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Wednesday August 20, 2014

Healing that follows disasters

By Jim Taylor

It was probably the first time since the Cariboo Gold Rush of the 1860s that the little town of Likely made international headlines. On August 4, a dam containing the tailings pond at the Mount Polley mine in central B.C. failed.

Mines concentrate valuable ore by grinding huge chunks of raw rock into a fine flour. The heavier metal particles sink; the lighter silt floats and gets skimmed off. But no system is perfect. Inevitably, some of the metals get flushed out with harmless sand and go into a tailings pond.

The tailings pond is supposed to protect the environment from toxic wastes. Some tailings ponds work; this one failed. Some 15 million cubic metres of waste flushed down Hazeltine Creek – enough, the media claim, to fill 2,000 Olympic swimming pools.

Last year, according to company reports, the mine discharged about 400 tonnes of arsenic into its tailings pond, along with 326 tonnes of nickel, 177 of lead, 138 of cobalt, and lesser amounts of copper, selenium, antimony, cadmium, and mercury.

Little wonder that local residents were warned not to drink, swim in, or even touch the water.

Nature heals

Even so, most water restrictions were soon eased.

Because nature immediately began its healing process. Flowing water sorted the sludge. Heavy metals sank, where they could be covered over and sealed off by lighter silt settling on top. Existing streams and lakes diluted the

dissolved chemicals, reducing their impact on plants and fish. Algae began gobbling minerals they'd barely met before, processing them into organically safer products.

As former minister Bob Thompson keeps reminding me, this is the recurring pattern of life on earth. Nature constantly heals itself. Nature responds to any disaster – landslide, earthquake, volcano, hurricane, tornado, flood, fire – by immediately starting to repair the damage.

It may take time. But new plants take root. Rains fall. Soil accumulates. Sun beams. New animals colonize the territory. Life begins again.

It's almost as if nature – the earth itself – had some kind of underlying purpose. To heal wounds. To restore abundant life.

Friend and former minister Bob Thompson says it's one reason why he believes in Jesus. While academics argue about who said what, and why, and to whom, one sure thing that can be said about Jesus of Nazareth is that he healed. He never made afflictions worse. He ever punished anyone with blindness, leprosy, the ebola virus, or Alzheimer's disease.

In that, says Bob, he embodied (or incarnated, the traditional term) the healing spirit of the earth.

Unwilling to think differently

You may say that such a theology borders on pantheism. It treats the planet as a living being with intent, volition.

Well, why not? Why are we so committed to thinking of the earth as nothing more than an accumulation of inanimate elements, acted on by the laws of physics but never itself allowed to act?

Are we afraid that a healing earth might make God less almighty?

That the earth heals seems to me beyond argument. So we have a choice. Either the earth acts on its own to heal, and heal again. Or it acts in response to some external force whose essence is also healing.

Either way, you have to think of the earth differently.

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YOUR TURN

As you know, I had some trouble sending out columns last week. The Soft Edges column about scattering my friend Bob Little's ashes in the Columbia River didn't go out until Friday. Perhaps that's why there was only limited mail.

Nenke Jongkind felt that the delay was worth waiting for: "Lovely pieces both last week and this week. Great comments too."

Mo Rajabally in Kelowna wrote, "You also brought many memories when you mentioned the event in Haridwar, Rajasthan. My wife and I were there in 1996 when I was a visiting professor at different universities in India."

Mo also asked for permission to publish the column on his website: memoryfacebook.com. I'm always glad to grant permission, provided only that you give me credit for the text, and don't expect to make any money from the publication

Isabel Gibson liked the idea of "being launched on a river -- it seems of a more human scale than the ocean, or being thrown in a permanent box, for that matter. Gotta keep moving . . .

"I'm sorry for the loss of your friend. I'm glad you still feel you have him, to some degree."

Marjorie Gibson, Isabel's mother, noted, "The comment made by the son certainly resonates with me: 'Death may end a life, but it does not end a relationship.' My husband Sheldon died three years and nine months ago. My awareness of him seems to increase as the years slip by -- a living tie to what was, and is."

PSALM PARAPHRASES

Given the current turmoil – in Syria, Iraq, Sudan, West Africa, and Missouri – this paraphrase of Psalm 124 seemed appropriate:

- 1 The odds were stacked against us from the beginning.**
- 2 The great corporations strung us a good line --
about caring for us, about bringing prosperity.**

**But they really meant prosperity for themselves.
When the profits looked better somewhere else,
they abandoned us.
They always do.**

**3 The powerful nations promised us freedom;
they loaned us millions for a fresh start.
now we are enslaved by our debt.
They will not free us.**

**4 The arms makers sold us weapons
to protect ourselves against our neighbors.
They sold weapons to our neighbors, too,
to protect themselves against us.**

**5 Now our former friends are a threat.
We need more, and more, and more.**

6 The only one not exploiting us for private gain is God.

**7 If we have retained any faith in human nature,
in justice, in our own identity,**

8 it is because of God.

**For paraphrases of most of the psalms used by the RCL, you can order my book
Everyday Psalms from Wood Lake Publishing, info@woodlake.com.**

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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For other web links worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Sunday called Sharp Edges, which tends to be somewhat more cutting about social and justice issues. To sign up for Sharp Edges, write to me directly, at jimt@quixotic.ca, or send a note to

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