

Isaiah 1:11-20 Cloud of Witnesses 1
Hebrews 11:1-3; 8-16
August 7, 2022

It is sometimes interesting to watch nature documentaries on television. There is a show on BBC America called, “Planet Earth,” hosted by a 96-year-old biologist and natural historian named David Attenborough. One of the features of programs like these is that they make use of the latest technologies to show places and happenings never before observable.

Drones with digital capacity and tiny remote cameras disguised as tree branches or small rocks can observe animals in the wild, and send real-time images so that photographers don’t actually have to be present in order to get magnificent photographs.

And this technology can go anywhere; into the highest and most remote mountain regions as well as into jungles and deserts, and ocean depths and in any of earth’s nooks and crannies as never before. It is all very fascinating, at least to me.

In addition to the beauty of it, part of what is displayed is the brutality of nature. Scenes of predators attacking and devouring prey without any evidence of inner conflict or moral sensibility. As a matter of fact, people have always given the natural world and all of its creatures a pass on morality. The animal world is acting by instinct, doing what it is programmed by nature to do, fighting for its survival without sentiment

regarding the death of any of its prey, which often seems helpless against it.

Part of what makes people different from the rest of the natural world *is that moral awareness*. There has been instilled in the human consciousness a sense of responsibility not found in the rest of nature. And that responsibility invades every aspect of human life. It is a part of the human condition.

The Bible is about the human condition. It is the human story, told through the lens of the people of Israel and their history, and the story of Jesus and his early followers. Its significance derives from its interpretation of the larger human story. It is good for us to do the best we can, to, “put our feet in their shoes and walk a mile or so,” so to speak, and that doesn’t turn out to be as hard as it might seem, because, after all, we are human beings too.

It should not surprise us very much when this moral awareness along with the burden of responsibility shows up prominently in the story the bible tells. Too often, embarrassingly often, people act as though they think they should receive the same pass given to the rest of the world of nature.

Our two readings for the day offer some pertinent reflections, as does the Communion we will share in a few minutes. The text from the Book of Isaiah, which is a magisterial work of prophetic imagination and theological reflection, begins as a call to the heavens and the earth to hear and to listen. It is as if Israel is on

trial; it is as if humanity is on trial; it is as if we are on trial, with the heavens and the earth is the jury. The first part of the message regards the sinfulness of the nation;

“The ox knows its master
the donkey his owner’s manger

But Israel does not know
my people do not understand.”

And we could re-translate as follows:

The human race does not know;
the people, my people, do not understand.

And that is the point. As human beings we have the capacity to know and to understand, thus also the responsibility to know and understand, not so much about scientific things or historical things, otherwise it makes sense that the bible would have been written much later, when the state of knowledge is more complete, but of moral things, the things of God.

The first part of the message is about the general human failure to recognize that humanity bears a kind of responsibility not applied to nature. It seems we ought to be able to agree that the presence of excessive poverty set next to extravagant wealth, for instance, and war and political strife, as well as environmental degradation, just to name a few things; the proliferation of inadequate justice, not to mention all the distortions and contradictions in our personal

lives, is evidence enough of human responsibility and guilt.

“Wash and make yourselves clean,
take your evil deeds out of my sight!

Stop doing wrong.
Learn to do right!

Seek justice,
encourage the oppressed.

Defend the case of the fatherless,
plead the case of the widow . . .

Come, let us reason together, if you are willing and obedient, you will eat from the best of the land, but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword.”

The result of Isaiah’s theology, and maybe the cause of it too, is an effort on the part of some people to live faithful lives, taking into account the responsibilities that are a part of the human experience. Sometimes that effort is seen as a journey, a journey that leads ultimately to heaven, the realm of higher promises.

The other of the day’s readings is from the Letter to the Hebrews, and it expresses this effort in terms of a faithful journey as well as or better than any other place in the scriptures. It tells the story of the faithful, one that is meant also to be our story, traveling through time “in search of a homeland,” believing in

an unfulfilled promise that such a place, such a life is real, even if they are destined to leave this earthly life before they see its fulfillment.

There is much to say about these two texts. They are resplendent with meaning. But before we share the Lord's Supper, let us conclude with these things; that we are grateful to be called to the journey of faith, and are committed to following its path wherever it may lead, until the destination is attained; and we recognize that divine love and mercy are our heritage, leading lives of sacrifice and service our sacred command; we share this heritage and mandate with one another and all the saints who take part in this journey, even if their path seems different from our own, and also with the faithful of Israel and all the great cloud of witnesses that have preceded us, and that surround us.

Even the wonderful digital technology that can search the nook's and crannies of the earth, and teach us about the fascinating world in which we are blessed to live, are no help to us on this quest, because this journey acknowledges a different aspect of the meaning of our lives.

In a way the bible serves as a kind of drone with digital capabilities, peering into the nooks and crannies of the human soul and making the fascinating discoveries about the life of faith, in search of the land that does not perish, spoil, or fade. We are confident that Christ who has been there before us, and will show the way.

[Back](#)[Home](#)