

WGUMC July 21, 2013 "Oaks Whirl, Hinds Calve"  
Psalm 29

We headed north on our heat-wave vacation this year, up to the Columbia River Gorge. While there, we wanted to spend a day at Mount St. Helens, and I'm glad we did. Not only was it cooler there, but it was really cool.

But seeing with my own eyes all the devastation around me at the Johnston Ridge Observatory, I still couldn't quite get my mind around it. Try to imagine it: On Sunday morning, May 18, 1980, a magnitude 5.1 earthquake triggered a volcanic eruption that caused the largest avalanche in recorded history. That landslide was immediately followed by a lateral blast that sent pulverized rock and debris travelling north at 300 mph, releasing 24 megatons of thermal energy (that's about 500 Hiroshima bombs) and taking out 4 billion board feet of timber, enough to build 300,000 two-bedroom homes. Not long after, melted snow and ice mixed with the debris and sent great muddy lahars down the mountainside, washing away 27 bridges,

185 miles of road, 200 homes, and reducing the depth of the shipping channel in the Columbia River by 25 feet. The eruption continued for nine hours, and the ash, 540 million tons of it, went 80,000 feet in the air, eventually covering 22,000 square miles. I was a teenager in Billings, Montana, at the time, almost 900 miles away. By Monday morning, there was ash all over everything. They let school out for a day.

Though officials had established an evacuation zone around the mountain, it wasn't nearly big enough, and 57 people died that day. Thank God it happened on a Sunday or that number would have been much higher.

Johnston Ridge was later named for David Johnston, the USGS scientist who lost his life monitoring the volcano that morning. Standing on the ridge where he died, it was impossible for me not to think about the power of nature and the power of God and the relationship between the two. On the one hand, you have the incredible destructive force of a volcanic eruption.

On the other hand, you have "God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth."

As I said, it's all pretty hard to get your mind around. But inside the observatory, the exhibits reminded me of something I learned in earth science: rocks are living. They have a life cycle. Magma, the fuel of the volcano, is just old rock, forced downward by colliding with the North American plate and melted by high pressure in the earth's crust. When it comes to the surface as lava, it cools and becomes new rock, and the cycle begins again. So even the greatest destruction we can imagine is just a part of an even greater cycle of recreation. But most of it we can't see.

After the eruption, Weyerhaeuser planted 18 million trees in the blow-down zone around the old volcano. Thirty-three years later, there's a forest growing out of the ashes. It was in those trees that I could most clearly see God's work of recreation.

So I found myself going from the science of plate tectonics to the songs of praise in our Bible. For some, that's a stretch. But I like to think that while science gives us the mechanics, we need the psalms to give us the meaning and the melody. You just have to learn how to read them properly. If you have a scientific mind as I do, you have to remember that the Biblical writers assumed, like all ancient peoples assumed, that natural events had supernatural explanations. The Native peoples around Mount St. Helens had their stories about how the gods created the fire mountains. So does the Bible. Psalm 104 says that God is the one "who looks on the earth and it trembles, who touches the mountains and they smoke."

[104:32]

So, it's not surprising to read Psalm 29 and find God causing all kinds of natural disasters! In this psalm, the voice of the Lord is characterized as a great storm; it is thunder and the wind that breaks cedars. The voice of the Lord moves

mountains, the mountains of Lebanon and Sirion, making them skip like a calf. The voice of the Lord is lightning (or maybe a volcano); it flashes forth flames of fire. The voice of the Lord is an earthquake; it shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.

So at first reading, Psalm 29 would give us Almighty God, the Un-maker of heaven and earth! But don't run for the hills. Hold on. Read on. We're coming to a very curious verse, verse 9. In the text I read, it says: "The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare..." Now I think that's a pretty good description of what happened at Mount St. Helens. But a more accurate translation of the Hebrew is: "The voice of the Lord causes the deer [*hinds*, in the King James English] to calve." I'm not kidding. Ask my husband. That's what it says. Instead of oaks whirling, we have deer calving.

But that makes it even more challenging to get at the meaning. Maybe this strange verse is here because ancient people believed that thunder caused animals to go into labor.

That's what my study Bible suggests. Plausible. But then again, maybe this verse is really here to remind us that in the midst of great destruction, God is already at work bringing about the new creation. In the midst of death, life. "The voice of the Lord causes the deer to calve...And in God's temple all say, 'Glory!'"

I say, look to science to give you the mechanics of what's going on in our natural world. But look to Scripture to give you the meaning. Scripture can give us a deep understanding of this very fundamental process of ongoing creation. In fact, I find in this curious little verse about oaks whirling and/or hinds calving a true depiction of how the Creator works and how everything in creation works, as well. In other words, what is true geophysically is also true individually.

What does this mean really? I came back down from Johnston Ridge, back to San Jose, thinking about what all this science and Scripture can teach me about creation and creativity. First of all, I learned that creation can be pretty

chaotic. Just look at my desk when I'm writing a sermon. I call it the blow-down zone! Second, that creation necessarily involves a lot of destruction. When I met my husband, he was working on a novel about the Prophet Jeremiah. He'd written a first draft that was 1600 pages long, but had junked the whole thing and started over. Volcanoes and writers sometimes have to destroy everything in order to create something.

Third, I learned that any act of new creation is going to have a big impact on the old creation. I hear that Grace Praisewater is having her kitchen remodeled after 63 years. She's planning on leaving town for three weeks and not coming back until it's done. Smart woman! But as any woman will tell you, rearrange your kitchen and you will rearrange your whole life! Just like the forests around the volcano, the Praisewaters will need some time to recover!

But the disruption caused by remodeling a room in a house is nothing compared to the chaos we encounter when

we are trying to rebuild our lives. Whatever the trigger—a natural disaster, a death, a divorce, a diagnosis—we're seldom prepared for the eruptions and interruptions of our daily routines. We find to our terror that we can't outrun what feels like a lateral blast that blows away our sense of security and stability. We look around and nothing is as it was. As time goes by, the fallout from this crisis is like an ash fall. It blinds our eyes, chokes our throat, and coats everything we can see and touch with a layer of fine-grained debris that used to be our life.

Now, we can look at the mechanics of this eruption in our lives and see nothing but devastation. Or we can search for the meaning and find the first fragile signs of our new creation. The first plants to come back to Mount St. Helens were the wildflowers. Nice touch. So, if you are ever lost in the ash fall, read Psalm 29 and remember this: wherever the oaks are whirling, the deer are surely calving. Wherever something is being destroyed, something else is being created. Isn't that,



after all, just what the Gospels are saying? Doesn't Jesus spend a lot of time trying to tell his disciples that he must suffer death in order to bring new life? Doesn't Paul say we have to be united with Christ in a death like his in order to be united with Christ in a resurrection like his? [Romans 6:5] You see, this relatively young volcano and this New Testament witness to the very same truth: the old creation must pass away or get blown away so that the new creation can come, and we're going to come, one of these days. [2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 4:22f; Revelation 21:1-5]

Creative people know all about oaks whirling and deer calving. Made in the image of the Creator, inspired by the beauty of creation, guided by the Spirit of life, artists live the creative process. They write, paint, sing, play, sew, knit, carve and craft it. But I hope as they do that they occasionally contemplate how God is writing, painting, singing, playing, sewing, knitting, carving and crafting them, too. I pray that

they understand that the process will sometimes demand that they ruthlessly rewrite the lines, revise the song, rip out the seams, tear up the sketch, and trust the Spirit enough to start over with a clean canvas. And no matter what disaster strikes, no matter what chaos ensues in the process, may they know that God is still in control. As Psalm 29 assures us: "The Lord sits enthroned over the flood; the Lord sits enthroned as king forever. May the Lord give strength to his people! May the Lord bless his people with peace." [29:10]

I hope you'll enjoy our Creator Faire during coffee hour. And I hope that you'll take the time to ask folks what their creative process has taught them about the Creator. Then, in God's temple, we can all say, "Glory!"