

Dancing with Doom
Psalm 130; I Samuel 8:4-20
Third Sunday after Pentecost, (June 9) 2024
Kyle Childress

*Expect the end of the world, Laugh,
Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful
though you have considered all the facts...
Practice Resurrection.*

-Wendell Berry

Sometimes I'm asked, "Where do you get your joy?" I usually say something like "I look for joy in the little things," and "I especially receive joy from little children." This morning I'm going to tell you a source of great joy for me: watching two-going-on-three-year-old Valentina Cline dance in the aisle during our first hymn over the past three Sundays gives me exquisite joy!

The Clines are out of town this morning, so I hope she'll return soon to dancing in church, but since her dancing is spontaneous, I don't want to ruin it by planning or scheduling it, and I don't know if she'll dance again or not. Nevertheless, her dancing in the aisle is one of the most enjoyable things I've experienced in church in a long time, and you know me, I enjoy church. Last week, from my vantage point, I watched her and Stan mimic and improvise off one another. She faced Stan who was standing in the hallway – she'd make a dance move and he would imitate her, then he'd make a move and she would mimic him. Back and forth it went for most of the hymn. I loved it! The choir loved it, and those of you who were seated where you could see her, loved it, too.

This morning I ask, what does she know that we don't?

But also, this morning, I'm asking, can we dance in this world we are facing? Most of us know what I'm talking about. Can we dance in a collapsing civilization and environmental and climate disaster? To put it bluntly: can we dance in a doomed Earth?

Let me quickly define my terminology. Much of this sermon is influenced by a new book I'm reading: Brian McLaren's *Life After Doom: Wisdom and Courage for a World Falling Apart*. When McLaren uses the word "doom," partly he means the standard English definition as, "inevitable downfall." But he also reminds the reader that the Old English "dom" meant a law or decree issued to bring justice. Hence, "kingdom" meant the region in which a king's laws prevailed. A wrongdoer or criminal would be "doomed" when sentenced for a crime. And the day the wrongdoer met his or her fate, when their sentence would be executed would be "doomsday." Doomsday became synonymous with judgment day – when we human beings receive the judgment given by God or as the Apostle Paul said in Galatians 6:7: "Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for whatever you sow you reap." (see McLaren, p. 231).

In other words, for us this morning, our doom is our reaping what we have sown. Now, we're going to come back to dancing but for now, let's stick with doom and reaping what we sow.

In our appointed lectionary reading from I Samuel 8, the people of Israel are going to get what they want, and they will eventually be doomed by what they get.

Samuel was the last of his kind. The last of the old-time judges of Israel. For roughly 400 years, from the time of Joshua, Israel was a kind of loose-knit

confederacy of tribes and extended families doing local agriculture and living a life founded in social justice that was an alternative to the kingdoms and empires surrounding them.

Our story says the old guard of Israel comes to Samuel and tell him they want a king like all the other nations, especially Egypt to their west and Assyria to their east. They want a more centralized government that will help them manage their surplus wealth more efficiently without the interference of Torah and the Jubilee every 50 years, where wealth is redistributed.

Samuel takes this request to God and God says, “Well, Samuel, they’re not rejecting you, they’re rejecting me. But I tell you what, let them have what they want. Be sure and warn them what they’re getting into but if they insist, let them have their king like everybody else.”

So, Samuel goes back to the elders and says, “If you want a king, here’s what you’re going to get.” And then for the next ten verses, using the verb “take” as the operative word for kings, he says they’ll take, take, take. “Kings will take your sons for the wars which are coming, take your daughters for the luxurious courts and houses that kings and royalty have, take your fields, vineyards, and orchards, monopolize the land, will raise taxes, and then take more and more. If you want kings like the other nations, we will have an extractive economy that concentrates wealth and land into the hands of a few, while driving most everyone else into slavery!” There! Samuel said the dreaded “s” word in Israel – slaves! Israel’s core memory is deliverance from slavery in Egypt and now, they are being warned that having kings will undo the Exodus. Samuel is saying, “You want kingship, but you’ll end up with enslavement.”

Doom is reaping what we sow, and, in this story, you take, take, take – extract, extract, extract, you will end up enslaved and exploited and the long-term care for the land and resources will be destroyed for short-term profit.

Now, let's fast-forward. Most of us have long been familiar with PTSD – post-traumatic stress disorder, but more and more we're experiencing another kind of PTSD – *pre-traumatic stress disorder*, that comes from knowing that what we know as our normal world is doomed. McLaren defines it as “the emotional and intellectual experience shared by all who realize the dangerous future into which we are presently plunging ourselves, our descendants, and our fellow creatures” (p. 6).

Of course, for many in the middle of such stress, anxiety, change, and facing a dangerous future we look for a king – a strong, centralized authority who will dispense with our messy and often inefficient and cumbersome democracy. Part of our scripture lesson this morning is to be careful what we sow because of what we'll reap. Beware!

We are much aware that anxiety and depression are pervasive throughout our society. We are experiencing on a society level Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's stages of grief where we seem to be ping-ponging back and forth between shock and denial and anger and bargaining and depression (McLaren, p. 6).

Our anxiety and depression are not simply about environmental collapse but the social collapse that will accompany environmental collapse. As ice sheets melt, sea levels rise, oceans warm, extreme weather patterns increasing, fires, storms, floods, depleted aquifers, degraded soils, and droughts leading to crop failures leading to food shortages, leading to mass unemployment and mass migration, in turn leading to financial recessions and depressions, leading to supply chain

disruptions, leading to un-insurability and debt defaults, leading to bank failures, and currency failures. Governments respond to civil unrest with intensifying crackdowns ... I don't need to go on. Most of you know the general idea.

Most all the scientists and activists call it “overshoot.” Overshoot is when our combined human footprint exceeds or overshoots the Earth's long-term carrying capacity. McLaren suggests that overshoot is humanity's original sin. It is the Genesis story of learning to live within limits in the Garden of Eden and refusing to do so (p. 29).

Overshoot says that when we refuse to live within the limits of this Earth, refuse to live within the limits God has given us, then we will reap what we sow. Doom is coming. We are being judged by the Earth.

So, what do we do? Most of the environmental writers and activists dealing with these various scenarios all agree “We're screwed.” Or some variation of that word.

I learned over 45 years ago of the central importance of reading and praying the Psalms. Walter Brueggemann taught me that we can group the Psalms in roughly three categories: Psalms of orientation, Psalms of disorientation, and Psalms of reorientation.

Psalms of orientation pretty much tell us that life is going along okay and all we need is to proper guidance. But then disorientation comes along. Disorientation are the Psalms that tell us we're screwed, we're facing doom, there is no easy way out and part of our crying out to God is to face the truth of reality.

Thirty or forty years ago, most environmental activists, writers, and scientists said, we need to get oriented. We're facing some bad stuff: climate

change, an enlarged carbon footprint, species extinction, etc., but if we get our act together and change our ways, we can avoid such bad stuff.

No environmental scientist says this now. Everything says, we're screwed, we're facing doom, we're facing change like we've never known before. Disorientation.

The Psalm appointed for this morning, Psalm 130, is one that points us to the third stage: reorientation. Reorientation is when we face reality, and then say to God, "What's next? We're doomed. We're reaping what we have sown, we look the beast squarely in the eyes, and then, as you've heard me say many times, we ask, "and." "And God, what is next?" "And God what's your word for us now?"

Psalm 130 does not say God is going to solve everything. It does not say everything is going to be okay. It does say that we wait in the doom with hope for our hope is in God. We wait. We must face the truth: we're screwed. And we must live with the depths of darkness of that truth.

Remember, we do not face the truth alone. God is with us in the depths, and we are with one another in the depths. For longer than my 34 years here, I have preached that we don't do this stuff alone! We cannot face the doom alone. We face it together.

Then we ask, "And" God, what's next?

Are you ready for the answer?

We dance.

Bear with me.

Do you remember over in Luke 12 where Jesus tells the parable of rich fool who built bigger and bigger barns and said to himself, “You have lots of stuff laid up for many years; now, relax, eat, drink, and be merry” (Luke 12:13-20)? Jesus goes on to say, “You fool! You’re reaping what you have sown this very night. Today is doomsday.” And he goes on to say such it will be for everyone who are not rich toward God” (12:21).

Then Jesus goes on to describe a different kind of life: instead of life consisting in the abundance of possessions and bigger barns, consider the birds who neither sow nor reap, they have no barns, and consider the lilies and how they grow but do not toil nor spin ...” and Jesus goes on to say even though the nations of world are based upon a building bigger barns kind of economic system, “instead, we are to be rich toward God. We are to seek God’s Way, and these things will be given you as well (12:22-31).

To be rich toward God, means it is time to start transferring our attachment to the economy and ecosystem of God and participate in the sacred web – the divine dance – of birds and wildflowers and creation that are interdependent and sharing in God.

The great mystics of faith, both Christian and Buddhist, use the term “detachment.” They do not mean we detach and withdraw into ourselves and our little enclaves. What they mean is that we disentangle ourselves from false ways of life so we can participate in God’s Way. We detach from the extractive, competitive economy and attach to God’s cooperative, connecting economy.

When faced with chaos and change, many of us resort to hunkering down and bunkering up. In fear we build walls, increase security, get our guns, and look

for kings to save us and protect us. We increasingly disconnect, stay home, isolate, and pull into ourselves. We contract.

But there is another way. The great Christian mystic, Thomas Merton, said, “We can involve ourselves in sadness, absurdity, and despair...” or we can join “the cosmic dance which is always there. Indeed, we are in the midst of it, and it is in the midst of us, for it beats in our very blood. ... We are invited to forget ourselves on purpose, cast our awful solemnity to winds and join the general dance” (*New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 297).

Merton is referencing the doctrine of perichoresis from the 5th century theologian, Gregory of Nyssa, who wrote on the Trinity. The three-persons of the Triune God are constantly interacting with one another, interpenetrating on one another in a kind of perichoretic dance, of turning – turning to one another and turning to the world to receive it. This Trinitarian dance sets the tone and tempo for the entire universe. God is not static. The Triune God dances and therefore, dancing and connecting is the essence of the universe.

Brian McLaren calls it joining the “cosmic dance of energy” (p. 240). Physicist Brian Greene writes of quantum physics and string theory, “That all of the wondrous happenings in the universe – from the frantic dance of subatomic quarks to the stately dance of orbiting binary stars, from the primordial fireball of the big bang to the majestic swirl of heavenly galaxies – are reflections of one grand physical principle...” He goes on, “Everything at its most microscopic level consists of vibrating [oscillating, dancing] strands” (*The Elegant Universe*, p. 5, 15). In other words, the universe is about dancing and music.

After Dante Alighieri descended into the pit of the Inferno, with its increasing contraction, paralysis, frozenness, isolation, with no hope of change.

Then the upward journey through Purgatorio where there was slow movement, he eventually began to sail, flying upward into Paradiso, discovering that the heavens are all about movement, change, transformation, with everything connected and alive. He heard the music of the spheres and the harmony of the stars, all dancing in love, “like a wheel revolving uniformly – by “L’amor che move il sole e l’altre stelle,” the Love that moves the sun and the other stars” (*Paradiso*, Canto 33, ll. 144-145).

I remember when I was a junior in high school some older guys, five or six years older, who were pretty good musicians, invited us to come hear them play at the National Guard Armory one night. Word spread and that night there were perhaps 30 or 40, maybe more, high school juniors and seniors sitting on the floor around these musicians listening to them play.

No one said anything about dancing. I guess in some ways, we didn’t think about a dance. Strangely enough most of us had never been to dance. We just didn’t dance. We did not have a high school prom and as far as I know, our high school had never had one. There was no ban on dancing and there was nothing condemnatory about it. We simply did not have a prom, did not dance, and didn’t think much about it.

But here we were in the National Guard Armory, sitting on the floor around some guys in a band playing contemporary pop rock music, and we were in the middle of this grand, wide-open space.

I was sitting next to my girlfriend, who had been my girlfriend, more or less, since we were both three-years-old. The band started playing *Colour My World* recorded by the band “Chicago” in the early 70’s, and it was slow and beautiful, and it was “our” song. Oh, I wanted to dance! It was our song. I was seated right

next to her, and all I needed to do was stand up and ask her to dance and we would have slow danced to our favorite song.

But I couldn't do it. No one else got up. We all stared at the floor or at the musicians and listened. And sat there frozen. I could not move. Oh, I desperately wanted to dance but couldn't. My life at age 16 was all about keeping the peace, being responsible, avoiding conflict, and keeping everything under control at home, ... but I wanted to dance.

God calls us to join the dance. Let go of our control and dance. Every time we participate in connecting persons and creation, feeding the hungry, making a place for immigrants, working for justice, including the outcasts, devoting ourselves to non-violence, giving of our money and time and service, caring for our children, and caring for all children, we are joining the dance of the universe where we discover everything is connected and meant to be connected. As we find ourselves facing doom, where the temptation is to pull into ourselves and hunker down, God calls us to nurture and build overlapping communities of resilience and expanding circles of trust, where we embrace one another in joy and love.

Rather than withdraw into ourselves God says, get up and dance! Move, embrace, give, participate in the cosmic dance, from the subatomic quarks to the swirling galaxies, to "the Love that moves the sun and the other stars."

And by the way – here's the rest of the story. About a year after me being unable to dance in the National Guard Armory, I was on a school trip in Athens, Greece. We were in a restaurant and show for tourists and I was sitting on the front row. A beautiful Greek girl not much older than me, reached down from the stage, took my hand, and beckoned me to join her on the stage for a Greek folkdance. In her beautiful Greek accent, she said, "Come. Come and dance." And I did.

God call us to come and dance. Valentina Cline gets it. She hears the call.
Let's join her.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.