“The Terrible Silence of the Sky”

Homily, Memorial Service for the Forest

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By Kathleen Dean Moore

Some time ago, in a forest west of town, foresters led schoolchildren on a field trip through an Oregon squall. I came along, holding my daughter’s hand. Gusts of wind blew though, tumbling the crows. Hemlock boughs rose up and down, as if they were patting alders on the head. The children jitterbugged up the trail to a towering tree, where someone had nailed a sign.

**Douglas fir**

**Height: 124’**

**Board feet volume: 1,060**

**No. of 8’ 2X4s: 208**

**Rolls of toilet paper: 6,890**

That’s a lot of toilet paper. But I can tell you,when the children pulled back their rain hoods to look toward the top of that tree, they didn’t see toilet paper and 2 X 4s.

They sawraindrops on draped lichens, a pine squirrel sitting on its haunches, a nuthatch upside-down,and a rain of cones when the wind gusted through. One of the children spotted a turkey tail fungus, spread like Thanksgiving.

They heard the nuthatch *nertnert*, of course, and the scolding squirrel. They heard nestling thrushes trying, pathetically, to whistle as beautifully as their fathers. The wind shuffled the treetop, and the children heard this too, and falling cones tapping on salal and swordferns. They leaned down to pick them up, bringing them to their little noses.

They smelled a sweetness that reminded them of Christmas.

They felt– how does a child feel in the presence of this height and beauty? A small one ran over and gave the tree a hug, and then they were all jostling for their turn as the teacher tried to corral them back onto the trail.

But somehow, it becomes possible– through the terrible anesthesia of our time -- to learn to look at a forest and see only commodities. It becomes possible to breathe sweet forest air and smell only diesel fuel and money. If a person develops the capacity not to see, not to hear, not to feel the ancient living forest, it becomes possible to mistake it for something far less, and think nothing – nothing – of cutting down its trees, hauling them away, bulldozing what small, stunned lives remain, and spraying poison on the wreckage.

Never mind. Now, in Corvallis, the ancient grove called “No Vacancy” is gone. Fifteen mossy acres of an ancient community of towering trees, spiderwebs and wildflowers, traded away for $460,000.

Nobody would take a child there now -- it’s too dangerous, the stickers, the smoldering piles, the poison, the precarious leaning deadheads, the soul-searing vandalism. But if the children were to gothere anyway, what would they find?

If they looked up, they would see, not green branches dancing overhead, glancing light decorated with swags of robin-flight. Instead, just **the terrible emptiness of the sky.**

If they listened, they would hear not birdsong and chittering squirrels, footfalls on moss, dripping fog. Instead, just **the terrible silence of the empty sky.**

What would they feel? Not the comfort and exhilaration of the breathinglives, but **theterrible sadness of the empty sky**.

We mourn the passing of an ancient grove that, for four centuries, quietly, steadfastly sheltered us, and made us glad and grateful. But it’s a far more crushing sadness to learn that those awful deaths were needless, the result of mis-understandings.what Dean Davis calls a “mistake.”That’s a shameful mistake for a College that calls itself a “trusted authority and world leader.”

But okay. I understand mistakes.

As we philosophers are wont to say, “Shit happens.”

It does indeed.

But sometimes institutions deliberately create or tolerate the conditions under which shit is more likely to occur. That changes an accident into a moral failing.

This is the sort of mistake that “happens” when a college is unable or unwilling to escape the entrapments of dangerously in-bred and out-dated, self-dealing assumptions of industrial forestry. The College has a moral obligation truly to understand the deep existential relation of forests and the future of civilization in this time and place. The obligation is even more urgent to listen to the discoveries their very own scientists are making, not try to discredit or silence them.

Three things they – and we all -- must now understand:

**1. We must understand** that we do not have the luxury to live in ordinary times, but the responsibility of living at a unique hinge point in history, the last time that humankind will have a choice: to continue with business-as-usual and watch the planetary systems that support our childrens’ lives fray and fall apart, or to participate in the greatest exercise of the moral imagination the world has ever seen, turning abruptly toward a better way.

We know what we have to do to save a world for the children. 1. Stop burning carbon. 2. Suck carbon dioxide out of the air, by planting 3 billion trees, actually now 3 billion 160 trees because of what the College of Forestry destroyed. Actually, 3 billion, 160 and another 200 trees, to account for the carbon spit out by their chainsaws and the trucks.

In this time, it is not morally possible routinely to cut forests, transmogrify them into obscenely big houses and unneeded university buildings, haul them away in diesel trucks,and burn the broken limbs in mushroom clouds of oily smoke from the hills behind town.

What is morally necessary is to plant trees, to save trees, to recover the soil. We must empower forests to save our skins, on the chance they might save our souls.

Make no mistake.

**2. We must understand** that we are living in a time of extinction. In our lifetimes, forty percent of “everything that has the breath of life,” animals and plants, has been erased from the face of the Earth, four out of every ten beings.

In our lifetimes, populations of the birds we love the best, the red-wing blackbirds and the robins, have been cut by a third. It will take 5 to 7 million years for the planet to recover the abundance and diversity of lives lost in our lifetimes.

In this time, it is not morally possible to bulldoze wildflowers – the lady slippers -- and crush the nests of owls. It is no longer morally possible to mistake biodiversity for a cash account, and trade it in to pay reckless debts.

What is morally necessary is to protect all the lives that are left, these lives that are the irreplaceable consequence of planetary creativity over four billion years. We have to transform campuses and yards and especially ancient research forests into refuges, to save the beings, large and small, that can still, possibly, escape through the crushingly narrow hour-glass of our time. What is gone, is gone forever. What is left – that’s what the world will be made of.

Make no mistake.

**3. We must understand** that a forest is not a bunch of trees**. “**Forest” is the name of the process of weaving lives into an endless tapestry, weaving green and green and green and black with red spots, creating a complex whole, where each watery warp and fledgling woof, each part, is astonishing and alive and worthy, worthy, the spar and the stone, the rain, the wasp, the children – nestlings, saplings, fingerling trout.

On this planet, the glittering urgency of on-going life is as close as we will get to the Sacred, and forests are its jubilant expression. It follows that, every suffering, every destruction of an old forest, is a profanity. It is a violence we cannot even begin to measure because we have only the sorriest understanding of the forest’s multitude of lives.

Be prepared for anger and for grief. Be prepared also for gratitude. Be prepared with the strongest moral resolve to guarantee that no more ancient forests will be sold out from under our children. They are not ours to sell; they belong to the future of the everlasting Earth.

Who among us didn’t cradle their newborn babies in their arms and whisper promises into their wispy hair: *I will always love you. I will keep you safe. I will give you the world.*

We didn’t mean, I will give you whatever is left scattered and torn on the table after the great cosmic going-out-of-business sale. We said*, I will give you this beautiful, life-sustaining, bird-graced, tree-shaded, rain-polished world*.

Now is the time, when we – all of us – have to make good on that promise.

Make no mistake.

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