

The Earth Weeps: Calling for Lamentations, Repentance and Justice for Mother Earth

Musa W. Dube, April 22, 2024 (Earth Day Sermon for sharing)

Recently, I listened to Bishop Hee-Soo Jung's talk on "Jesus Tears: Messianic Hope and Liberation in the Korean Diaspora." He proposed that the experience of early Korean Christian community is best captured through "Jesus' experience of tearful repentance and penance itself" (2024:1). It was particularly striking when he described "Kim Jong Seop, who was known as the Apostle of Tears." Jong Seop apparently

had a lot of tears. When he saw an old man begging on the street, he cried. When he saw a foreigner, he took out a towel and wiped his tears, thinking how much they missed their hometown. One time, he walked down the street wailing thinking about how his mother passed away without believing in Jesus. He cried when he thought of the cross that Jesus bore, he cried because he felt futility of human life, he cried when he saw the sinful nature of humankind, he cried when he thought about the dedication of the apostles, he cried while eating and he often cried while sleeping.

"According to Denise Ackermann it is important to note that a theology of lament is not the same as a theology of hopelessness and victimization. Lamentation is a framework that insists on exposing injustice and calling for justice to be established. Those who lament are making a social protest against the oppressive conditions of their existence as unacceptable; they are underlining the need for transformation. Their voices are insisting on the need to let justice roll down into our streets and homes. Lamentations are in themselves a call for the establishment of justice" (Ackerman 2000:220-221).

As you might imagine, I cried as I listened to Bishop Hee Soo Jung, for I too, like Kim Jong Seop the Apostle of Tears, I was that girl who grew up crying. I cried while I walked; and I cried even when I slept, I cried everywhere I went. You see when I was born some six decades ago, my mother almost died. I was born at home and after my successful birth, the placenta did not come out. A week later my grandmother, who was a spirit medium, and an herbalist arrived. She went to the forest, dug an herb, boiled it and served it to my mother. The placenta came out. In gratitude, my mother named her little girl "Musa Wenkosi," that is the

“grace of God,” for she said, “I survived by the grace of God.” And that became my name. It became my daily privilege, and burden, to carry my mother’s testimony.

About a month later, my mother would carry the ritual of planting my umbilical cord into the Earth, as they would do with every child who is born, thereby underlining that the Earth is their mother, in life and until death when they return to arms of Mother Earth. Often, such belief also endows the Earth with sacredness, for not only is the Earth a Mother to every child, she also houses every person who passes on.

And so, I grew up in the Dube Farm, where mornings began with birds erupting into songs; cocks crowing, bells of cows, donkeys, goats, and sheep ringing, as they woke up and found their way to the grazing pastures and watering points. My typical day was under this wide bright blue sky with unfailing brightly shining sun. The end of the day arrived with breathtaking sunset paintings drawn across the sky, as dust began to refract the sunrays; doves began to sing, frogs began to croak; calves joyfully mooed as they were reunited with their mothers and goat kids began to bleat gleefully enjoying milk from the breasts of their mothers. Quietness would soon descend, disrupted by the owl and the jackal that continued to punctuate the night with sounds. It was not only nature that surrounded us with beautiful songs. We also sang songs in celebration of nature.

My brothers would welcome and name each cow as it walked into the kraal with whistles and praise poetry saying, “*e nala, e nalana, e phatshwa, e phatshawana, e tilodi, e tilotswana, e thamaga, e thamagana.*” When the rainy season started, my Father would happily sing, “*Ezulu li ya ndidima, siko chada inkosana,*” he said the rain thunders, it is a royal wedding, for the coming of rain facilitated a productive intercourse with the soil/Earth. And, whenever I and my sisters descended down the river to fetch water for our household use, we would dig the sand and sing a song for the water as the water filtered: *Manzi xoboso u mama u funa ku natha, manzi xobo! Xobo! Xobo!* Whenever each of us lost their milk teeth we negotiated with the moon and the eagle to bring us a better, brighter, and stronger teeth; singing, “*Mzwazwa 2x ngiphe lihle wena u thate libi.*”

But nothing was more breathtaking than when the sounds of the evening would calm down and darkness began to creep in. I was amazed by the capacity of the dark night to birth one of the most breathtaking sceneries I have ever seen in my

life. We got to watch the moon and the stars rise, marching in slowly, taking their rightful place and populating the sky like a billion diamonds, all the while, silently. No clutter. No noise. Hush, this was heaven happening (Dube 83-85). When the moon finally sets, the Milky Way takes on a greater intensity, with breathtaking beauty. It often made me feel like I am in this big black Igloo mansion, roofed with a billion diamond stars. Beauty unmatched. When the new day came, it first scattered gold and then it turned into bluest sky.

This is where I grew up; and this how I grew in the house of Mother Earth, where literally, like the Psalmist said, “The Lord led me into the green pastures, and I lacked nothing!” (Dube 2024: 52-58). You might be asking yourself, “Why then did I also grow up weeping and crying while I walked, and crying even when I slept?” I cried because even when grace had been granted to my biological mother, her health had been permanently compromised by the events surrounding my birth. I cried because I carried her pain and testimony. I cried because I could not separate myself from her suffering. I cried because I could not understand; how I could have hurt the one I so dearly loved. Finally, I was a grown-up woman and I started working and earning a salary. I did all that was in my power to make my mother’s life comfortable. It was forty years of God’s grace, before she was promoted to the warm arms of Mother Earth—and that was the hardest experience of my faith, “to understand a God who can take away something I so-loved, my mother.”

But little did I realize that today you and me, all of us, would be weeping and lamenting, for we have hurt our common Mother, Mother Earth. Today Mother Earth weeps and grows in pain and we cannot separate ourselves from her ill health. We the human children of Mother Earth have pumped greenhouse gases into her body, triggering a chain of extreme and persistent heat waves and frequent, long lasting, and stronger storms and wildfires. In this context of Climate change, Mother Earth is unsettled and unsettling. Mother Earth tears and weeps. Mother Earth rages with pain and drowns seashores, homes, fields, forests; breaks glaciers apart, melts permafrost; throwing huge hail, unleashing amazing hurricanes, cyclones, tornadoes and destroying all that is along her way. Mother Earth boils and burns with unacceptable temperatures that are too high for most members of the Earth community to bear. Mother Earth burns with uncontrollable wildfires.

These are symptoms of a dis-ease called climate change that has human roots. Mother Earth laments for the thorn is in her flesh. This context of climate change is

a context of displacement, forced migration, uncertainty, fear, pain, loss, death, food insecurity and insecurity about the future of Planet Earth. Home has become strange and dangerous. Moreover, the most marginalized members of our human community, the ones who contributed the least to climate change and who have the least means for climate adaptation, resilience and mitigation are disproportionately affected.

The question of how we got here and how we get out of here has been scientifically and religiously addressed. The Paris Accord of 2015, encouraging that carbon emissions should be cut by 50% by 2030, was adopted by most of our nations, although not consistently adhered to. People of biblical faith have been returning to the Bible asking themselves the question, “What is our role in caring for Mother Earth?” Numerous books, articles, sermons, and ecumenical statements about stewardship over Mother Earth have been and are being written.

It is my view that any claim to stewardship should be preceded by humility, weeping and repentance, in our quest for Earth Justice. We should weep in solidarity with the suffering body of Mother Earth. We should weep in solidarity with God and Christ the creator of all life. We should weep in solidarity with the Spirit of God, that was in and all-around creation from the very beginning. We should weep in solidarity with many animal and plant species whose habitats have been destroyed and who face extinction due to climate change. We should weep and repent for no other member of the creation community has polluted the air, soil, and water so consistently, and profoundly like human beings. Moreover, no other member of the creation community, has practiced over-accumulation of goods and services, thereby stretching the Earth resources beyond the limit, like human beings. No other member of the Earth community has brought life systems of the Earth close to their tipping point, like human beings. We are even in the age of the Anthropocene (where the Earth’s landscape, climate, landscape and ecosystems have been significantly impacted by human activities). This calls for humility and repentance in the quest for Earth justice.

We need to face up. Stop! How come the claim to superiority—the claim that we are made in God’s image—did not necessarily give beings a better relationship with the Earth? According to Lynn White, “the western Christian and philosophical beliefs that denied all other members of creation their divine status, while conferring it exclusively on human beings, commodified all other members of Earth. The commodification served capitalist and colonialist ideologies of

exploiting the Earth's resources as lifeless objects (1967:1203-1207). Norman Habel, on the other hand, asserts that our anthropocentric worldview has led us not only to super-impose our own human interests on the whole creation; but above all, we have failed to notice that the mission to preach the good news was not exclusively to human beings; but rather to the whole creation (2010:114-125). Pointing to Mark 16:15 and Luke 4:16-22, Habel proposes a third mission for the church—a mission of preaching good news; not just to human beings, but to all members of the Earth community. In the Third mission, the church forgoes dualism and hierarchy and becomes sensitive to the voice of the Earth, it celebrates the Earth as a sanctuary filled with God's presence and works to protect its sacredness (Genesis 1). In this third mission of the church, the church embraces and serves the disproportionately impacted in their struggle for climate adaptation, resilience and mitigation.

We are at the crossroad, no doubt. We are like the Markan disciples described in chapter 4: 37-41. They are travelling with Jesus, like we are. The story tells us, that a ferocious storm began to toss the boat, filling up their vessel with water—just like many of our countries and homes are drowning today due to ferocious climate change storms. Their boat was about to sink. They were about to lose their lives. They reach for Jesus, who was peacefully sleeping. They shake him up. They wake him up. They put an accusation to him: ‘Do you not care that we are about to perish?’ Apparently, Jesus cares. He wakes up and says to the storm, ‘Peace be still.’ And the storm ceases. Jesus is appalled that his twelve male disciples were all trembling in the face of this storm. He expected better from them. He asks them a question, ‘Why are you so fearful. How is it that you have no faith?’ In the Markan literary style, the disciples look at one another and put a rhetorical question to us, the readers; namely, ‘*What manner of a man is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?*’ For this question and for the crisis of climate change confronting us, we need to revisit our creation story, to retake our bearing as we move forward. Please come with me to the theater of creation presented in Genesis 1 (Dube 2015:1-17).

Genesis 1:1-2 “In the Beginning, God...!”

In Genesis 1, we are invited as an audience in God's drama of creation to hear God's will for planet Earth anew.[1] The reader/listener who sits in the theater of creation hears the first line of the play: ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the Earth. Now the Earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the

surface of the deep, while the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters,” Genesis 1:1-2. The opening verses thus invite anticipation from the audience, who are eager to see how God would fashion Earth from its formlessness, emptiness, and darkness. Yet the verses assert from the start that the whole universe is a product of God’s creation—both heaven and Earth. Even if the Earth is on stage for further creation, from its formlessness, emptiness, and darkness, the presence of God is in it, since it is stated that “the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” The latter underlines that before creation of other members of the Earth community, the Earth was the abode of God’s Spirit. Verses 2-25 are elaborate in featuring God the creator on the stage, transforming darkness to co-exist with light, vv.3-5; and transforming emptiness into platitude and formlessness into structure.[2]

The drama of creation occurs through God’s spoken word (Dube 2015:1-17), when God calls various members of creation into being by saying “let there be...” (vv. 3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26). The formula slightly diverts in verses 11, 20, 24 and 26b, where God says, “Let the land produce vegetation;” “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures;” and “let us make humankind in our image.” The created come into being through God’s spoken word. They take their place in the stage of creation. This is significant since it characterizes all members of the Earth Community as concrete products of the word of God. The light, sun, moon, stars, and the atmosphere are God’s word with us. When we see the sea, and its sea life we are seeing God with us. The dry grounds, its vegetation, animals, and the birds are concrete attestation of God’s word among us. The birds and their songs, all people, of all identities are products of the word of God. All nature, animate and non-animate members of the Earth and the whole Universe are God amongst us. In other words, we are surrounded by the awesome presence of God, in and through creation.

This is perhaps best captured by the Gospel of John’s opening, which reads: “In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God...All that was made was made through the Word, and without the Word not one thing came into being” (1: 1-2). If we wish to hear or know the word of God, we just have to see any member of the Earth community (Dube 2015:245). So, in addition to the Spirit of God that was already hovering upon the face of the Earth, all members of the Earth community are God’s word of life with us. They are sacred. Having sat in God’s creation theater means that readers/listeners come out with the

rallying voice of *God saw all that God had made and that it was very good*, the role human beings are invited to uphold as members of the Earth who are made in God's image. But John's take's it further. Jesus was not just the word that created, he was himself the word. Jesus was not just with God, he was God. Moreover, the word comes into the world and dwells with us. Something profound happens here. John makes one of the strongest theological statements that connects Jesus, God and the whole creation.

So, when the disciples of Jesus ask us a profound question; namely, "what manner of a man is this that even the wind and the sea obey him. We are happy to answer, "He is the word of God, and he is God with us. Amen."

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[1] For what follows and for more detailed reading of Genesis 1, please see, Musa W. Dube, “And God Saw that it was Good! An Earth-Friendly Theatrical Reading of Genesis 1,” *Black Theology Vol.13/3*, (2015):1-17.

[2] Terrence E Fretheim, “Genesis.” In *The New Interpreters Bible* (Vol 1), 343, holds that “The formless void...is neither “nothing” nor undifferentiated mass: the earth, the waters (deep), the darkness, and the wind are discrete realities,” rather it is void/empty “in the sense of something desolate and unproductive.”