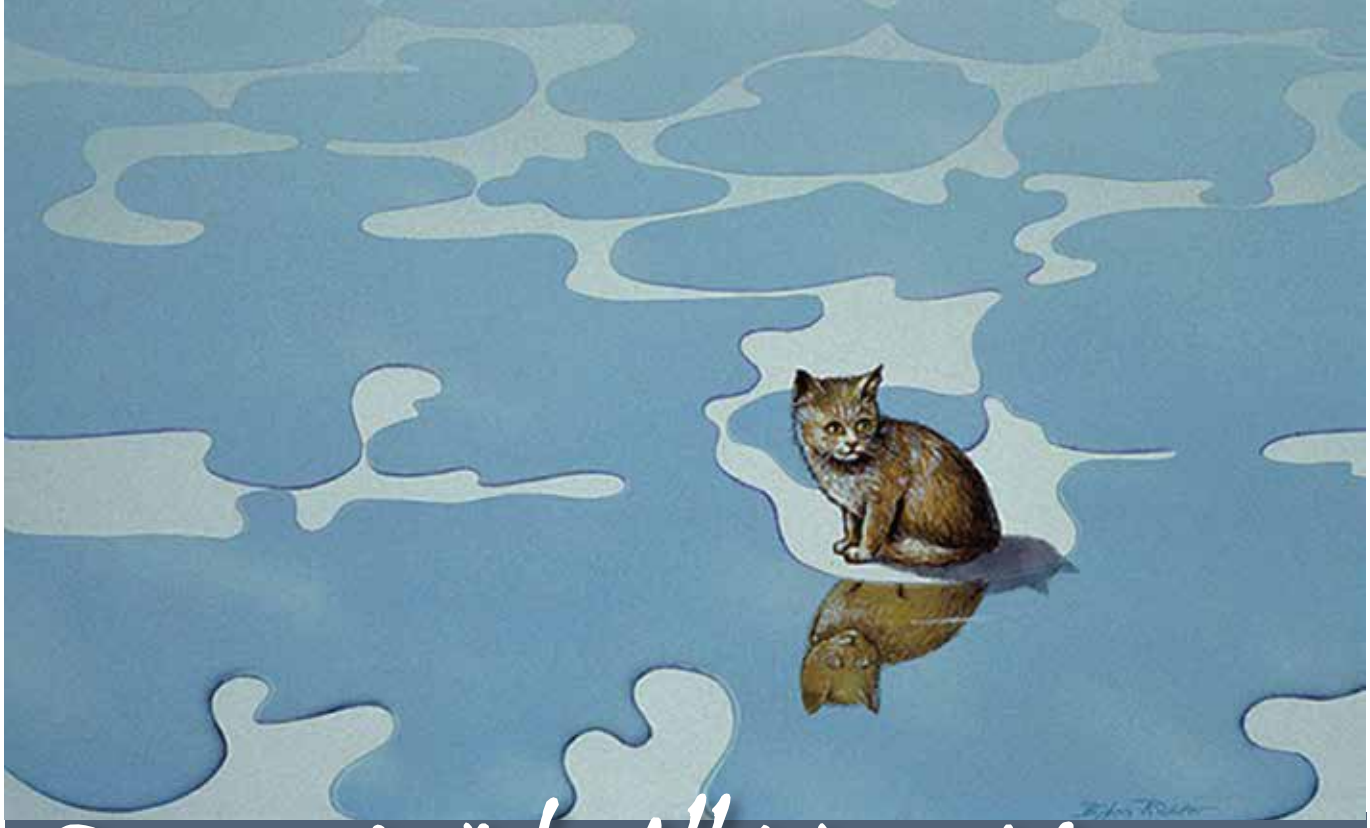

# Return With All Your Heart

ELAINE WAINWRIGHT **interprets Joel 2:12–18, the first reading of Ash Wednesday, as an invitation to become involved in restoring relationships in the whole Earth community.**

I believe we need to read our biblical texts in dialogue with the issues and the challenges rising up in our world today. Over recent decades Christian communities have done this in relation to a range of liberation issues, feminist concerns, postcolonial perspectives and other contemporary challenges. But now we must read scripture in dialogue with the most urgent and comprehensive issue of times — the ecological.

Almost daily we hear the cry of the Earth confronting us. Extreme weather patterns wreak havoc across the globe, causing devastation and suffering to the most vulnerable in the human and Earth communities. In many places Earth's temperatures are the highest on record as are those of our oceans. Ice sheets are shrinking and glaciers are retreating. Arable lands that support the livelihood of Earth's people are becoming deserts. It's with these cries around us that we seek to read our biblical texts ecologically so that those texts may shape a new ecological consciousness in us.


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## Critique and Reclamation

Together with other liberation perspectives, an ecological approach holds two stances in tension: critique and reclamation.

At the critical phase, the reader is attentive to the ways in which Earth might be obscured by focusing only on people in the biblical text itself; the other-than-human may be represented in a subordinate relationship with people; or the materiality of the other-than-human might be completely absent from the text.

In the reclamation phase we attend to the voice of Earth and all Earth's constituents as these function either explicitly or implicitly in the text.

## Joel, First Testament Prophet

Joel 2:12-18 is the first reading on Ash Wednesday (14 February) the beginning of the Lenten season. Joel is one of the 12 minor prophets in Israel but as we know nothing about him, his time or his context we will focus on the text.

12 Yet even now, says our God,
return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and
with mourning;
13 Rend your hearts and not your
clothing. Return to your God, who
is gracious and merciful, slow to
anger, and abounding in steadfast
love, and relents from punishing.
14 Who knows whether or not
to turn and relent, and leave a
blessing behind, a grain offering
and a drink offering for your God?
15 Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify
a fast; call a solemn assembly;
16 Gather the people. Sanctify the
congregation; assemble the aged;
gather the children, even infants at
the breast. Let the bridegroom leave
his room, and the bride her canopy.
17 Between the vestibule and the
altar let the priests, the ministers
of our God, weep. Let them say,
"Spare your people, O God, and do
not make your heritage a mockery,

a byword among the nations. Why should it be said among the peoples: 'Where is their God?'
18 Then God became jealous for the land, and had pity on the people.

## At First Seems Human-Centred

We can see in a first reading that the text's perspective is anthropocentric or human-centred. The divine voice is speaking to the human community, inviting them to *re-turn* to God — a fitting invitation as we enter into the Lenten season. And the return is to be shown in the human body — fasting, weeping and mourning and in the rending of hearts and not clothing. This is accompanied by a gathering of the human community, identified specifically with the aged, the children, even infants at the breast — the least powerful in the community. It is this vulnerable group whose plight cries out to God to restore justice or right relationships. Lent is a time when we listen to these cries and endeavour to respond.

## Reading More Deeply

A critical phase in our ecological reading is recognising the faint voice of the material in the text. In Joel 2:13 there is a passing reference to clothing, which could be torn to indicate mourning, and mention of "a grain offering and a drink offering" (Joel 2:14). The materiality, or material things in the text — a grain or a drink offering (Joel 2:14); the bridegroom's room and the bride's canopy (Joel 2:16); the vestibule and altar (Joel 2:17) — give a context for the human interrelationships.

In order that the biblical texts can inform and inspire us we're invited to hear the text as addressed to the *entire Earth community* — the human community being just one participant in that wider community.

## Invitation to Return

The divine voice first invites us (Joel 2:12) to turn or to re-turn, suggesting that a relationship is broken and needs to be righted. The broken relationship can be multi-dimensional: between Divinity and the Earth community — which includes people, animals, and all other communities of being. The call is to re-turn, meaning to turn from the current relationships to a prior one. And the call is coming not only to the human community but to all groups within the Earth community. It is a comprehensive call to right relationships between Divinity and Earth. Within the call is the recognition of many broken relationships not only between the Divine and people but within the multi-relational world that we now know.

Joel 2:13 characterises the Divine as multi-dimensional and relational: *hanan*, *raham*, and *hesed* are three key terms describing the merciful love of God. God, gracious and merciful abounding in steadfast love, invites the whole Earth community into right relationship. Joel 2:14 recognises that the human community is ambivalent towards repentance: Who knows whether or not to turn and relent? But as the text unfolds it assumes that we do repent, that we do make the change to right relationships.

## Invitation to Restore Relationships

We can read Joel 2:15-16 in terms of the right relationships that need to be restored. Lent is a time of fasting — fasting in order to restore relationships. Today our fasting can have an ecological face. For example, we might concentrate on a just way in which we use water and power; on growing our food or accessing what is local; on joining action for justice so that all the Earth's people can access clean water, power and local food supplies. The trumpet blast of Joel 2:15 can refer to such critical actions reminding us that repentance is a communal activity (Joel 2:16). We can look around for others with whom we can gather during this Lenten season to expand our own consciousness of ecological conversion.

## God in All Relationships

Conversion is not only about restoring right relationships between the human and other-than-human but also noticing God's engagement in these interrelationships. The question: "Where is their God?" (Joel 2:17) recognises that in participating in interrelationships we are led to further recognition. The prophet then acknowledges God's care or even, God's jealous care for "the land" — which we know includes the entire Earth community. We can read the final statement: "God had pity (merciful compassion) on the people" (Joel 2:18), as also extending to the whole Earth community.

During Lent we can take Joel's invitation to restore right relationships as our own. And we can think of the invitation as including relationship among Divinity, humanity and Earth. It's an invitation into adventure. ■

Painting by Bjørn Richter, Norwegian painter, sculptor, designer and writer. © Giclèe prints available from wwwbjornrichter.com *"The sales of my work help me continue my (often idealistic) work for our planet. I began expressing my concern in painting in 1974 – probably the first artist to do this."*

# New Way of Being with Earth

ELAINE WAINWRIGHT says that listening to the prophet Jeremiah 31:31-34 during Lent can bring us to a new relationship with Earth.

We hear the prophet Jeremiah in the reading for the Fifth Sunday of Lent — the Sunday just prior to Palm Sunday and entry into what we call Holy Week. It is intended to speak to the heart of our journey of conversion through the Lenten period into Easter.

An initial reading of Jeremiah's text (Jer 31:31-34) draws readers into the intimate relationship between God and the human community. This is a relationship that has been broken in the past — broken by members of that community, individually and collectively. God, however, promises a restoration, a new covenant. The text breathes intimacy and right relations and our reading of it is familiar.

## Listen to the New Voice

It would be easy for us, therefore, this Lent and Easter to rest in the familiar and to let words like "new covenant" invite us into minor changes in our lifestyle. But there is another voice that echoes through the words of Jeremiah at this time. It is that of Pope Francis who is calling for "a fresh analysis of our present situation" in the opening chapter of his 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si'* (par 17). Such an analysis uncovers a list of challenges: pollution and climate change; the issue of water; loss of biodiversity; decline in the quality of human life and the breakdown of society; global inequality; weak responses; and a variety of opinions (par 20-61). These form a new perspective from which and through which to read the biblical text (par 62-100).

This new perspective needs to be both global and local and our Jeremiah text suggests that it is characterised by urgency: the days are coming, says our God, when I will make a new covenant. The Lenten period is a time for examining our attitudes, our priorities, our way of seeing and being in our world.

## Look at Where We Live

We are challenged to expand our perspectives so that we are not confined within a worldview that focuses only on the human and the holy. *Laudato Si'* invites us to include habitat within not only our worldview but our way of being and acting on this planet Earth that we and all other earthlings/earth beings call home. Living into such a new understanding and lifestyle can be seen as the "new covenant" which God wants to make not just with the human community but also the other-than-human. How might such a shift in perspective shape our reading of the Jeremiah text?

*A new covenant is called for. It will engage us in our local, regional and global communities who are seeking to attend to the challenges to Earth and our covenant with Earth.*

## Urgency Is with Us

We have already drawn attention to the note of urgency in the voice of God that echoes through Jer 31: 31. It finds expression in the phrase "the days are *surely* coming". For the ecological reader this phrase captures the urgency with which ecological issues confront us. Water and waste are perhaps the most urgent globally. They call for individual responses

**Elaine Wainwright** is a biblical scholar specialising in eco-feminist interpretation and is currently writing the Wisdom Commentary on Matthew's Gospel.

but also what might be called a "covenanting" with others locally, regionally or globally to bring about a new response to the challenges that face us in relation to water and waste. *Surely the days are coming when we make a new covenant between people and nations.*

*It will not be like the covenant of old.* Indeed, no. We are in a new time and the issues facing us are monumental. They extend far beyond the confines of a God in relationship with a select segment of the human community.

**Jeremiah 31:31** The days are surely coming, says our God, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. 32 It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says our God. 33 But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says our God: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other: "Know your God" for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says our God; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

## Time for a New Covenant

A new covenant is called for. Each of us is invited into this moment, this new moment, in the unfolding of the interrelationships within the habitat-human-holy web. It will require very careful analysis of and attention to the ways in which relationships have broken down (how we, the human community, have broken the covenant, in the words of Jeremiah).

It will take us to the heart of our daily lives: how we use or abuse water, food, power and other Earth resources. It will also engage us in our local, regional and global communities who are seeking to attend to the challenges to Earth and our covenant with Earth.

For our new challenges, we need a new covenant. As far as we as a human community know, the planet has never before been so severely under threat. For those on the Lenten journey accompanied by texts such as that of Jeremiah 31:31-34, this does not have to lead us to despair. Rather the prophet can be heard providing assurance of a new future: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

The "new law" that is needed at this time can be heard in the call of Pope Francis to "ecological conversion" (par 217). It is a call to be "protectors of God's handiwork", not as an optional extra but as essential to a "life of virtue" (par 217). It will entail "gratitude and graciousness, a recognition that the world is God's loving gift". It is also characterised by a "loving awareness that we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures but joined in a splendid universal communication" (par 220).

We, the human community, "are not disconnected ... but joined in a splendid universal communication". Bringing to our biblical text the lens not only of the human and the holy but also of habitat, invites and challenges us to conversion during Lent — to a new way of being on this planet Earth.

## AUTUMN PASSION

Bright autumn Christ,
The silver birch,
The bell-bird's call,
The vibrant light,
The glory through
The pain.

Sharp autumn Christ
The fallen leaves,
The slanting sun,
The hint of frost,
Toll for the life
That's gone.

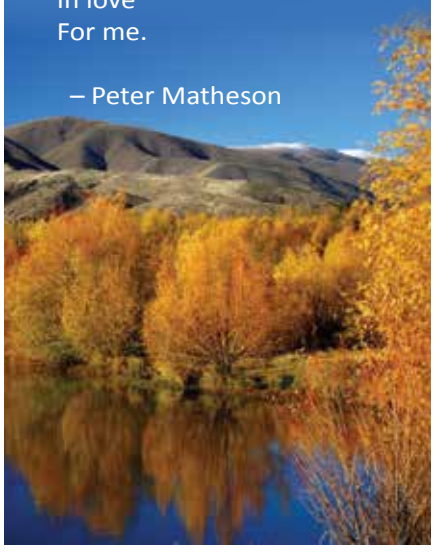
Dark autumn Christ
The broken branch,
The weeping tree,
The whole sad
Earth gasps
Piteously.

High autumn Christ
The teacher gagged,
The friend betrayed,
The healer hung,
The saviour
Torn.

Rich autumn Christ
The hill is climbed,
The hate disarmed,
The fear is gone,
The battle
Won.

Sweet autumn Christ,
The rose-red blood,
The rowan tree,
God's heaven aflame
In love
For me.

– Peter Matheson



# A New Time for Everything

ELAINE WAINWRIGHT **interprets the well-known text Ecclesiastes 3:1-11 from an ecological perspective.**

When I began my search for a Hebrew Bible/Old Testament text from the April lectionary, I discovered that in the post-Easter period, the first readings for each Sunday are all from the New Testament Acts of the Apostles. However, in the readings for Anzac Day liturgies I was given a choice of two Wisdom texts. The first was Wisdom 3:1-9, a very familiar text as it is often read at Catholic funerals: "The souls of the virtuous are in the hands of God." The second, Ecclesiastes 3:1-11, is equally or even better known: "There is a season for everything." I have chosen to focus on Ecclesiastes as it will yield rich insights.

## Wisdom Tradition

The Book named *Ecclesiastes* (Greek), or *Qoheleth* (Hebrew), belongs to the Wisdom tradition in Israel's scriptures. In it a sage reflects on life and in the particular text that is our focus, reflects on the movements or particular moments of life — birth and death (Eccl 3:2), killing and healing (Eccl 3:3) among others. The foundational life experiences highlighted by the sage mean that this text can be read anew in each new age. In this reflection we are invited to read the familiar Ecclesiastes text in light of the new ecological age in which we are living.

**Elaine Wainwright** is a biblical scholar specialising in eco-feminist interpretation and is currently writing the Wisdom Commentary on Matthew's Gospel.

## Significance of Time

*There is a time . . . a time . . . a time . . .* Time is a key element of life that grounds us ecologically. "Everything", in the words of Qoheleth, "every occupation under heaven", has a time (Eccl 3:1). Everything takes place in chronological time as the word *chronos* in Eccl 3:1a indicates. But when particular "moments" are highlighted, as repeatedly they are beyond Eccl 3:1a, the sage uses the designation *kairos*, which has the sense of "season" or "opportunity" as well as crisis — an appropriate rallying call in our present *ecological crisis*. The human community maps its very being in its generalities and its particularities by *time*.

## Extending Our Vision in This Time

The ecological reader can extend the vision of the sage in Eccl 3:1 at least to the entire biotic community, to all living beings. For them too, there is a time, a season for everything, for giving birth and dying in particular (Eccl 3:2). And perhaps the words of the sage allow us to extend the "everything" of Eccl 3:1 even further to include the abiotic — the rock, sand and water to name but an "abiotic" few. We can think of these physical elements, too, as being birthed from Earth's processes and dying or coming to an end as those same or similar processes unfold. The sage's evocation of a season for everything is expansive and inclusive.

The way in which this evocation of times and seasons unfolds is by pairing. It would be possible to think of the pairs as opposites, setting them over against each other and evaluating them. In thinking ecologically, we are invited into the movement or the dance between the pairs, between the life processes that the sage evokes. Ecclesiastes 3:2 immerses the reader/listener in foundational movements, into life and death, planting and uprooting.

## Universe Time

The universe itself was born in all its incredible complexities from a massive explosion of energy that scientists call the Big Bang. And in the unfolding of the universe, its elements — stars, for instance — die, even though their deaths may take millions of years. There is, indeed, a time to die. Birthing and dying take place on a cosmic as well as a microcosmic stage and involve all that is.

The second part of Eccl 3:2 emerges from the microcosmic — we see the life and death cycle in human agriculture. Agriculture, though, has never been exclusive to the human realm. Researchers have discovered that "several non-human species have developed farming-like relationships with organisms they've encountered" *(www.bbc.com/earth/story/20150105-animals-that-grow-their-own-food).* This too belongs now to the sage's song.

## A Time to Question

Ecclesiastes 3:3 invites us to reflect on violent action. We are to consider killing and its opposite — healing. There are many cycles of killing and healing in the other-than-human world as species need other species for survival. The human community is also no stranger to these processes. However, many today question our violence towards animals, for instance, which we do in order to serve our food chain. Perhaps the ecological reader/listener needs to ask a new question: Is there still a time to "kill" or are we in a cosmic moment that needs to be characterised by healing?

In Eccl 3:4 the sage focuses on the human community evoking our activities of weeping and laughing, mourning and dancing. And we can confine these to the human community. But in his TED talk Bernie Kraus introduces us to the "voice of the natural world" including a soundscape of a mourning badger whose home and family have been blown up by careless rangers. The poignancy of the badger's cry affirms the words of the sage: "There is a time to weep or to mourn."

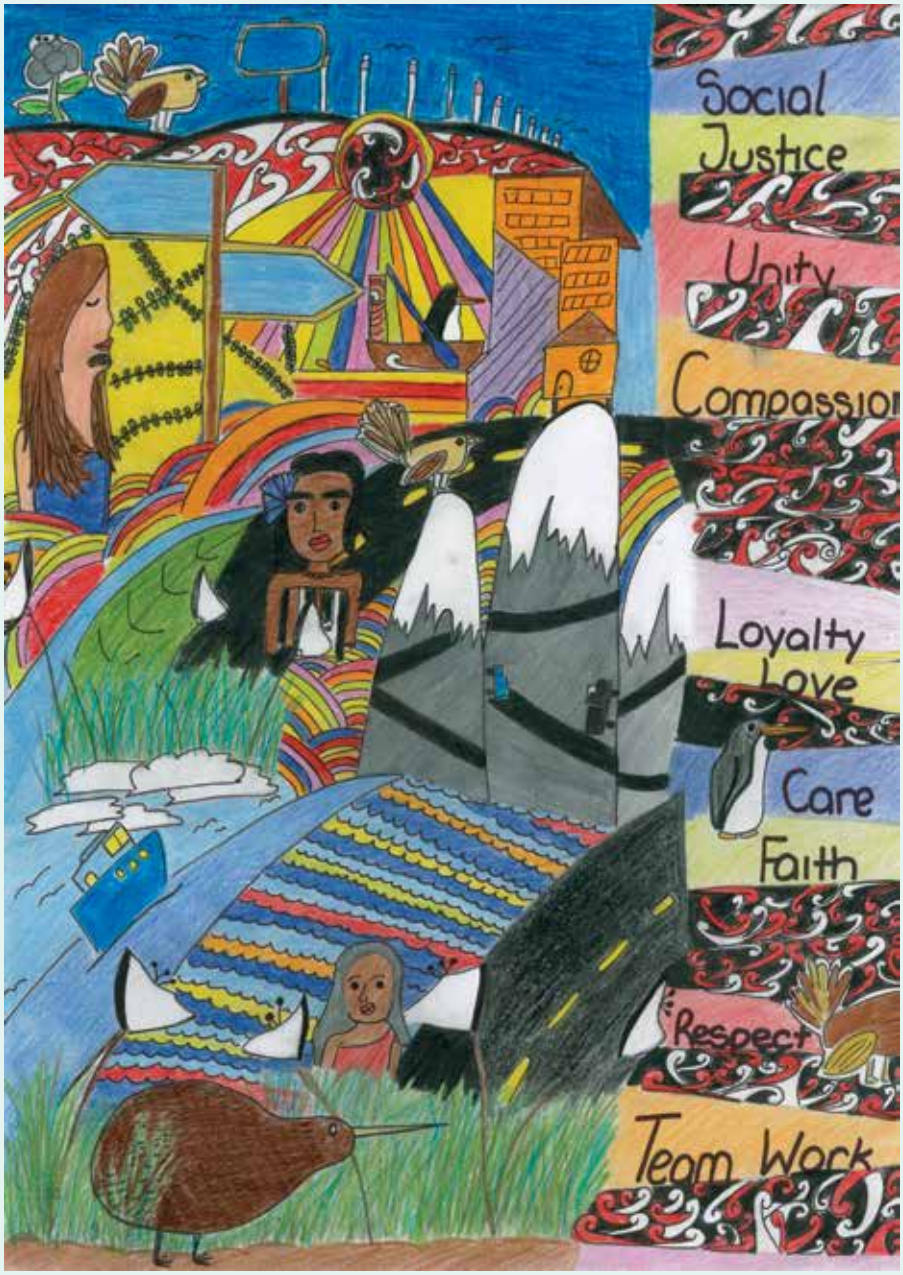
### Ecclesiastes 3:1-11

1 For everything there is a season,
and a time for every matter under
heaven:
2 a time to be born, and a time to
die; a time to plant, and a time to
pluck up what is planted;
3 a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time
to build up;
4 a time to weep, and a time to
laugh; a time to mourn, and a
time to dance;
5 a time to cast away stones, and a
time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to
refrain from embracing;
6 a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to cast
away;
7 a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time
to speak;
8 a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for
peace.
9 What gain have workers from
their toil? 10 I have seen the
business that God has given to
everyone to be busy with. 11 God
has made everything suitable for
its time; and moreover has put
a sense of past and future into
their minds, yet they cannot find
out what God has done from the
beginning to the end.

The sage has listened attentively to the cycles of life, to the *kairos* moments in human unfolding, concluding in Eccl 3:8 with the claim that there is a time for love and hate and for war and peace. And then in the concluding verse, Eccl 3:11, affirms this right ordering of human activity; God has made everything suitable for its time, for its *kairos*, for its opportune time. Although the sage's perspective is human, the reflections of the sage can be read through an ecological lens. His poem can have the cosmos and its unfolding together with all its biotic and abiotic constituents as its referents.

## Our Invitation

A new invitation comes with the words of Qoheleth when we engage with our ecological perspective. We're invited to hear the text not just as it captures the dynamic of human activites, but as it celebrates the movements and moments in a cosmic unfolding — of birth and death, uprooting and planting; of tearing and mending; of loving and hating, together with making war and making peace. During April, as — attuned to the ecological voice — we listen to the words of the sage, we will be open to transforming our consciousness to that of an Easter people who read, think and pray ecologically. ♀




# Keep the RULE to Keep the EARTH

ELAINE WAINWRIGHT shows how Deuteronomy 4:32-34, 39-40 challenges us to radical conversion so that we may keep Earth as our home.

My aim each month is to offer an ecological interpretation of an Old Testament reading that we will hear on one Sunday during the month. I discovered that the first Lectionary reading on each of the Sundays in May this year are taken from the New Testament book Acts of the Apostles, right up to the last Sunday of May when the Church celebrates Trinity Sunday. The first reading for that feast is taken from the Book of Deuteronomy and it draws us into the world view that the Deuteronomist (the authorial voice) proposes: being faithful to God's commandments leads to life, and infidelity to those commandments leads to death. This paradigm, this pattern, this rule-of-thumb permeates not only the Book of Deuteronomy but also what is known as the Deuteronomistic history — the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings.

## Election Calls for Fidelity

Foundational to the Deuteronomist's world view is the theology of Israel being the chosen nation of God: "Has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for that god's self from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by terrifying displays of power, as your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?" (Deut 4:34) Accompanying this theology of choice or election must be a fidelity to the commandments that lead to life, the Deuteronomist insists so emphatically.

What is not emphasised — indeed it is quite hidden — is the fate of the nation from which the chosen nation is freed. For example, the passing reference in Exodus 14:30 to the Egyptians lying dead on the seashore — to which we proclaim "Word of God" after listening to this reading during the Holy Vigil — is but one example. It shows that we need to engage with Deuteronomistic theology critically not only for its impact in the human community but in the other-than-human also.

## Deuteronomic Challenge

The Deuteronomist offers us a world view, a way of viewing or conceiving the world and how we should live in it. We are invited to: "Ask now about former ages, long before your own, ever since the day that God created human beings on the earth; ask from one end of heaven to the other." We are invited by the Deuteronomist as we are being invited by Earth system scientists to consider "former ages" as well as our own; to ask the new questions that Earth is addressing to us.

**Deuteronomy 4:32-34, 39-40**

32 Moses said to the people: "Ask now about former ages, long before your own, ever since the day that God created human beings on the earth; ask from one end of heaven to the other: has anything so great as this ever happened or has its like ever been heard of? 33 Has any people ever heard the voice of a god speaking out of a fire, as you have heard, and lived? 34 Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for that god's self from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by terrifying displays of power, as your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? . . . 39 So acknowledge today and take to heart that our God is in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other. 40 Keep God's statutes and commandments, which I am commanding you today for your own well-being and that of your descendants after you, so that you may long remain in the land that your God is giving you for all time."

## Dialogue with Earth System Scientist Clive Hamilton

In this regard, Clive Hamilton in his 2017 book *Defiant Earth: The Fate of Human in the Anthropocene* introduces us to Earth system science. This science proposes that we name the current geological epoch "the Anthropocene" — an age characterised by a rupturing of the Earth system itself. "It is the Earth taken as a whole in a constant stage of movement driven by interconnected cycles and forces... It is a single, dynamic, integrated system, and not a collection of ecosystems."

In order to explore what this new understanding might yield, I found myself returning to the opening words of the Deuteronomist in our focal text: "Ask now about former ages, long before your own, ever since the day that God created human beings on the earth; ask from one end of heaven to the other."

We are encouraged to ask about "former ages" — which for us would include the 14 billion years from the Big Bang to the present. And in our "asking" we are returned to the Anthropocene and to the Deuteronomic invocation to "ask from one end of heaven to the other".

In doing this we encounter Earth system scientists' discovery of "the new concept of the Earth system" which "encompasses and transcends previous objects of study such as 'the landscape,' 'ecosystems,' and 'the environment'." Naming this current period as Anthropocene, therefore, does not encapsulate just the disturbances of ecosystems but the disruption of the entire Earth system.

The Deuteronomist asks: "Has anything so great as this ever happened or has its like ever been heard?" Addressed to the emergence of the Anthropocene, this question confronts us as contemporary readers/hearers of the Deuteronomic text: "Has anything so great as this ever happened or has its like ever been heard?"

If this question echoes through current Earth system science, the answer that we will hear is an emphatic "NO!" As a result of human activity across the past century, there has been an unprecedented change to Earth's system, one unlike any other before it. And as a result, our entire way of being as Earth creatures in relation to Earth's systems must change.

In the final verse of the Deuteronomy text we hear this imperative: "Keep God's statutes and commandments, which I am commanding you today for your own well-being and that of your descendants after you, so that you may long remain in the land that your God is giving you for all time."

The "land" that God is giving/has given to the human community is Earth itself and its inhabitant community has an obligation to care for it. Current science has, however, revealed the depth of damage that has been done to Earth over more than a century or two, and asks if it is indeed irreparable.

We may have hope, but for Clive Hamilton the future of Earth is grim. We need to remember that the Deuteronomist's call to keep the commandments "so that you may long remain in the land" is no blanket guarantee but rather an exchange: we must keep the rule to keep the Earth. What the Deuteronomist calls for is a radical human conversion that allows us to continue to live on this planet — against the odds, against the Earth system science, even — this Earth that is given us "for all time".

Art by Lakai Monu, aged 12.

# relationships disrupted

**Gen. 3:7** Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.
8 And they heard the sound of God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of God among the trees of the garden. *9 But God called to the man and said, "Where are you?" 10 And the man said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself." 11 God said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" 12 The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." 13 Then God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."*

*14 Then God said to the serpent,*
*"Because you have done this,*
*cursed are you above all livestock*
*and above all beasts of the field;*
*on your belly you shall go,*
*and dust you shall eat*
*all the days of your life.*
*15 I will put enmity between you and the woman,*
*and between your offspring and her offspring;*
*he shall bruise your head,*
*and you shall bruise his heel." . . .*

**Elaine Wainwright** is a biblical scholar specialising in eco-feminist interpretation and is currently writing a Wisdom Commentary on Matthew's Gospel.

ELAINE WAINWRIGHT **points to ecological questions we can reflect on when we read Genesis 3:7-15.**

The First Reading from the Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Gen 3:9-15) highlights an issue inherent in our lectionaries. Our Scriptures are written predominantly in the form of lengthy narratives or poetry while our lectionary readings tend to be short selections from the Scriptural texts. And it requires a significant literary and theological wisdom to make the selections meaningful. Such wisdom does not seem to have informed the choice of opening verse for the First Reading of the Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Gen 3:9-15). As the fuller text of Gen 3:1-15 makes evident, Gen 3:9 cannot be separated from at least Gen 3: 8 given the connective "and" at the beginning of Gen 3:9; and, narratively, Gen 3:17 provides the broader context for both verses and what follows in Gen 3: 9-15.

These familiar texts have a long history of interpretation. Pope Francis, in Laudato Si', recognises that "biblical texts are to be read in their contexts with an appropriate hermeneutic" (par 67) and the encyclical invites us to use an ecological hermeneutic, in the face of the current degradation of Earth and all its constituents and people.

Pope Francis notes further that "the creation accounts in the book of Genesis contain, in their own symbolic and narrative language, profound teachings about human existence and its historical reality." He goes on to lay

out what he sees as "three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God (the Holy), with our neighbour (the Human) and with the Earth itself (Habitat)" (par 66) (my parenthesis). These three categories give significant lens for an ecological reading of biblical texts.

The immediate literary context for Gen 3:9-15 is verses 7-8. First, the woman and man find that on eating the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden "their eyes were opened and they knew that they were naked" (Gen 3:7). The actions awaken a new consciousness. They see both the world and each other in a new way — not with the innocence of before but with a knowing that has them recognise their nakedness. Their new knowing also calls for a response, and so they take "fig leaves" from their habitat to function as loincloths — habitat and human function together to seek to restore right relationships.

Norman Habel *(Earth Bible Commentary Series)* says of this new state that they are "no longer 'simple' and innocent". Rather they are "on the way to wisdom", but Gen 3:8 makes it evident that the journey toward a new wisdom is now treacherous, marked by the experience of estrangement from God (hiding themselves among the trees) and from their naked human bodies (sewing fig leaves together).

*We have brought "enmity" between the Earth, its waters and all its resources because we have not respected the right relationships established by God. However this "enmity" could be reversible. The way forward will be challenging and conflictual, but there is hope.*

The ecological reader will recognise in the choice made by the man and woman of Gen 3 a violation of the triad of right relationships between habitat, human and holy. This echoes through Gen 3:8–13. Verse 8, for instance, evokes the *sound* of God *walking in the garden in the cool of the day*, a powerful image of right relationship between habitat and holy. In this same context, the human couple hide from the presence of God, using the trees as their camouflage, thus highlighting the rift their actions have caused in that same triad of habitat, human and holy. The conversation which follows between God and the human couple in Gen 3:9-13 widens this rift.

The Holy One begins the conversation, asking the male where he is in the garden, indicating that there has been a break-down in relationships. Habitat is no longer a place of right relationship but of disjuncture. The man is afraid of his nakedness and he hides. He also sets up a cycle of blame as the Holy One questions whether he has broken the boundaries of right relationship by eating what was prohibited. The woman joins the cycle, blaming the serpent. These verses call for significant reflection as we seek to address the spiralling devastation that our choices are causing in our habitat and our responsibility for that devastation.

The harshest language characterising the breakdown of right relationships is directed at the serpent: "Cursed are you" (Gen 3:14). This is confronting language that can alert contemporary ecological readers to the horror of the ecological degradation of our day and to human responsibility for that degradation. How challenging it would be for us to receive as severe a divine critique as that directed to the serpent of Genesis 3. We are responsible for the breakdown of right relationship with so much of our habitat, Earth.

We have contaminated Earth's waters and brought degradation to much of its land. We have brought "enmity" between the Earth, its waters and all its resources because we, like the serpent, have not respected the right relationships established by God.

However, this "enmity" could be reversible as Gen 3:15 suggests. The way forward will be challenging and conflictual, but there is hope.

Gen 3:9-15 is a "poetic" text evoking new meanings when we read it in new contexts — the contemporary ecological crisis being one of them. Let us take time with this text in our own contexts so that it may open up new meanings and responses for us to the radical challenges of our day, in particular those coming from Earth and Earth creatures.

Painting: ***Adam and Eve*** by John Powell (Jamaica) © Used with permission
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# Goodness and Sincerity of Heart

ELAINE WAINWRIGHT **introduces the Book of Wisdom and points to how wise living today involves caring for all life — Wis 1:1, 6-7, 12-15; 2:23-24.**

| | |
|---|---|
| *Wis 1:1* | *Love righteousness, you rulers of the earth,* |
| | *think of God in goodness* |
| | *and seek God with sincerity of heart; . . .* |
| *Wis 1:6* | *For wisdom is a kindly spirit, . . .* |
| *12* | *Do not invite death by the error of your life,* |
| | *or bring on destruction by the works of your hands;* |
| *13* | *because God did not make death,* |
| | *and does not delight in the death of the living.* |
| *14* | *For God created all things so that they might exist;* |
| | *the generative forces of the world are wholesome,* |
| | *and there is no destructive poison in them,* |
| | *and the dominion of Hades is not on earth.* |
| *15* | *For righteousness is immortal.* |
| *16* | *But the ungodly by their words and deeds summoned death; . . .* |
| *Wis 2:23* | *for God created us for incorruption,* |
| | *and made us in the image of God's own eternity,* |
| *24* | *but through the devil's envy death entered the world,* |
| | *and those who belong to the devil's company experience it.* |

The First Reading for the Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (1 July 2018) is from the Book of Wisdom and it is eclectic: three verses from Chapter 1 (Wis 1: 13-15) and two verses from the second chapter (Wis 2: 23-24). This prompted me to be a little more expansive and choose seven verses from Wisdom 1 and the two verses from Wisdom 2. I want to have a more representative piece of text so that I might introduce you to the Wisdom literature. And I want the chosen text to enable us to explore how Wisdom writings provide a rich resource for ecological reading.

### Types of Writing in Old Testament

Readers of Israel's scriptures, known by Christians as the Old Testament, are familiar with the different types of writing within it. So much is "historical", tracing the story of

the covenant relationship between God and Israel. To this is added the voices of Israel's prophets speaking God's challenges and promises to the nation. And there are 150 psalms — the nation's book of prayer. Probably the least known are the Wisdom writings, the latest collection to be added to Torah, History and Psalms. They are unique, rising from the reflection on life of the sages — wise ones of Israel. The Book of Wisdom was written around the first or second century BCE. It personifies Wisdom as female and sings her praises as well as calls readers to right living. It functions well, therefore, as a text to be read ecologically.

## Wisdom Speaking to All of Us

The opening verse of the Book of Wisdom (Wis 1:1) singles out one group of readers: you rulers of the earth. We will extend the book's readers/recipients far beyond this exclusive, hierarchical and generally male-gendered group. An ecological perspective might lead us to name the recipients in this verse simply as "earthlings" (those of and on Earth) and to hear the sage's opening call: Love righteousness, you earthlings.

"Righteousness" is a key virtue in Israel's scriptures, especially in the call of the prophets and the prayers of the psalmist (eg, Psalm 37). It is the right ordering of relationships not only within the human community ("they shall be kept safe forever" (Ps 37:28a) but with the other-than-human: "the righteous shall inherit the land and live in it forever" (Ps 37:29).

We will always need to engage critically with righteousness or right ordering in different times and different places. For contemporary ecological readers, right ordering will be informed by what we now know of human dis-order in relation to Earth — our exploitation of water resources, our pollution of the oceans, our destruction of species and our lack of awareness and attention to ecological imperatives, like recycling.

## Seek Goodness and Sincerity

As we read on as Earthlings invited to love right ordering, we encounter a further invitation: think of God in goodness and seek God with sincerity of heart. This is another way of inviting us into the right ordering that is of God and can be discerned through a lens of goodness and sincerity of heart. And at this point of the unfolding of the universe, such "goodness" that is of God must include not only the human realm but also the other-than-human.

> ***We know that today wisdom must extend beyond the human realm. The one who is "wise" is not only a lover of humanity but of the entire cosmos. We can acclaim wisdom as a "universal spirit" personifying such love.***

In Wis 1:6, we hear the exclamation, "wisdom is a kindly spirit!", and further exploration reveals that the Greek word *philanthropos* used in this phrase means literally "love of the human one" (kindly). However, we know that today wisdom must extend beyond the human realm. The one who is "wise" is not only a lover of humanity but of the entire cosmos. Unfortunately, there is no Greek word for this cosmic love (as there is for love of the human) but we can acclaim wisdom as a "universal spirit" personifying such love.

## Avoid Causing Death

Wisdom 1:12 –14 yields very readily to an ecological reading shaped by an expanded consciousness. The death and destruction that the sage calls to readers' attention will be perceived as more expansive than that afflicting the human community. Wisdom calls her readers/hearers to avoid inviting death by the error of their lives. We can understand that as the death of sea creatures choked by the plastics in our oceans, pollution and destruction by pesticides and other toxic chemicals in some of the planet's richest lands and waterways.

The sage challenges her ecological readers with the expansive claim that "God did not make death" nor does God "delight in the death of the living" — of anyone or anything living in the cosmos. Wisdom 1:14-15 closes this short invocation with a vision of hope for the human community informed by an ecological imperative:

> . . . *God created all things so that they might exist;*
> *the generative forces of the world are wholesome,*
> *and there is no destructive poison in them*
> . . . *righteousness [God's right ordering] is immortal.*

Wisdom's sage is attentive also to what is destructive of this right ordering, recognising that "the ungodly by their words and deeds summon death" (Wis 1:16).

## Invitation to Reflect

The reading closes with Wis 2:23-24, a climax to our ecological interpretation. Wis 2:23 invites us, the cosmic community of all that is, into God's eternity. However, the final verse reminds readers of the presence of death that the sage attributes to the work of the devil. But an ecological reader can bring a particular perspective on these final verses beyond that of the sage: both life and death may, indeed, be part of the cosmic processes that are unfolding in our extraordinary universe and both can be celebrated. Wisdom's sage is indeed a rich source of reflection for the ecological reader of the biblical text. ■

Painting: ***#411*** by Bjorn Richter, Norwegian painter, sculptor, designer and writer © Used with permission. www.bjornrichter.no *"The sales of my work help me continue my (often idealistic) work for our planet. I began expressing my concern in painting in 1974 — probably the first artist to do this."*

**Elaine Wainwright** is a biblical scholar specialising in eco-feminist interpretation and is currently writing a Wisdom Commentary on Matthew's Gospel.

# READ the SIGNS of the TIME

ELAINE WAINWRIGHT introduces the apocalyptic writing in Revelation and urges us to read the signs of life and death in our world.

## REVELATION 11:19, 12:1-6, 10-12

11:19 Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of the covenant was seen within the temple; and there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail.

12:1 A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. 2 She was pregnant and was crying out in birthpangs, in the agony of giving birth. 3 Then another portent appeared in heaven: a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. 4 His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born. 5 And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. But her child was snatched away and taken to God and to God's throne; 6 and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, so that there she can be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days.

12:10 Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming:
"Now have come the salvation and the power
and the kingdom of our God
and the authority of God's Messiah,
for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down,
who accuses them day and night before our God.
11 But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb
and by the word of their testimony,
for they did not cling to life even in the face of death.
12 Rejoice then, you heavens
and those who dwell in them!
But woe/alas to the earth and the sea,
for the devil has come down to you
with great wrath,
because he knows that his time is short!"

The extract from the New Testament Book of Revelation is the first reading for the feast of the Assumption celebrated on 15 August. The whole Book of Revelation is in an apocalyptic genre, which doesn't always sit comfortably with our understanding of Scripture. But much of our popular fiction and film today has an eschatological aesthetic — *The Hunger Games*, *28 Days Later*, *Snowpiercer*, to name just a few. The end of the world is very much of the zeitgeist, but when it comes to reading Scripture, we tend to shy away from it, particularly as Catholics, thinking of it as futuristic, Earth-denying. With its splashes of fantastic imagery it seems removed from our lives and our world. We might wonder, then, how it could possibly be read from an ecological perspective.

Catherine Keller suggests another way of understanding Revelation. She says that apocalyptic or eschatological literature "does not boldly stride toward new worlds but rather laments the destructiveness of this world." It is ethical literature concerned with the here-and-now, both in terms of *time* and of *space*. So, in ecological terms, it is not speaking of an imagined time in the future but of the present; not in some imagined space but on this Earth — the place where all other-than-human and human interrelationships are enacted. And while the feast of the Assumption might seem to turn our attention from Earth toward the heavens — away from the present to the future — reading the verses of Revelation on this feast day with an ecological lens will return our gaze to Earth.

### Earth's Language

In Rev 11:19 Earth demands the ecological reader's attention with lightning, thunder, earthquakes and hail. Today, Earth's demands capture our attention just as they did the seer of the first century. Earth's "language" calls us to be attentive so we do not miss what Earth is directing us to, the call into a new future such as that which unfolds in Rev 12.

### The Vision

In Rev 12 the seer sees and describes for listeners/readers a cosmic sign: a woman clothed with the sun with the moon under her feet and a crown of 12 stars on her head. As she is described, this woman is woven into and one with the cosmos. She is in right relationship with it and so is poised to give birth — to enter into the birthpangs necessary for ongoing and new life in the cosmos. This seems to contradict Keller's description that apocalyptic

literature "does not boldly stride toward new worlds". However, it is only momentary.

## The Challenge

Another force enters the vision — the dragon creating chaos in the universe and seeking to destroy the cosmic child.

This description of warfare in the cosmos spoke to first century readers/listeners of their struggle with the powers of the Roman empire which raped and plundered the people, their lands and resources.

When we read this section today we are invited to consider the powers we struggle with in our own world — the rampant mining that ravages our landscapes, for instance, and other processes that denude and devastate our lands. It questions the human presence and activity in space/in the cosmos that scatters debris across the heavens and litters ocean beds, like the dragon ravaging the heavens and the earth.





And the dragon waits (Rev 12:4) — as do the forces that destroy Earth now. They watch and wait for the birth of the new — of the child of the cosmos, of Earth-enhancing processes and engagements. The dragon and its forces of destruction cannot allow any challenge to their death-dealing. All challengers must be destroyed.

Just as the seer imagined the chaos that the empire wrought on peoples and land in the first century, we experience cosmic, planetary and earthly forces pitted against one another causing chaos in our age. We see climate change melting Arctic and Antarctic ice, arable land breaking down into desert, toxic runoffs polluting the oceans and destroying the habitats of millions of marine creatures and wild weather events that devastate human communities.

## Hope and Commitment to Act

However, the seer of Revelation does not speak of evil winning the day even in the face of the multi-headed dragon and all its powers. The heavens have been reclaimed (Rev 12:10-12). The seer turns attention to the earth and the sea and laments: "Alas to the earth and the sea, for the devil has come down to you with great wrath" (Rev 12: 12b). Earth and sea form our habitat as human community. We need to work for right relationships with the earth and sea in our time "for the time is short", as the seer knows.

We know well that our ecological challenges at this point in human history are of apocalyptic proportions. The Book of Revelation with its eschatological visions and imagery calls for an urgency to act. As Catherine Keller says, it is "discourse about the collective encounter at the edge of space and time, where and when the life of creation has a chance at renewal — that is, it is about the present."

Humans desire to predict and imagine our future — whether that be the prospect of heaven or the demise of our entire planet. We are great consumers of eschatological texts — books, films and television programmes which foresee our collective end abound. And yet today, when we know ourselves to be closer to the abyss than ever before — through climate change and myriad other human-made planet-destroying processes — we seem unwilling to engage with eschatology in Scripture. Perhaps this is because we look to Scripture for comfort — God will save us — in what sometimes seems like a world headed for disaster. In fact, Revelation has much to offer us, too. The seer knows, as we are coming to know, that "the time is short".

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# BURNING SAND SHALL BECOME A POOL

**Isaiah 35:1-10**

1 The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice
and blossom; like the crocus
2 it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing.
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of
Carmel and Sharon.
They shall see the glory of God, the majesty of our God.
3 Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.
4 Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God. Who will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense. God will come and save you."
5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
6 then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert;
7 the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground
springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.
8 A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people;
no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray.
9 No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there.
10 And the ransomed of our God shall return, and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and
gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

ELAINE WAINWRIGHT

**suggests that the poetry of Isaiah offers the human community an incentive to change our behaviour towards Earth's community and commit to ecological conversion.**

This month we are celebrating the Season of Creation from Creation Day, 1 September, to the feast of St Francis of Assisi, 4 October. The Season is an invitation from our Churches to focus more sharply on our created or material world that includes the other-than-human with the human. All are created, all are material. This focus is necessary in order that we shift our consciousness to automatically

embrace the other-than-human. We are not there yet!

The Isaiah 35:4-7 text is the first reading for the 23rd Sunday of the Year and a gift for our reflection during the Season of Creation. The entire poem of Isaiah 35:1-10, from which the four verses of the First Reading are taken, show the Earth-consciousness of the poet/prophet very explicitly. It is a consciousness which we are endeavouring to inhabit also.

## Time and Place

Two key aspects of an ecological consciousness to guide our reading are attentiveness to *time* and attentiveness to *place* — in our own lives and in the biblical texts with which we engage. The time is that of Isaiah, an eighth-century prophet. His oracles are collected in the first 39 chapters of the much longer collection of Isaiah in our Bibles. Isaiah is called to preach and prophesy to Judah, the Southern Kingdom (Is 6), at a time of political threat from the north. The place is the built environment of the city of Jerusalem (Zion). The prophet also draws the other-than-human reality into his preaching challenging a people who have abandoned God. We hear this in the poignant opening verses of an earlier Isaian oracle: "Let me sing to my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard" (Is 5:1).

## Offering a Vision of Change

Isaiah 35 is the last great oracle of this eighth-century prophet (or perhaps, as some scholars suggest, from a later prophet that found its way into the concluding section of the First Isaiah — Is 1-39). The dominant theme characterising this prophetic oracle is "reversal". We hear this in the opening verses where deserts blossom and wildernesses rejoice. The prophet offers a vision of hope — a vision which can be ours today. We can ask ourselves: What signs can we see of deserts blossoming or wildernesses rejoicing? Are they a material reality somewhere in our lives and our world now? Or are they what we simply hope for?

The prophet in Isaiah 35 uses poetry as the medium of his message. While we can read prose that confronts with stories of desertification, the making of wildernesses, poetry can reach into our hearts. We recognise the voice of the prophet speaking in evocative poetry to ancient Israel certainly, but also speaking to us today. And we hear contemporary prophets urging us in this same genre.

*If we are to ward off the imminent destruction of precious ecosystems and species, the human community must be responsible for the reversal.*

## Vision of Hope

Both ancient and contemporary poets use reversal to face us with the devastation of Earth and all Earth's living being:

> Strengthen the weak hands,
> and make firm the feeble knees.
> Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
> "Be strong, do not fear!" (Is 35:6-7)

And just as it was difficult for ancient Israel to stay strong in the face of their impending political disasters, so too, is it difficult for us today to stay strong in the face of impending ecological disasters.

## Commitment to Ecological Conversion

"Be strong, do not fear!" We need these calls to rise up in many different contexts and in many different languages. If we are to ward off the imminent destruction of precious ecosystems and species, the human community must be responsible for the reversal. We must be strong in our commitment. We must be forthright and hold our elected leaders responsible to the Paris Agreement, by way of example.

The prophet says: "God will come to save", but not as an interventionist actor. God will come and save as the one who stands with the entire Earth community in its journey toward right relationships.

In Is 35:5-10 the poet/prophet offers a new vision of restoration to the community. As in Is 35:1-2, the vision of restoration has water at its heart:

> 6 For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert;
> 7 the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs.

Water and access to water is necessary for all that lives, and hence is one of the most central aspects of our ecological crisis. The need is not new in our time, as the words of the prophet indicate.

The vision that the prophet Isaiah writes is as appropriate for us in our days of ecological crisis as it was for the people of Judah in eighth-century BCE. During the Season of Creation we're invited to be attentive to the word being addressed to us through our scriptures as well as through our lives. Our times confront us daily with imperatives to ecological conversion. Through our conversion we will know and experience the incredible diversity and complexity of Earth, respect its creativity and live in right relationship with all as we co-create the future of this planet.

May this Season of Creation provide opportunities for the restoration and development of right relationship within the Earth Community.

See https://seasonofcreation.com for more detail and resources for each of the Sundays during the Seasons of Creation.

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# *CREATED to* ***SERVE*** *and* ***PRESERVE*** **EARTH**

ELAINE WAINWRIGHT **reads the very familiar Genesis 2 text of the creation showing humanity's responsibility to serve and preserve the Earth community.**

This Genesis text of the creation and naming of the animals, the creation of woman and the celebration of the relationship between the man and the woman, is very familiar. It focuses on the human couple belonging in a web of emerging life.

There are two factors which can influence our ecological reading of this text: its familiarity and its focus on the human couple. We need to make sure that neither

**Gen 2:18-24**

Gen 2:18 Then God said: "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." 19 So out of the ground God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.

20 The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner.

21 So God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh.

22 And the rib that God had taken from the man God made into a woman and brought her to the man.

23 Then the man said,
"This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
this one shall be called Woman,
for out of Man this one was taken."

24 Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.

stops us attending to how the human, the holy and the habitat are interconnected in this narrative.

Gen 2:18-24, the first reading for the 27th Sunday of Ordinary time, belongs in the wider context of Gen 2:4b-25. There we encounter the ancient storyteller narrating the origin of the universe in what may seem today to be a very primitive account. However, the early verses of Genesis 2 speak of unfolding and emerging which evoke contemporary stories of the origins and ongoing expansion of the universe. The seer tells of forming an Earth creature from the Earth itself — the *adam* from the *adamah* (Hebrew text of Gen 2:7). The task of the *adam is* to "serve" and to "preserve" (to till and to keep) the *adamah*, the Earth given as home. We hear that Earth precedes the Earth creature in this narrative of the emergence of the universe — as it does in our contemporary scientific narratives.

It is at this point that our focus on Gen 2:18-24 begins. The Creator discerns that it is not good for the Earth creature/the *adam* to be alone. However, we note the anthropocentric perspective here. The implication seems to be that it is not good for the Earth creature to be the lone one of its type. It may also imply that one Earth creature alone is insufficient to serve and preserve Earth. For contemporary readers, the different possibilities that the text evokes enable us to draw into our meaning-making some of the different ways in which we tell our stories of origins across a range of human cultures today.

As the narrative continues we encounter the divine intention to make a helper (an *āzer* in Hebrew) for the *adam*. This *helper* is not an inferior being. In fact there are texts within the Hebrew Bible that name the Divine as *āzer* (Ex 18:4; Deut 33:7; Ps 70:5). The *āzer* is the one who might remove the aloneness which accompanied the *adam* and his serving and preserving of the *adamah*. The text of Gen 2:18 evoking the aloneness of the *adam*/the earth creature opens into divine creativity and rich images of the countless animals being formed and brought to the Earth creature in order to find this *āzer*/helper. The verses Gen 2:19-20 which recount the activity teem with creativity. They draw contemporary readers into the unfolding of the universe and all its constituents — into the world of today.

***This entire narrative of creation invites us into a material world, a created world, a world in which divine creativity is forever at work in the unfolding of the universe***

But the *adam* still cannot find a living creature that shares his same being. Reponding to this lack, the storyteller recounts an amazing act of divine creativity. Earlier in Gen 2:7 we heard that the *adam* was formed "from the dust of the ground" and into the nostrils of this first creature, the Creator breathed the breath of life. The verse concluded with the phrase: the *adam* became a living being. We hear this story as teeming with life — the human and other-than-human intimately related in life.

God continues the creative process of seeking a companion for the *adam*. It becomes more complicated: a rib is taken from the *adam* and formed into a new creature that the storyteller names as "woman". A climatic exclamation emerges from the *adam*: "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh."

There is no hint in this extraordinary exclamation of inferiority on the basis of gender. Divine creativity has brought forth humanity as male and female through different processes but with a shared outcome. It is this which is celebrated in the exclamation:

**This at last is bone of my bones**
**and flesh of my flesh;**
**This one shall be called Woman**
**for out of Man this one was**
**taken (Gen 2:23).**

And while the text emphasises the creation of the human couple, it cannot be separated from the whole emergence of the heavens and earth and all living beings into which we are drawn as readers and listeners. This entire narrative of creation invites us into a material world, a created world, a world in which divine creativity is forever at work in the unfolding of the universe.

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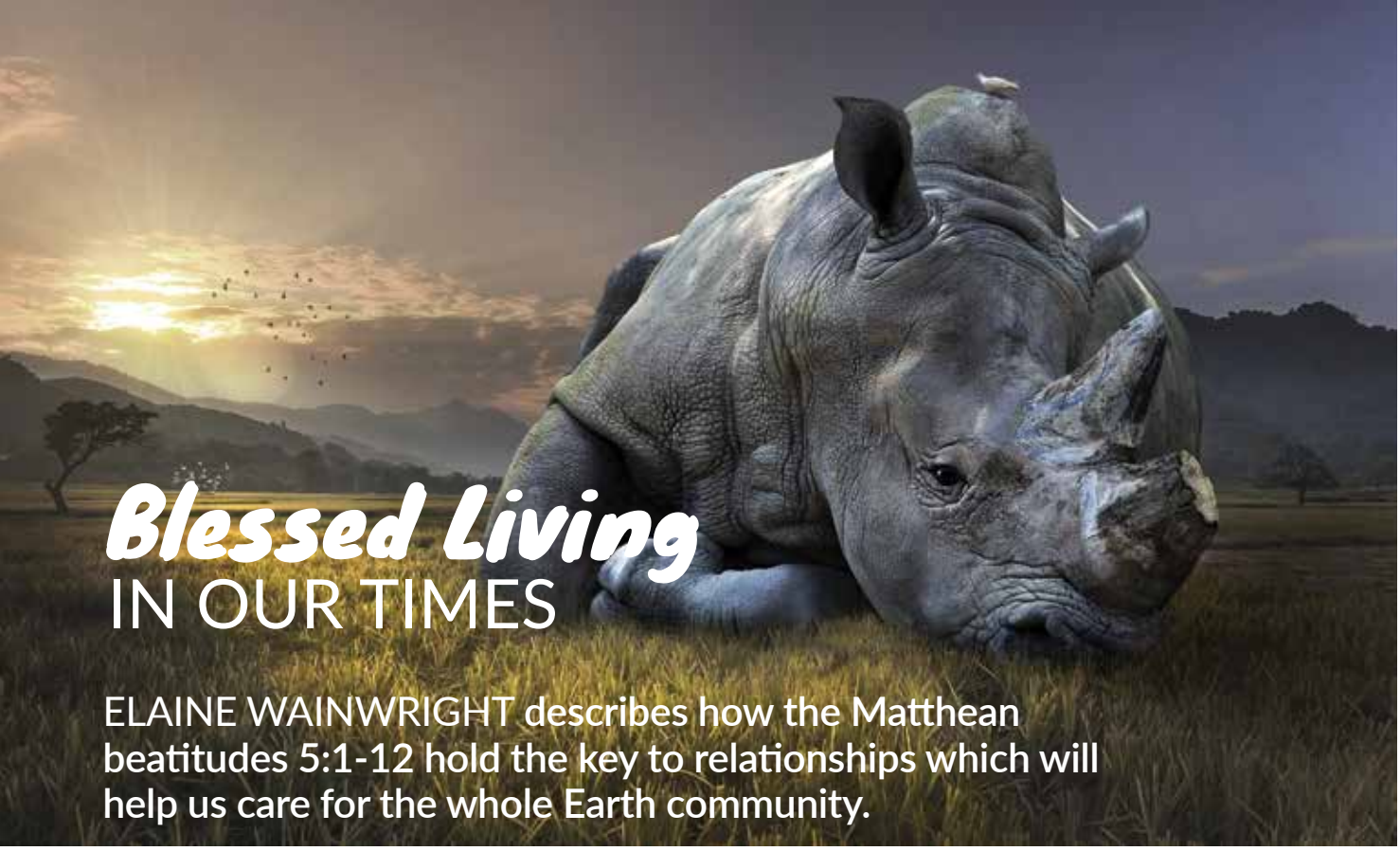

# Blessed Living IN OUR TIMES

**ELAINE WAINWRIGHT describes how the Matthean beatitudes 5:1-12 hold the key to relationships which will help us care for the whole Earth community.**

The text challenges the ecological reader in two ways. First, its familiarity means we tend not to notice what's really being said — we hear only what we've heard before. And second, because it seems to focus very specifically on the human community and human virtues. But having taken up the challenge to read the beatitudes from an ecological perspective, I have found them rich in what we might call ecological ethics.

The opening two verses (Mt 5:1-2) are rich in inter-contextuality. This means that the human and the other-than-human interact subtly and collaboratively in the text even though Jesus functions as key character in these verses. He *sees* the crowd, a simple statement that links him to the human community, and he *goes up* the mountain, reminding readers that all that is human takes place *in a context*, *a material context*. This context in particular is rich in symbolism. Within Israel's religious tradition, mountains are places of encounter with the divine, for Abraham (Gen 22:2-19), Moses (Ex 19:1-6) and many others. The text states explicitly that Jesus sits down on the mountain — on the earth itself, which acts as an authorising agent for what takes place there.

The first word that the crowd hears is *makarioi:* fortunate, happy, privileged, blessed. It is an affirmation of members of the human community, those who live the virtues that will be praised by the nine-fold repetition of *makarioi.* So, the invitation to hear these well-known beatitudes ecologically is to hear them anew.

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### Matthew 5:1-12

1 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain;
and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2 Then he
began to speak, and taught them, saying:
3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of
heaven.
4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
5 "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for
righteousness, for they will be filled.
7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
8 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called
children of God.
10 "Blessed are those who are persecuted for
righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
11 "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute
you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my
account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in
heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets
who were before you."

## Poor in Spirit

The "poor in spirit" are the first proclaimed *makarioi*/blessed (Mt 5:3). This phrase does not appear anywhere else in the Jewish scriptures or in Greek texts of the first century. Scholars recognise in it, however, echoes of the virtue of humility that was highly prized in antiquity. Such a virtue recognised what the human person shares with all Earth's constituents. It is a virtue essential to our contemporary ecological ethics.

The second half of the beatitude gives the reason for this blessedness — the *basileia*/kin(g)dom of the heavens is theirs. John (Mt 3:2) and Jesus (Mt 4:17) are proclaiming

this kin(g)dom. It is a vision for right relationships at the heart of the Matthean Gospel. The ecological reader understands the vision extending relationships from just within the human community to those in the entire Earth community.

## Those Who Mourn

The second proclamation of 'honour" or "blessing" is of those who mourn (Mt 5:4). Members of the human community mourn when they lose someone or something they hold dear (Gen 23:2, 37:34; 50:3; 1Sam 15:35) as do members of the other-than-human community. But also in Hosea 4:3, the land and all beings who live in it mourn as Earth's creatures vanish (see, Is 33:9; Jer 4:28; 12:4); and people mourn this fate of Earth (Amos 8:8).

Mourning accompanies the breakdown of relationships in the Earth community and in the community's relationship with the Divine. Grief and mourning for broken relationships characterise many today who work for ecological transformation. Just as they characterise Earth creatures experiencing the loss of habitats and companions at the hands of the human community. However, mourning is not to become a permanent state for those who seek the gospel vision of Jesus. Rather, their comfort is in a commitment to the flourishing of diversity.

## Humble Meek

We might notice the close relationship between the first and the third beatitudes: the "poor in spirit" and the "meek". Both can be characterised as "humble". To understand this connection, we can read Psalms 37 in which the phrase "shall inherit the earth" occurs five times. In particular, Ps 37:11 names the "meek" as inheritors.

And also Israel's tradition is strong in the recognition that the land belongs to God (Num 26:53; Ps 105:11). Israel's task is to till and keep it (Gen 2:15); to be in right relationship with it. This beatitude could have offered hope to a first-century Galilean audience whose land was being confiscated by Roman landlords.

## Right Relationships

Righteousness/right ordering/right relationship is the virtue praised or honoured in both the fourth and eighth beatitudes. It is a key Matthean virtue preached in the Sermon (Mt 5:6, 10, 20; 6:1, 23) and in Ps 85:10-13 it is repeatedly linked with other key virtues:

Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet
*Righteousness* and peace will kiss each other
Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
*Righteousness* will look down from the sky.
God will give what is good
And our land will yield its increase.
*Righteousness* will go before God,
And will make a path for God's steps.

This righteousness or right ordering is to characterise Divine, human and other-than-human interrelationships. Within them ecological and social justice meet and embrace. However, right ordering needs to be worked out in each unique location and community, each habitat and ecosystem. In so doing those hungering and thirsting for right relationships will be satisfied.

## Practising Compassion

The sermon gives us three additional ways of living the right relationships that characterise the new vision that Jesus preaches. Those who show mercy participate in the mercy of God and are caught up in a spiral of mercy (Mt 5:7). Compassion is not confined to the human community. Our hearts break when we see the ravages of Earth and all Earth's creatures by wanton industrialisation and destruction. Can we receive compassion that heals such pain?

## God Is with the Whole Earth Community

The pure in heart (Mt 5:8) are named blessed and promised that they shall see God. It is through our body, our heart and our eyes, that we can see and know God. We know that God is "with us" as Mt 1:23 tells us. That "us" is not just the human community as we usually think. Rather, God has entered into a unique relationship with the entire Earth community. We need to call on all our senses, all our bodiliness, to engage fully in this relationship. It is this which makes for peace — an ecological peace (Mt 5:9).

The idea of reading the beatitudes ecologically is new. It extends the invitation to repentance as preached in the Gospel of Matthew (Mt 3:2; 4:17) beyond the human to the other-than-human community. We are on the very threshold of a response to that invitation and each of us is invited to participate. We might reflect and talk to others about how we are invited to articulate the beatitudes afresh in the face of the ecological imperative. ◑

# GOD WILL LEAD US

ELAINE WAINWRIGHT **introduces the prophet Baruch encouraging the Hebrew exiles with God's promise of their return to and restoration of their land.**

We will hear Baruch 5:1-9 for the First Reading on the second Sunday of Advent. The verses make up the final prophetic oracle of an unknown prophet. His work has been attributed to Jeremiah's scribe who bears the same name, Baruch. The book is not included in the Jewish canon nor that of most Protestant denominations. In the Catholic Lectionary it is one of the Deuterocanonical books. However, readers will hear in this text echoes of other postexilic prophets envisioning the exiles' return to the land of Israel and to Jerusalem.

These prophets can provide inspiration to the ecological reader as they draw on imagery from the material world to envisage a new future for the people of Israel on their return to their place, their land. Initially, the prophet addresses the city, Jerusalem — destroyed by the Babylonians and left in ruin during exile. It is as if the city is clothed with a garment of "sorrow and affliction".

It takes little imagination for us to call to mind cities of present-day Syria, for instance, that are likewise clothed with a garment of sorrow and affliction. Indeed, there are so many such places enduring sorrow as a result of the manifold ways of devastation of Earth and its peoples. They cry out for a restoration that is not just human but ecological.

## Dressing for a New Time

The prophet challenges the exiles to take off sorrow and affliction and to be reclothed. One image of this reclothing is to put on "the cloak of God's justice" (Bar 5: 2). The prophet also gives the city, Jerusalem, a new name — righteous peace, Godly glory (Bar 5:4). The words "justice" and "righteousness" permeate the new vision. They evoke right ordering, the ordering that is of God and God's desire for the universe. For us, today, this must include the other-than-human. Habitat, the human and the holy must all be caught up in the vision of "righteous peace and godly glory".

## Vision of Exiles' Return

The return of the exiles is envisaged in a number of ways. The prophet recalls their being led away on foot and contrasts this with the image of their being carried back as would be a triumphant ruler. It is imagery

**Baruch 5:1-9 [Reading for the Second Sunday of Advent]**

Baruch 5:1 Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem,
and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God.
2 Put on the robe of the righteousness that comes from God;
put on your head the diadem of the glory of the Everlasting;
3 for God will show your splendour everywhere under heaven.
4 For God will give you evermore the name,
"Righteous Peace, Godly Glory."
5 Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height;
look toward the east,
and see your children gathered from west and east
at the word of the Holy One,
rejoicing that God has remembered them.
6 For they went out from you on foot,
led away by their enemies;
but God will bring them back to you,
carried in glory, as on a royal throne.
7 For God has ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills be made low
and the valleys filled up, to make level ground,
so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God.
8 The woods and every fragrant tree
have shaded Israel at God's command.
9 For God will lead Israel with joy,
in the light of God's glory,
with the mercy and righteousness that come from God.

of the humans. It is followed by the use of Earth imagery: the flattening of mountains and hills, the filling in of valleys. The reason given for such a transformation of Earth is that "Israel may walk safely in the glory of God" (Bar 5:7).

As ecological readers, we are aware of the ways in which Earth can be violently manipulated to serve human ends — mining, agriculture and industry to name a few. Mountains can be flattened and valleys filled in as the prophet envisages. And for Baruch, this is to serve the needs of the exiles — that they have a route of return along which they can travel safely.

## Critique and Reclamation

We discover as we engage with this prophetic vision of hope expressed through Earth imagery, that ecological reading entails a twofold movement similar to prophetic reading.

Initially, it is necessary to *critique* those aspects of the prophet's vision that fail to evoke ecological justice and fullness of life for all Earth and Earth beings. And so we look closely at the imagery of flattening hills and filling in valleys as a manipulation of Earth for human need.

Having undertaken the critique, we now engage in the second phase, namely the *reclamation* of the text and its message.

The text says that the flattening of mountains and filling in of valleys is part of God's work in returning the exiles — "so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God". The reader discerns what is the right and just relationship within the Earth community of the human and other-than-human at different points along their shared journey.

The image that the prophet selects to give expression to this right and just relationship is significant for the ecological reader: the woods and every fragrant tree have shaded Israel at God's command (Bar 5:8). Human wisdom knows how important trees are for the health and survival of the planet and all its constituents. The prophet draws on this wisdom and returns it to the human community.

The ancient prophet concludes his words of hope to a displaced people with a promise: God will lead Israel with the mercy and righteousness/justice that come from God. Righteousness or justice is the right ordering of relationships. The prophet sees these relationships of mercy and justice among the human community and with God.

We think of mercy and justice as core ecological virtues, ways of living and being. Were Baruch preaching today he might conclude his prophecy in this way:

*"For God will lead the Earth community with joy,*
*In right relationship with God,*
*with the mercy and justice that come from God."* ⭐

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