**Offering Our Little Loaves and Fish:**

**Relearning Relational Power in an Age of Eco-Anxiety**

St. John the Divine Anglican Church

By

John J. Thatamanil

July 24, 2021

We live in a death-haunted time. Last year, in the early phase of the COVID crisis, in my New York apartment, I heard ambulance sirens day and the night. I knew, all too well, that many being taken to nearby hospitals would never walk out. Death was omnipresent.

Sometimes death haunts us, but the sirens are inaudible. Scientists tell us that a billion sea-creatures were cooked in their shells during our recent heatwave. One Billion! The human mind cannot comprehend such numbers nor does the heart know how to grieve so vast a loss. Ecological death may not come with audible sirens, but alarm bells are ringing nonetheless. This week, friends back in New York reported that the city is shrouded by smoke from fires in Oregon and BC. Smoke has traveled across the entire continent triggering air quality alerts, forcing people to stay indoors. Here, we now face drought and the devastation of entire towns like Lytton being wiped off the map.

So, we should not be surprised to hear that climate change is beginning to trigger significant psychological symptoms. An article entitled, “[Therapy for the End of the World](https://thewalrus.ca/therapy-for-the-end-of-the-world/?fbclid=IwAR38zkiSM189YK63M1BoumMupz-uTHXRfNn5_yDcAj3D2bzRNORlrWBYV9o),” discusses the growing phenomenon of “eco-anxiety” and the emergence of therapists who are learning how to treat climate grief. Here is a snippet from that article,

Even far away from these disasters, psychologists are now finding, just knowing about the severity of our climate predicament can take its own kind of toll. In recent years, the climate and wider ecological crisis has led to an explosion of what has been termed eco-anxiety, which the APA defines as the “chronic fear of environmental doom.” It is born of the barrage of increasingly worse environmental news combined with the knowledge that actions taken so far to address the problem have been ineffective or insufficient, and it destroys people’s capacity to feel safe in the world. The stress of worrying about the future of the biosphere, the species, one’s community, and one’s life, as well as already occurring environmental disasters, can look more like cycling through grief, fear, shame, guilt, resignation, despair, and nihilism than just anxiety.

As therapists learn how to care for these patients, they face an unexpected twist. Therapists customarily treat what might be called “pathological” anxiety and depression, conditions that might be found in the DSM. But in this case, those feeling eco-anxiety and climate grief are the ones who see the world most clearly; there is nothing wrong with what they are feeling.

At the heart of eco-anxiety is the feeling of powerlessness, the feeling of being unable to make a difference. The Finnish theologian [writes](https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200402-climate-grief-mourning-loss-due-to-climate-change), Panu Pihkala, writes that in the wake of climate change,

We need to *relearn the world*: it is not like it was, or like we thought it was….For many middle-class citizens of industrialised nations this brings a profound existential challenge. The world is revealed to be much more tragic and fragile than people thought it was.”

What do we do when we realize that the whole earth is “more tragic and fragile than people thought it was?” That is surely one of the central questions of our time.

When we feel powerless, it’s quite natural to try to find something that makes us feel less vulnerable. It is natural to say, “If only I had the *power* to make a difference.” Right smack dab at the heart of any anxiety including eco-anxiety is the feeling of being trapped, unable to change things—in a word, “powerless.” If only I had power *to do something* about how vulnerable I am feeling! We inevitably feel the need—should we say the temptation—to combat fragility by gaining some power over the situations that make us feel anxious.

The idea of power, we observed in sermon circle, keeps coming up in the Lectionary almost every single Sunday. The Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament are obsessed with questions of power. This week’s readings are no exception. Our Hebrew Bible reading is a classic story about unchecked power. It is chock full of lust, sex, deception, and murder. Bathsheba bathes on the roof while King David walks about idly in his palace as his troops fight his battles for him. And the King decides that he will take what is not his and execute a loyal and principled general in the process. As Penny Holt put it, this is one of the Bible’s #MeToo stories. Bathsheba is given no voice in this story; she is granted no agency—at least not in this episode.

But the most outrageous element of this reading comes *before* the Bathsheba story. Listen: “In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war, David sent Joab out with the king’s men and the whole Israelite army.” II Samuel depicts war as a seasonal activity. In the winter it snows. In the Fall, leaves fall. In the Spring, Kings kill; they engage in violence with seasonal regularity.

The people of Israel have no reason to be shocked. We know what God told to the Israelites when they asked God for a king. In I Samuel 8,

God says through Samuel,

“These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; 12…and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. 13He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. 14He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers….And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves.” (I. Samuel 8)

Samuel might have added, “He will have your generals killed and take their wives.”

The Hebrew Bible regards kingship as a decidedly mixed bag. They point a sobering picture of what kings, even the very best, are like. Kings exploit. That’s what they do. That’s the nature of royal power. Kingly power is *power-over*. It is controlling power, power to bend others to your will. It is take-what-you-want power. At its worst, it is power without accountability. Ultimately, every form of power-over is false and misguided because it seeks the impossible: to escape human fragility and vulnerability. Those who put their trust in controlling power do so because they lack the courage to face their own and the planet’s fragility squarely in the face.

Any wonder that in today’s Gospel, Jesus wants nothing to do with kingship?! The story we heard is quite familiar. The feeding of the 5000 is told in all Four Gospels. It is so familiar that we tend to tune it out. And if we had tuned out, we would have missed this verse, found only in John, which is sandwiched between the Feeding and Jesus’s walking on water.

14When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

Why? Wouldn’t the world have been far better off if Jesus had embraced kingship? Don’t Christians routinely imagine Jesus as King and Lord, the one who comes from David’s royal line? So then, why does he take off? Why is Jesus allergic kingship?

The answer rests in the difference between two adverbs, “Above” and “among.” Take a look at the feeding narrative: “Jesus said, “Make the people sit down.” Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they[[c](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%206&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-26257c)] sat down, about five thousand in all. 11Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, *he* distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted.”

David stays at home, remains *above* the fray, and gets his soldiers to do his dirty work. Jesus walks *among* the 5000 feeding them. He doesn’t just perform a fabulous miracle and leave the rest of the hard work to his disciples. We might say that Jesus is practicing “grass-roots” politics. Thanks Susan for the accurate pun.

The trouble that many of us—not just Christians face—is that our only model for power is *power from above*, controlling power. Having decided that is the only kind of power there is, and having concluded that that kind of power is flawed and corrupt, we are left at a loss about how to bring about change. Our limited imagination leaves us feeling powerless, anxious, and at a loss. Worse still, we imagine that Christian life is not about power or politics but just about tenderness and interpersonal kindness.

Nowhere’s plenty to be said on behalf of kindness and tenderness, but we do well to remember Cornel West’s powerful aphorism,   
“Tenderness is what love looks like in private; *justice* is what love looks like in public.” If we want justice including eco-justice, we must get involved in political life. For justice seekers, there is no avoiding power. So, then what are we to do?

The choice is not between kingly power or powerlessness but *power-with* rather than *power-over*.

Kings control; Jesus collaborates.

Kings dictate; Jesus teaches.

Kings disempower; Jesus empowers.

Kings hoard power; Jesus gives it away.

In this story, Jesus is able to do what he can only because of presence of a little boy who is willing to share his five little loaves and two fish. That boy’s willingness to share is an example of power-with. Jesus can only work with what we are willing to give him.

*Power-over* or *power-with*—that is our fundamental choice. Power-with does not seek to control. Power-over is the power of exception, the power of the sovereign to declare what the rules are, rules that he is not obliged to follow. *Power-with*, by contrast, is accountable to community; it is power that listens and works to win consent. Power-with is *relational power*. Power-with embraces the difficult truth of fragility and vulnerability because they bind us all together in a common fate. Power-with is the power of Love.

Any wonder then that Jesus runs from sovereign power?! He runs not because he is uninterested in justice but because he knows that love cannot accomplish its ends by unloving means. Love that works from above is not love at all.

Friends, we will for the foreseeable future be living through difficult times of ecological peril—of drought, flood, and flame. In times of dire peril, grabbing for power-over is sorely tempting. Jesus was confronted by that temptation in the desert when the Devil offered him all the kingdoms of the world. Jesus refused power-over and so must we who are his disciples. Jesus followers must learn how to live through times like these without freaking out and falling prey to the temptation of controlling power.

We have tried that way before. The church was once wedded to the state and bourgeois society. It gave us status and standing, but it also led us to destroy the lives of many, First Nations communities in particular. Now, as power-over is stripped from us, and we find ourselves headed to the margins, we are well positioned to relearn the way of relational power, the way of love, the way to which God calls us.

One of the great American exemplars of relational power can serve as our role model. I am thinking of activist, writer, pacifist, ornery eccentric, and founder of *The Catholic Worker*, Dorothy Day. Here is what her friend, Robert Ellsberg has to say about her:

Dorothy did not expect great things to happen overnight. She knew the slow pace by which change and new life comes. It was, in the phrase she often repeated, “by little and by little” that we were saved. And yet she acted out of deep faith in the mystical bonds of cause and effect in which we are all connected. Any act of love might contribute to the balance of love in the world, any suffering endured in love might ease the burden of others. We could only make use of the little things we possessed—the little faith, the little strength, the little courage. These were the loaves and fishes. We could only offer what we had and pray that God would make the increase.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Let us, like Dorothy, learn to offer up our little loaves and fishes in love and pray that the power of God working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Amen

1. Ellsberg, Robert. *A Living Gospel: Reading God's Story in Holy Lives* (p. 43). Orbis. Kindle Edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)