

When Man Plays God: Taking Away Creation's Breath

By: Larry Greenfield

Posted: Tuesday, June 2, 2009

The psalmist covers most but not all of the possibilities.

In praise to God's wisdom and power, the psalmist says that when God chooses to hide God's face, the creatures of the earth "are dismayed," and when God chooses to "take away their breath, they die and return to their dust." (Psalm 104:29)

This life-taking by God is the counterpart to God's creative – God's life-giving – activities, which are as wide as the whole creation:

"O God, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures." (Psalm 104:24)

And it is the counterpart as well to the life-sustaining and re-creating activities of God, which are worldwide too:

"When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground." (Psalm 104:30)

But what the psalmist doesn't cover is the phenomenon of a relatively few of these creatures (compared with vast number of creatures in the world) who take the place of God by employing their wisdom and power to satisfy only their own individual and collective ends at the expense of the rest of the creation – and even at the expense of many of their own species.

Whenever that happens, then it isn't God who is choosing to take the breath of the other creatures away. No, it is that relatively small number of creatures – believing they are the real life-givers and life-sustainers and life-renewers – who are making the choice about whose breath should be taken away, whose breath should be sustained, whose breath should be renewed.

They are, in short, taking it upon themselves to determine who should suffocate.

The psalmist didn't take these suffocators into account when writing about God's wisdom and power, God's truth and spirit.

But we need to.

It may be a little bold on our part, for which we will need to ask God's forgiveness, whenever we overstep our own limits in trying to stop the suffocation.

But I think it is fair to the psalmist's text to claim that God welcomes human partners who are intent on and active in allowing the whole creation to have the breath that God provides for its flourishing, allowing all the peoples of the earth the breath God provides for living in their own thriving cultures, allowing every citizen the breath God provides to participate equally in the governance of their society, allowing every individual the breath God provides for living healthy lives, allowing every child the breath God provides to learn and be fully prepared for realizing her or his potential and for contributing to the well-being of others – to the common good.

In the season of Pentecost especially, when we acknowledge and receive the presence of God's Spirit in the world, the work of God's partners is to put an end to the suffocation of the earth and its human inhabitants. The work is to return to what the psalmist asserted: that it is God, not a relatively few self-selected human beings, who should choose when to "take their breath away."