

Cornel Barnett  
Redwoods Presbyterian Church  
Larkspur, California  
October 24, 2010

Genesis 1:9-13, 20-23; Romans 8:18-28  
“The Age of Inspiration and Action”

The title of my sermon is a renaming of the title of a short story by Margaret Atwood called, “The Age of Lead.”

Atwood’s age of lead goes back 150 years when tin cans were lined with lead. It was a new invention to make food last. Two ships, the *Terror* and the *Erubus*, were packed with these cans for their journey through the Northwest Passage to find an easier route from Europe to the Far East.

The journey was called the Franklin Expedition. Atwood’s book opens with the discovery about 20 years ago of the body of John Torrington, a seaman who fled his grounded ship in northern Canada. Everyone on and off the ship died in the passage.

Torrington was among the first to die on land since he was buried by his mates. His crew dug a hole in the permafrost which liquefied with exposure to the air and they placed Torrington’s body in the hole. The water quickly froze and encased his body. His exhumed body over a hundred years later looked like the day he died.

The question asked through the decades was: What would take the entire crew down in such short order? From samples of Torrington’s fingernails and hair, scientists discovered that the cause of death was lead poisoning. A host of other reasons had been posited but it remained a mystery until this investigation. Thus, “the age of lead.”

Atwood jumps forward to her day and catalogs numerous deaths of younger people from cancer, heart attack, AIDS, viral pneumonia; hepatitis and spinal meningitis.

She compares the Franklin Expedition deaths to these deaths: “It was as if they had been weakened by some mysterious agent, a thing like a colorless gas, scentless and invisible, so that any germ that happened along could invade their bodies, take them over.”

She turns to her protagonist in Toronto: “Jane began to notice news items of the kind she’d once skimmed over. Maple groves dying of acid rain, hormones in the beef, mercury in the fish, pesticides in the vegetables, poison sprayed on the fruit, God knows what in the drinking water. She subscribed to a bottled spring-water service and felt better for a few weeks, then read in the paper that it wouldn’t do her much good, because whatever it was had been seeping into everything. Each time you took a breath, you breathed some of it in.”

The book ends with this paragraph: "Increasingly the sidewalk that runs past her house (Jane's house) is cluttered with plastic drinking cups, crumpled soft-drink cans, used take-out plates. She picks them up, clears them away, but they appear again overnight, like a trail left by an army on the march or by the fleeing residents of a city under bombardment, discarding the objects that were once thought essential but are now too heavy to carry."

This was 20 years ago. It's a far cry from the sublime expression of creation in the Hebrew Bible read by Suellen where over and over God's amazing creation, the sea, earth and sky, is described as good and when a human being is made it is very good.

Something happened through the years and even in Paul's letter to the Romans we read: "...creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay... We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now."

Scripture often gives one a sense that God does the damage in order to reveal God's glory. It's not so. It's a way of coming to grips with what Atwood describes as damage done by that "mysterious agent, a thing like a colorless gas, scentless and invisible." It's Paul's way of highlighting the decay as he sees it.

There's a kind of heaviness in Paul's description of creation in his day and heaviness in Atwood's description of 150 years ago and the environmental effects of her day. Atwood ends in hopelessness.

We don't go there as Christians. We acclaim with God that God's creation is good and we open our eyes to see what has happened to this good creation. Atwood's prophetic writings serve us well in this respect and we feel with her. We carry the load and claim the good news of the gospel which offers an alternative.

We see the good news in Paul. I purposefully left out some words when I just quoted him. Listen now to the full text, listen to his positive affirmations; the good that overcomes the bad: "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 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.

"We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; 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.

"For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

“Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

“We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God’s purpose.”

Paul communicates the bad but sprinkles it all over with the good. There’s no age of lead with him. God is in the rescue plan. Paul’s words are inspiring and energizing and that’s why we can call his age – Paul’s Christianity – the age of inspiration and action. Every evil is out-stated with the good given us in Christ and we are encouraged to hope, pray, love and serve.

This is where stewardship comes in. In the past couple of years we have been amazing stewards of this beautiful facility that God has given us. We have refurbished the nursery, redone the landscape, placed a new roof on the sanctuary, put up a new sign, had work parties, cleared and cleaned rooms and brought in a real estate broker to evaluate our rooms to increase our revenue which needs increasing.

God is smiling on us for this superb stewardship of our space. We are good stewards in other ways: all boards and committees are committed and active and requests will go out for others to answer the call to serve on our boards. I trust that we will take up the challenge because God has amazing things in store for this church.

Further, our rooms and meetings, our education and communal gatherings, our boards and committees serve the all-important purpose to be about God’s good work to transform ourselves and others and to make this world a better place. As a church, as people of God, we cast aside burdens and affirm our strong lives in Christ to free all creation from bondage by engagements in human and earth saving endeavors.

Like Paul, ours is the age of inspiration and action and we have many allies out there like those at the amazing Bioneers Conference in San Rafael last weekend which John Girton, Suellen and I attended and the Green Festival next month which I hope some of you will attend.

We are God’s people in this church to be about serving and engaging in the world that God so loves. Our giving makes all this possible and affirms this special place called Redwoods Presbyterian Church in the Twin Cities.

One expression of our mission serendipitously visited us today in the person of David Gist. He will complement my sermon with a presentation on Bread for the World and our mission chair Debbie Lundberg will facilitate the Blessing of the Letters.

Later in the service we will bring forward our pledges, the “first fruits of the Spirit” for our ministry in 2011. Amen.