

Hope, Earth's Saving Grace

(Reflection by Rev. Peggy McDonagh, March 21 2021)

Beloved ones, today we continue our journey through Lent, a season of recovery in which we have been addressing the various kinds of brokenness we experience in our lives and in the world. This morning we acknowledge that an essential component of repairing and restoring our own Holy Vessels includes our participation in repairing and restoring the brokenness of our beloved and treasured planet.

All of us are aware of the brokenness of the Creator's beautiful and beloved creation. More than ever before, people are conscious of the very real and urgent environmental crisis and the massive threats facing the planet. Like so many people, young and old, I despair about what is happening to this Earth we call home and I often wonder what kind of world my nieces and great-nieces will have to live in. Around the world, we see and hear the concern for the planet being voiced through the millions of students protesting climate change. In the face of such colossal problems, it is difficult to be hopeful and positive.

About a month ago Janice Rider told me about a book entitled, *Hope Matters*, written by Dr. Elin Kelsey who is a leading spokesperson, scholar, and educator in evidence-based hope. Her work focuses on the reciprocal relationship between humans and the rest of nature, and this well-researched book contains a powerful and timely message of hope for a world in which there is so much eco-anxiety. I encourage people to read *Hope Matters* because I believe that its message is vital to give us the courage we need to move forward with a more positive and hopeful mindset knowing that the existing brokenness of Creation does not have to be the last word.

It is a challenge to write a short reflection on a book that has much to say but I was so inspired by it that I wanted to offer you a glimpse of Kelsey's wisdom, insight, and hopeful message.

Wherever Kelsey speaks about environmental issues, positive solutions, and global trends, she meets hundreds of people, especially young people, who are keenly aware of our environmental problems and who are hungry for hope. She understands why there is so little hope, because every day young people are "bombarded with horrifying content about the ruined state of the planet that their lives depend on."

Kelsey talks about the doom and gloom power of the media, how for the past two decades the information we receive has grown more fatalistic. She writes, that "the strains on human emotions are far greater than ever

before thanks to social media, twenty-four-hour news cycles, and alerts on personal devices. Relentless exposure to widespread tragedy fuels emotional exhaustion,” and impacts people profoundly. It triggers stress, guilt, despair, hopelessness, depression, PTSD, increased aggression, numbness, and apathy. “By hammering children and adults with issues at scales that feel too large to surmount, we inadvertently cause them to downplay, tune out, or shut down.”

Kelsey suggests that in a democratic society there should never be just one dominant story. She writes, “The idea that something as complex and extraordinary as life on Earth could ever be encapsulated by a single grand narrative does not make sense. We have massive, terrifying, urgent environmental problems. But we also have powerful successes that we need to amplify above the din of hopelessness.” As we know, negative news is more profitable, “but who suffers are those watching it.” For Kelsey, there is not only an environmental crisis but there is also a crisis of hope. The fatalistic mindset of our time is fueling an epidemic of deep despair and hopelessness and it is time to face our fears and invite other stories and narratives into our lives.

When I think of the stories of Jesus, I am reminded that he often encouraged people to see the world a little differently, to look beyond the dominant story of exclusion, injustice, hatred, and dehumanization. The story we heard this morning of the stilling of the storm is a dramatic illustration of what it takes to face the storm or the dominant story. The disciples are called by Jesus to follow him into the storm that will require them to be fearless in their responsibility to shape a new narrative, a narrative of inclusion, equality, peace, and justice. We must have big faith to follow Jesus. We must have big hope to face the storms of environmental crisis.

It is Kelsey’s mission to create a narrative of hope because according to her, “we cannot save the world from a fatalistic mindset that relentlessly focuses on what is broken and what is going wrong without acknowledging all the environmental progress and successes that are occurring worldwide. She argues that hope for the environment is not only warranted but essential to addressing climate change and the full suite of environmental crises,” and in order to do so, “we need to pry ourselves free from disempowering rhetoric and situate ourselves within the positive environmental trends that are already well established and yielding the successful result we need to grow. The constant harkening back to fear does not serve us well.”

Fear can for the short term be an effective strategy. Kelsey tells us that “mass demonstrations of collective worry are creating change and she references many successful results such as climate change being a top issue for Canada’s next federal election, and the “world’s youngest prime minister, Sanna Marin, striving to make Finland the first carbon-neutral welfare state in the world. Fear is a good indicator that something is broken or has gone wrong. But, when it becomes entrenched, as it has in the doom and gloom narrative, it is demotivating.”

While fear and anger may motivate people in the short term to rally and protest, Kelsey has seen how hope motivates people to not just protest but to get involved in creating environmental solutions and successes. “A 2018 study of 50,000 people around the world found that people who believed that climate demise was a foregone conclusion were less likely to engage in personal behaviors to address climate change. Conversely, those with a sound comprehension of climate problems yet had a sense of hope that collectively people could act to solve some of them, were likely to act.”

We feel all sorts of emotions connected to environmental problems because we deeply love this planet, and Kelsey encourages us to tap into this love existing under all the anxiety, fear, and apathy and let it empower us to hope and to act.

For Kelsey hope is not about turning our backs on facts. “Global climate change protests are occurring because the facts are known, and hope is mobilizing people to take collective action, and being involved in collective action fuels hope. Being hopeful amid a terrible situation takes fortitude,” says Kelsey. “Being hopeful in many ways, is the more difficult path, than despair and cynicism.”

It is important to note that wishing and hoping are quite different from each other. Wishful people see the positive outcome they are yearning for as out of their hands, they let others take care of it. “Hopeful people plan for and show up in ways that they believe will help the future improve.”

Studies suggest that hope helps us to cope and not to disengage and it is contagious. Kelsey sites a Facebook study that “showed that the more hopeful posts one received the more hopeful posts they produced” and vice versa. Hope is a way of thinking that influences our emotions. When we are hopeful, we believe that things can change for the better.

But hope is also an action.” Someone said that hope “is a verb with its sleeves rolled up,” and author Barbara Kingsolver said, “Hope is something we actually do with our hearts and our hands, to navigate ourselves through the difficult passages.”

We may think that our small individual environmental actions may be ineffective but studies have shown that choices such as avoiding air travel as much as possible, eating a plant-based diet, not wasting food, getting rid of single-use plastics, have had a great collective environmental impact. It is important to find something environmentally that deeply excites you and invest your time in it. Studies show that bird watchers are “5 times more likely to participate in wildlife habitat conservation, recycle, and engage in other eco-friendly activities.”

Vaclav Havel, the Czech statesman, said, "Hope...is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out." We may not know the future of the Earth, but it makes sense for us to do what we can now for the love of the planet.

Kelsey writes that “Hope is grounded in a sense of a meaningful present.” If we are constantly bombarded by doom and gloom it is difficult to have a sense of a meaningful present. The purpose of *Hope Matters* is to show us that the present is still very meaningful and that remarkable environmental successes are occurring worldwide. The author interviewed hundreds of scientists around the world who expressed hope for the planet and she discovered how optimism fuels the work they do to create environmental solutions and successes.

There are so many amazing environmental stories of recovery and resiliency all around us and these stories reveal that life is far more resilient than we can imagine. Kelsey shows in her book that “nature has an astonishing capacity for healing, a capacity for ecosystems to recover.” She says that acknowledging creation’s resiliency and its ability to recover does not “diminish the urgent need for environmental reforms. It stokes the courage, the hope we need, to keep making the massive necessary changes. Positive trends unfold slowly and therefore do not get much attention,” but we must find those stories to create a new narrative so that we can lessen the power of the doom and gloom narrative. When we read stories of resilience and recovery “these fuel hope and counter cynicism and emotional paralysis.”

Bikini Atoll in the Marshal Islands - the world’s largest testing site for atomic bombs from 1946-1958, remains radioactive yet is a thriving coral domain with colorful fish, sharks, and large tuna. “It is so beautiful it is hard to imagine its historic identity. It is radioactive and thriving.” In 1986 the Chernobyl Nuclear power plant in northern Ukraine exploded releasing radioactive material in many parts of Europe and the land around it continues to be radioactive. Today, the vast area surrounding the remains

of the power plant now houses the highest population reserve of grey wolves. “They are resilient and radioactive. Sudbury, Ontario, one of the most polluted landscapes on Earth, is now an international model of ecological recovery.” One of the world’s most famous rivers, the River Thames in London, England, was declared biologically dead in 1957. Now it is teeming with 1000s of different fish and seals. Life on earth is constantly recovering, “often in ways we never would have guessed possible.”

Giant pandas are no longer endangered. In 50 years, bald eagles have gone from the brink of extinction to numbers never seen. The number of American households growing food at home and in community gardens is rising. Worldwide, wildlife crossing structures, bridges, underpasses have reduced wildlife deaths 80% across species.

Kelsey says that if we do not look for the stories of success we will not learn of all the “natural climate solutions being developed and the organizations helping to restore degraded deforested land and most of all the remarkable stories of recovery.” She writes, “hope exists within the agency of the countless animals, plants, and other life-forms that populate this remarkable planet. It exists within our proven collective capacity to enact meaningful change. Hope is wild and contagious.”

My friends, just a Jesus calmed the storm and invited his disciples to travel with faith into an uncertain future, in *Hope Matters* Kelsey encourages us to face the storms of our environmental challenges with hope. We can find ways to turn around the doom and gloom environmental narrative that shapes our lives by turning toward positive solutions that are emerging. These solutions show us that the recovery of our dear planet is not beyond our reach.

The more we are exposed to the amazing stories of the resiliency of Mother Earth the more inspired we will be to help in her recovery. Kelsey invites us to nurture the “wild contagious hope that lives inside of us and actively spread it to everyone we know.” She asks that we share this book with those we love. Janice shared the book with me and so I have shared a small glimpse of it with you.

My friends, *Hope Matters* reminded me of the beauty, power, resiliency, and creativity of our magnificent living, breathing world. My heart is hopeful. Amen.