stenazo*), and also because this groaning reveals the interconnection between creation, people and God's Spirit. *Stenazo* entails the feeling of being compressed and constricted, being pushed forward (as in a baby's birth), with either extreme distress or pleasure. Today we experience great pain and longing but, as the pain becomes more intense, so the hope of deliverance and future joy is ever closer.

As we lament so many deaths from COVID-19, so many avoidable extinctions, so much trauma from the climate crisis, so our hearts as Christians



are intimately tied both to creation's suffering, and to God's Spirit, who breathes life into all creation, suffers alongside as comforter and intercessor, and yet also brings hope.

That brings us to the third thing I believe God is saying: seek a renewed vision of the future. Amidst all the talk about green recovery and building back better, there's been little coherent vision. Surveys around the world are clear that most people want things to change. Our old economic structures have brought material comfort and technological progress, but have also caused the problems we are now facing. Ever since the industrial revolution, the myth of progress has dominated: unlimited resources for an unlimited population; exponential growth in lifestyles, waste, resource-use, without any worry for the future. We have acted as if the earth exists simply for humanity to use and abuse as we wish.

Today we need a new story or, in fact, to return to the old story the scriptures narrate. We need to expose the dangerous heresy that being made in God's image gives us licence to exploit, pollute and destroy the creation God declared very good. Instead, we need to recover the biblical vision summed up in two biblical terms: *shalom* and Kingdom of God. They describe the same vision in different ways.

Shalom is far more than the absence of conflict. It is about restored, harmonious

relationships in every dimension, reflecting the harmony within the Godhead. It includes the spiritual, societal, economic and ecological dimensions. The Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed and demonstrated is similarly Good News in every dimension: it includes freedom from sin and death, sickness and suffering, exclusion and oppression, decay and fruitlessness. *Shalom* and Kingdom of God are comprehensive and all-encompassing, bringing a vision of well-being for humans within a flourishing creation.

The passage I've turned to repeatedly is Jeremiah 29. Verse 11 has become the most-quoted Bible verse online: 'For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.' Its positive, hope-filled message is wonderful, but in isolation could be read individualistically and materialistically. Its context is crucial. These words were given to exiles in Babylon, when it seemed all God's promises had been broken and there was no future. Contextually, they follow vv. 5-7 which give the fullest description of *shalom* / the Kingdom of God to be found in scripture, and which sum up a Christian vision for a just and sustainable world:

'Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have

carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.'

Here is a Christian vision for the twenty-first century. It is urban, yet deeply connected to the soil and local food systems. It is about putting down roots where God has planted us, even in exile, and believing it's worth investing in the future by starting families. It seeks, and prays for, the 'peace and prosperity' of a pagan city that is now home. Peace and prosperity mean far more than a booming economy. Biblical prosperity is the *shalom* vision of restored relationships with God, myself, other people, and the created order. Only then can we truly thrive.

This vision thus includes everything from tackling injustice and racism, to church-planting and evangelism, to simpler, more joyful lifestyles and campaigning on climate change. What makes it radically different from a secular agenda is that it is always, biblically, focused on the Lordship of Jesus Christ. If we say that 'Jesus is Lord', the most basic Christian confession,

then all that his Lordship includes becomes part of our vocation and mission. Biodiversity loss matters, first and foremost because all things were made 'by and for' Jesus Christ, 'hold together' in him, and are included in the 'all things' covered by his death and resurrection (Colossians 1:15-20). Climate change is a missional concern both because it affects the 'least of these' (Matthew 25:40-45) most severely, and because it prevents creation declaring the praises of the one who made and sustains it.

If we recognise we are not in control, lament for all that we've lost, and seek renewed vision for God's future, I believe we could yet see an answer to creation's 'longing in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed' (Romans 8:19). God's answer to today's crises is not spiritual escapism or technological fixes. It is neither education nor economic renewal, though both are vital. It is, to repurpose 2 Chronicles 7:14, for God's people, who are called by his name, to repent, return and seek his face so that he can indeed renew the land and its creatures.

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