

“We Are The Blue Boat Home: A Sermon for Earth Day”

Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker

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In 1964, the folk activist Pete Seeger and Lorre Wyatt composed the classic: “Somos el Barco, We are the Boat.” In it, Seeger sings:

“We are the boat, we are the sea
I sail in you, you sail in me
The stream sings it to the river
The river sings it to the sea
The sea sings it to the boat
That carries you and me.”

The boat that carries you and me. Right now, it surely seems to be caught in a mighty storm. Pope Francis lifted up this metaphor in his Lenten homily to an empty, rainy St. Peter’s Square. In it, he preached: “We have realized that we are in the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented, but at the same time, important and needed. All of us called to row together, each of us in need of comforting the other.” Amid the pandemic, Francis said, “we have realized that we cannot go on thinking of ourselves, but only together we can do this.” A fine pastoral message and as much as I appreciate the Pope’s sentiment, we are not all “in the same boat,” really; even if we are all in the same storm.

The blogger, Daniela Ramic wisely points out: “Your boat could be shipwrecked and mine might not be. Or vice versa. For some, quarantine is optimal. A moment of reflection, of re-connection, easy, in flip flops, with a cocktail or coffee. “The great pause.” For others, this is a desperate financial & family crisis. For some that live alone; they are facing endless loneliness. While for others it is peace, rest & time with their loved ones.”

Some have experienced the near death of the virus; some have already lost someone from it, and some are not sure if their loved ones are going to make it. Others don’t believe this is a big deal and feel impervious. Some have faith in God and expect miracles. They show up at church, no mask or gloves, claiming to be “washed in the blood of Christ.” Others say God is not going to save us and the worst is yet to come.

So, friends, we are not in the same boat. We are going through a time when our perceptions and needs are completely different. Each of us will emerge, in our own way, from this storm. It is very important to see beyond what is seen at first glance. Not just looking, actually seeing. Not just seeing but also empathizing. So, may we be especially kind to one another, look beyond our secure bubbles (if we inhabit them) and honor each situation and individual experience.”

There is one ship, though, on which we are all passengers, regardless of circumstance...the Blue Boat of this planet. Are you familiar with the famous lifeboat ethics experiment? It asks us to decide who is worth saving when there are not enough lifeboats for everyone. How would we decide this, how have we decided this, when the passengers on the great blue boat include all living things— animals, trees, humans, rivers, glaciers? How do we decide? Who has the right to decide between a modern way of life that pollutes our planet or shared sacrifices that forestall human extinction?

Yes, we are the boat and we are the sea. And unless we make some impactful changes, it will be all species and living things that will go down together. However, I do believe that an awakening of awareness precipitated by the virus may still enable us to be a Blue Boat Home for this planet that we claim to cherish before it is too late.

As the lockdown drones on, we witness increasing attempts to portray the effects of the virus on nature as a pastoral—a return to some sort of pre-industrial Eden. No one can deny that we are enjoying cleaner air, clearer skies. Yet, as we amaze over the sound of birds chirping in Time Square, ooh and ahh over dolphins spotted in the Venice canals and coo with delight at mating pandas, the environment is not healed. The climate crisis is not reversed. Humans have not saved the day by staying home. Snookered again by Instagram.

The New York Times writer Amanda Hess calls this “The Rise of the Coronavirus Nature Genre.” She notes: “I don’t know if panda sex is truly facilitated by the averting of human eyes, but I’m clinging to the idea. Humanity has been shuttered indoors, but our media feeds are overgrowing with tales of a revived natural world.”

Hess drives home the point: “These fantasies are not about humans living in harmony with the natural world,” she writes. “The people who have decamped from cities to live in the countryside, cultivating sourdough starters and leading their broods on nature walks, are eyed with suspicion. The nature images that have captured our imaginations rest on total human exile. It is not a pastoral vision; it’s a post-apocalyptic one. A Los Angeles Times article on Yosemite without visitors described the landscape as an imagined future “where the artifacts of civilization remain, with fewer humans in the mix.”

“At a time when human life is at great risk,” she muses, “it’s a little disquieting that some of us are finding comfort by reveling in our own obsolescence. There is a tantalizingly dark escape in getting a glimpse of nature that we cannot otherwise see, because we’re always out there ruining the view. Most of the people sharing photos of domineering goats and marauding boars are not expressing a latent death wish. The appeal of the coronavirus nature genre is, in part, its subtle massaging of the human ego. It feeds the fantasy that centuries of environmental abuse can be reversed by an abbreviated period of sacrifice. With a few weeks’ supply of shelf-stable foods and unhinged Netflix docuseries, we can save the planet.”

Hess makes it clear enough; we are not living in an 18th c Jane Austen garden or the tree house of the Swiss Family Robinson. And like Hess, other keen observers are

already warning us about “the great gaslighting” that will emerge when we are released from lockdown and can resume some of our normal activities.

What is gaslighting? It is a psychological manipulation; a method of making us believe what we believe is false. “No, you didn’t see that. No, that’s not what happened. No, our way of life will not lead to human extinction. We are not to blame.” The great marketing machine that stokes the American consumer appetite will crank up to make us feel good about getting back to what was. We must resist.

In an essay for the blog, *Medium*, Julio Vincent Gambuto observes that “the curtain is wide open. At no other time, have we had the opportunity to see what would happen if the world simply stopped.” “And if you’re like me,” he continues, “you are scared, confused and heartbroken. And what a perfect time for Walmart to help you feel safe again.”

Gambuto warns us that what will be unleashed will be a gaslighting blitz to make us believe we did not experience what we experienced: “the air wasn’t really cleaner; those images were fake. The hospitals weren’t really a war zone, those stories were hyped. You didn’t see people in masks waiting in the rain to vote. Not in America. You didn’t see indifference or an utter failure of leadership. Fake news.”

Consider this: an image I saw depicting an activist at the White House holding up a banner emblazoned with this astute message: “The normal is the virus.” Gambuto implores us: “From one citizen to another, I beg of you: “Take a deep breath, ignore the deafening jingles, and think deeply about what you want to put back in your life, your world.”

The Pope chimes in here, too, preaching that “the storm exposes our vulnerability and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, our habits and priorities. And he admirably condemns the way humanity has treated the environment, taking it for granted and seeking greed rather than justice. “We carried on regardless, thinking we could stay healthy in a world that was sick.”

The Pope’s blunt declaration is all the more potent given the hubris in the Judeo-Christian tradition regarding our relationship to the natural world. Open the Hebrew Scripture, and in Genesis 1-1 through 25, Yahweh creates the heavens and the earth, and water and light and living creatures. It’s a lovely world, one in harmony with itself.

Then in Verse 26, he creates humankind and says: “Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

He goes on to encourage Adam to fill the earth and *subdue* it. He tells Adam – “look what I have given you to rule – every green plant, every beast, every bird, everything that has the breath of life.” Perhaps Yahweh might have stopped for a period of reflection at verse 25. For see how far we have drifted from a place of balance with Nature, from reverence and respect for the air, the bud, the river. Even before the virus, we’ve been in a kind of self-imposed quarantine from right relationship to the Earth.

Did you know that the word Quarantine is from a Venetian word meaning “40 days,” originating during the Black Death epidemic as the amount of time a ship’s crew needed to wait before going ashore? The term holds Biblical roots, as well, as a part of Mosaic law in Leviticus (although the term of quarantine was 7 days). From a religious perspective, that number 40 is a familiar and significant one - the duration of Lent and the time Jesus spent fasting in the desert. 40 years, the duration Moses and the Israelites wandered in punishment, making their way to the Promised Land.

We are in a desert right now...and it’s been just about 40 days since we began a stay-at-home period here in Flagstaff. What have we learned about our footprint on the planet, our role in the imbalance that contributed to this crisis, our place in the ecosystem during this bewildering time of wandering around our living rooms and meandering through the landscape of our values and hopes? Are we willing to make amends, to “repent”? A word that is very hard for liberals to hear, but apt, nevertheless.

What constitutes a Promised Land for our planet, our country, our green mountain town? To be clear, it’s not what we have been promised. It’s what *we will* promise to one another and to future generations. After the coronavirus abates, we need to rebuild wisely. We cannot pretend that the megadrought predicted for the Southwest will not happen. We cannot ignore the food crisis that looms, the irreversible devastation of deforestation or disappearing glaciers.

We can support a younger generation of activists like Greta Thunberg and youth-led grassroots groups like Zero Hour, who will inherit this mess; we can support candidates and legislation that tackle climate change and environmental standards so that a failure to do so does not threaten our planet for centuries (not days, mind you...centuries). Denis Hayes, who founded Earth Day 50 years ago, rallies us to the cause, writing this week in the Seattle Times: “Covid-19 robbed us of Earth Day this year, so let’s make Election day Earth Day. This November 3rd, vote for the Earth.”

Through the earth and our willingness to love it and learn from it, we become aware of our deep spiritual and energetic connection to all life, all beings. And how our action or inaction sets the great independent web atremble. As Walt Whitman reminds us: “We are Nature. We are what the atmosphere is, transparent, receptive, pervious, and impervious. We are snow, rain, cold, darkness, we are each product and influence of the globe.”

We can pledge our allegiance to something bigger than recycling, reusable shopping bags, or composting (all worthy practices, but not enough to prevent our extinction). The water is wide, but take heart - *We are the boat, we are the sea. I sail in you; you sail in me.* So, may we pledge allegiance to the Earth itself, feel the sea flowing in our veins, and row our beloved Blue Boat out of the tempest and home, together.

Just such an inspiring pledge was written by my colleague, Vern Barnet:

“I pledge allegiance to the earth and all life:

the fields and streams, the mountains and seas,
the forests and deserts, the air and soil,
all species and reserves, habitats and environments;
one world, one creation, one home, indivisible for all,
affected by pollution anywhere, depleted by any waste,
endangered by greedy consumption, degradation by faithlessness;
preserved by recycling, conservation, and reverence,
the great gift renewed for all generations to come.”

So, may it be. Blessed be. Blessed we. Blessed she, Ancient Mother.

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