

Listening for the Time to Come: A Call to Christians in the Face of Environmental Crisis

Janeen Bertsche Johnson

AMBS October 1, 2010

Isaiah 42:5-9, 21-23

Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it:

I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

I am the Lord; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols.
See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

The Lord was pleased, for the sake of his righteousness, to magnify his teaching and make it glorious.

But this is a people robbed and plundered; all of them are trapped in holes and hidden in prisons;
they have become a prey with no one to rescue, a spoil with no one to say, 'Restore!'

Who among you will give heed to this; who will attend and listen for the time to come?

This text includes some familiar verses from one of Isaiah's Servant Songs, followed by a short passage from later in chapter 42 that first caught my attention last December. I had done a search for the word "listen," and of all the passages that came up, Isaiah 42:21-23 stood out. I was struck by the way despair and hope seemed so intertwined here.

I especially noticed the description of a people robbed, plundered, trapped, and imprisoned. It seemed to speak not only to the original context of Babylonian exile, but also to the way our own society has been overpowered by forces too strong to resist. We are a people robbed by the staggering costs of rampant militarism. We are a people trapped in the hole of insatiable consumerism, and our environment has been plundered by our reckless rape of the earth's resources. We are a people hidden in the prisons of individualism and apathy. We have become a prey to the polarization industry, which makes its wealth by dividing us into factions and encouraging us to scorn the other. We are the spoil of the forces of a dysfunctional culture, and no one seems able to rescue us.

And in the midst of this bleak reality, the words of Isaiah pierce our hearts: "Who among you will give heed to this; who will attend and listen for the time to come?" There is hope here, an invitation to engage the pain of the world with the promise of God.

For the last several months, I've kept these verses posted on the bulletin board in my office, and I've kept wondering what they have to say to me. A few weeks ago, I was invited to preach for the Faith and Environment Conference at Merry Lea Environmental Center of Goshen College. The question I was asked to address was, "What hope does the Christian tradition offer in the face of overwhelming global problems such as climate change?" I knew right away that I wanted to use the call of Isaiah 42:23, a call that comes from the world's Creator, who stretched out the heavens and spread out the earth, and gives breath to everything in it. (vs. 5)

"Who among you will give heed to this; who will attend and listen for the time to come?" This text urges that some of the most important work of Christian creation caretakers is to attend, to listen, and to imagine.

First, what does it mean to attend? Quite simply, we must pay attention to what is happening in the world around us. But that is harder than it sounds. It is so easy, in our current context, to ignore the created order. Most people spend their waking hours inside a building, or in an air-conditioned car that moves too fast to truly see what is around them. We are in a constant state of busyness and hurry, which does not lend itself to the act of attending.

In addition, many of us haven't been trained to understand the natural world, and the signals it gives us. We may notice a few things, but not know how to interpret them. I have heard people scoff, in the middle of a harsh winter, "How can people talk about global warming? This is the coldest winter we've ever had!" But an exceptionally cold winter in Indiana does not mean that the polar ice caps and glaciers are safe! We have to learn what certain patterns mean within a bigger picture.

I recently encountered a killdeer, which is a truly amazing bird. Most people become aware of a killdeer's presence because of its loud shrieking call. When you look to see what creature is sounding this alarm, you will see a long-legged bird flailing nearby. One wing will be dragging near the ground, and the other will be flapping wildly.

Your first impulse will be to think, "Oh, that poor bird is injured, and can't fly away." That is exactly what the killdeer wants you to think. But if you know what this signal means, you will instead look down on the ground and watch out for the killdeer's nest, which is a group of four eggs that blend perfectly into the pebbles or ground around them. You are close to the nest, and the killdeer is trying to draw you away so the eggs stay safe.

So, attending means becoming educated so we know how to read the signals the earth gives us. A few years ago, I learned how to do biological monitoring of water quality. Before this training, I didn't even realize that a whole assortment of macroinvertebrates—insect nymphs, worms, snails, and more—lived on the floor of rivers and ponds, let alone that they can tell us something about whether the water is healthy or not. But now I can identify a dragonfly nymph and know that is a signal of good water quality.

Another reason we struggle to attend to the earth is because we are in denial, and we'd rather stay there than face harsh realities. Often the messages coming from creation are sounds of distress, from a world that is being scarred by human ruthlessness and carelessness. Romans 8:22 describes the whole creation groaning as if in labor pains, waiting for redemption. If we truly attend to creation, or even to the reports scientists give us about the environment, we will hear much that will alarm us, which should jolt us out of our apathy. Many people don't want to face that bad news, or the guilt they feel, or the awareness that their way of life needs to change.

Think about how you felt this summer as the news got worse and worse about the BP oil spill in the Gulf. Initially, I didn't pay too much attention, but then I got angry. As the enormity of the spill became obvious, I moved into grieving. But eventually, I couldn't listen anymore. It was too big of a problem, and I felt too helpless and hopeless. I shut down my "attending" function, before I could move to a place of action, where I would actually dramatically reduce my use of oil.

And yet, there is more to attend to than the trauma creation is experiencing. Dan Epp-Tiessen, a Bible professor at Canadian Mennonite University and Mark's father, says in an issue of *Vision* that "creation care best begins not with guilt at how humankind is destroying creation (although such guilt may have its place), but with delight, amazement, reverence, gratitude, and praise, all inspired by attentiveness to the wondrous nature of God's handiwork." (Creation Care, *Vision* 9:1, Spring 2008, p. 4)

How might we attend to the beauty of creation that is all around us, even here in Elkhart? Notice the variety of grasses and flowers in our centerpiece. All of them came from just 100 feet east of here, in our prairie!

Second, what does it mean to listen? Spiritual director Jean Stairs writes, “To listen is to wait with a posture of alertness, in anticipation of hearing something of the voice and presence of God, who longs for us to be whole and abundantly alive. But we do not listen in order to make God present. We open our ears as a way of responding to the presence of God, who is already and always present in our lives, with or without our recognition.” (*Listening for the Soul*, p16)

Every Wednesday morning, a group of birdwatchers gathers at the Rieth Center in Goshen and heads out to the woods with binoculars and bug spray. Last spring, I started joining this group as often as I could, because I knew very little about birds and wanted to know more.

What I soon learned about bird watching is that it is just as much about bird listening. We have a couple of group members who astound me in their ability to recognize the presence of a particular breed of bird just by its distinctive call. “There’s a red-eyed vireo!” Don will exclaim. “Where?” I ask, my binoculars shooting to my face. “Oh, I don’t see it—I hear it up there.”

Sometimes there are several bird calls overlapping one another, and those of us with less trained ears can’t tell which one is which. Then one of the hard-core birdwatchers will take out their iPod with the bird call application, and play the call for us. Sometimes, people disagree about which type of bird they are hearing, and they use the recordings to compare the calls of the possible sources. If we are lucky, each bird we hear will make its presence known visibly as well. But even if we don’t see it, we get to count it as a bird we have found.

Just as listening is a crucial part of bird watching, it is a crucial part of creation care. Isaiah 42:23 specifically cries out for someone to “listen for the time to come.” What does that mean? I believe it links back to verse 9, where God declares: “See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.”

Our faith proclaims that God is always at work reconciling all things to God’s self—restoring creation as well as humanity. Throughout the scriptures, God asks God’s people to watch and listen for the signs of that work, so that we can join in with it and give testimony to others. Sometimes our work is to watch and listen for signs of restoration around us. Other times, it is to listen to God’s promise, even before the restoration springs forth.

Just as birdwatchers do not always spot the birds they hear, yet recognize their presence, we need to be training our ears to hear the promises of restoration within creation, even when we don’t see the evidence.

Finally, what does it mean to imagine? I think it means taking our place as co-creators with God. Not taking the place of God, trying to change things according to our own agenda. But keeping before us the vision of God's intention for the created order—to reconcile all things on earth and in heaven to God, and to renew and transform the earth—and then thinking creatively how we might join in God's restoration activity.

Tom Sine, in his book *The New Conspirators*, says “God invites us to be co-creators in giving imaginative expression to God's new creation in the here and now.” (p. 220) When we imagine the time to come, the new things that God is causing to spring forth, there are endless possibilities for our involvement. Imagining a new reality becomes the basis for experimentation and action.

Several years ago, our entire campus was a mowed lawn. Then some students asked if the seminary could leave some of the lawn un-mowed, and plant wildflowers in those areas. There was hesitation at first, especially about what the neighbors would say. But eventually we decided to try leaving a small patch of land un-mowed, on the other side of the seminary apartments and fairly hidden from sight.

That seemed to be appreciated by campus residents, and none of the neighbors complained. Then, students asked if a larger patch of land could be left un-mowed. That, too, was done, on the other side of campus, and beautiful patches of wildflowers started to appear.

By the time AMBS built our LEED-certified library three years ago, there was no hesitation on campus about planting a plot of taller prairie grasses and wildflowers in front of it—in full view of the street. What started as the imagining of a few students led to a totally different campus habitat! The prairie grasses are absorbing much more carbon dioxide from the atmosphere than lawn grass does, and providing a habitat for a whole range of wildlife. Less mowing saves time and reduces the burning of fossil fuels.

Imagination has a critical role in confronting the challenges facing creation, and in cultivating new solutions. We cannot enact what we cannot imagine, and we cannot imagine if we do not believe.

Tom Sine tells the story of Andrea, a Christian teacher in Camden, New Jersey who is part of a new monastic community. Andrea teaches urban farming to children at a Catholic school that is surrounded by brown fields and Superfund sites. One day when the children and Andrea were walking past one of the brown fields next to their school, they had an idea. They mixed clover seed into balls of compost. Clover apparently has the ability to leech toxins from soil. Once the compost balls were made, one night Andrea's students threw hundreds of them onto the brown field, and with rain, the clover began to sprout and green the field where nothing had been growing. (*The New Conspirators*, p. 300)

Imaginative acts do not have to be big. Most of them will be something small. But from small seeds grow mighty trees.

Brian McLaren ends his book *Everything Must Change* with a parable Jesus told: “if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.” (Matthew 17:20) McLaren writes, “It's interesting—astonishing, really, that Jesus doesn't simply say, ‘Nothing will be impossible for me,’ or ‘Nothing will be impossible with God.’ Instead he says, ‘Nothing will be impossible for you.’ This is our call to action, our invitation to . . . reshape the social and spiritual landscape of our world. Yes, change is impossible through human effort alone. But faith brings God's creative power into our global crises, so the impossible first becomes possible and then inevitable for those who believe.” (pp. 300-301)

May we be people who attend and listen for the time to come, in the confidence that God is making all things new! Amen.

