

# Healing of the Earth: A Call to Public Witness

Author: Dr George Zachariah is based at Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, in Chennai, India, where he is an associate professor in the department of theology and ethics.

[gzachariah@gmail.com](mailto:gzachariah@gmail.com)

Theological and ethical reflections in the area of Christian Mission in recent times have identified healing as a missiological category challenging the Church to become a therapeutic presence in our respective communities. The ecological awareness created by the distress of the earth has inspired us to broaden our understanding of healing to respond to the sickness of the earth as well. So healing of the earth has become a familiar phrase in our contemporary missiological terminology, and Christian communities all around the world are engaged in diverse ecological ministries to heal the earth. However, our earnest commitment to become a healing presence in a world threatened by ecological crisis seems to have failed miserably thanks to our over-enthusiasm to treat the problem based on the diagnosis and prescriptions “from above”. This calls for developing alternative healing practices informed by the diagnosis and the experiences of healing at the margins.

Reflecting from the standpoint of the women in South Africa, Denise Ackermann and Tahira Joyner observe that: “Earth-healing praxis requires an understanding of the interconnectedness of the different manifestations of violence. The violence of poverty, racism, sexism and classism, of social dislocation, of militarism, of battering and rape are not unrelated to the violence against the environment. They are all rooted in the abuse of power as domination over the exploitation of the other.”<sup>1</sup> Such prognosis from the wounded earth and the subjugated bodies of the subalterns give birth to alternative mission understandings and engagements with the dying earth and the dehumanised humanity. It is our organic solidarity with the groaning creation that provides us the epistemological key to discern and understand the prognosis and the responses from the margins.

## The Groaning Creation

How do we problematise the groaning of creation? We tend to understand the groaning of the creation as the helpless cry of the victims. Groaning of the creation that we encounter in our daily life is an invitation to transgress the boundaries of our analytical horizons to problematise what we see and hear so that we understand the world differently. The epistemology of such a discerning process should stem from the groaning of creation. Our problematisation of the distress of the earth, and our re-imagining of Christian mission should be informed by our complete openness to and immersion in the groaning of creation. This lecture is an attempt in that direction to problematise the groaning of our times to discern the ailment of the earth and its children to engage in alternative interfaith public witness.

## Groaning of Creation: A Prognosis from Below

Groaning is a metaphor extensively used in the biblical texts to signify diversity of existential realms. Groaning portrays the pathos, the experience of God-forsakenness, the discernment of unjust social relations, envisioning alternatives, revolutionary patience for

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<sup>1</sup> Denis Ackermann and Tahira Joyner, “Earth-Healing in South Africa: Challenges to Church and Mosque,” in *Women Healing Earth: Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism, and Religion*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether, New York: Orbis Books, 1996, 125.

the unfolding of utopia, and the radical experiences of epiphany. So from a biblical perspective groaning indicates the presence of deep rooted sin and injustice in our social fabric. Groaning goes beyond an innocent cry of helpless and passive victims seeking external intervention to “save” them. Rather, groaning is a public display of the inherent sinfulness of the prevailing order, and the resilience of the victims to transform it. As we learn from the biblical texts, groaning is also a God talk. Confronted with the experience of utter God forsakenness, the community of creation re-imagines God, inspired by the surprising encounters of epiphanies at the most unexpected places. Groaning discerns God differently as a co-sufferer who laments with them while keeping their hope alive. How do we discern the groaning of creation in our times? What are the insights that we gather from the groaning even as we strive to reflect upon our mission and ministry in the context of the distress of the earth?

### **Groaning of Creation: A Public Protest against Structural Sin and Injustice**

Groaning exposes the structural sin and injustice that perpetuate death and destruction in our communities. A public display of the violent face of our prevailing order questions the very diagnosis of the problem and the solutions prescribed by the experts. Groaning as a social protest calls for counter engagements with the problem that leads to new diagnosis informed by the experiences of the victims. So groaning proposes two things: a hermeneutic of suspicion of the dominant narratives of the problem and their solutions, and the cognitive potential of the communities at the margins. Differently said, groaning, as a discourse emerging from the victims of structural sin, proposes a new epistemological key to discern the signs of the times.

In the story of our ancestors narrated in the book of Genesis, the Lord said to Cain, “Your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground.... When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength” (Genesis 4: 10-12). Fratricide and ecocide are integrally connected. The eco-crisis that we confront in this story is both the refusal and the inability of the land to yield to bear fruits when there is blood in the hands of the tiller and the keeper. Ecological crisis is more than a change in the mercury level. When the harmonious relationship in the community of creation that was found good by the Creator is disrupted due to arrogance, greed, domination, power, and accumulation, creation is robbed of its integrity and agency, and is being reduced into the state of a commodity to be exploited, manipulated, and sold for profit. So the groaning of the blood of Abel emerging from the land is a mirror held in front of our sinful worldviews and structures which prevent us from becoming siblings and neighbors in the community of creation.

We see a similar groaning in the same book by a single mother, abused and dispossessed by Abraham (Genesis 21: 15-19). Denied of the right over property and inheritance, Hagar and Ishmael were wandering in the wilderness and crying for water. Water is a basic human right, and its denial is a sin against humanity. In our world today, we come across different manifestations of desert experiences, where we hear the groaning for water every day. When water becomes a commodity with a price tag, Hagar and Ishmaels are destined to die in the wilderness without access to drinking water. The groaning in the wilderness compels us to question whether water crisis is a natural calamity or not. The weeping of Hagar and Ishmael provides us a new lens to understand the contemporary crisis of water. The intimate violence on a slave woman’s body, and the subsequent disinheritance of both her and her son from their legitimate inheritance rights are integrally related with the desert experience and cry for water of Hagar and Ishmael. Accumulation is possible only through dispossession, and the dispossessed are the ones who groan for water in our world today.

“The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God” (Exodus 2: 23). Groaning emerging from the context of slavery affirms the inalienability of human dignity and human rights. Human beings, created in the image of God, are not meant to live as slaves. Slavery is the negation of God because it takes away the God given right to freedom, and adequate rest (Sabbath) to God’s creation. The groaning of the slaves exposes the inherent sinfulness and injustice of the imperial order. Imperial violation of human dignity is not a story that we read in the history books alone. It is also a contemporary reality in our times. When workers and undocumented people are exploited in the sweat shops, Special Economic Zones, and in the contract sector without the protection of labor laws and the right to organise, we hear their groaning exposing the sinfulness of the system. In such contexts, groaning is a public protest unveiling the brutal face of neo-liberal capitalism and imperialism.

In the prophetic books we again encounter the groaning of God’s creation for freedom and dignity. Isaiah narrates the outcry in the streets where joy has reached its eventide (Isaiah 24: 1-13). “How long will the land mourn?” Jeremiah cries aloud. (Jeremiah 12:4)

In the book of Joel, even the wild animals cry out to God because their water and food supply has dried up. (Joel 1: 17-20). In these texts we see the portrayal of the groaning and lamentation of the whole community of creation—the land, the grain, and the cattle. They groan because the earth has become desolate. This reality of desolation is the consequence of sin and injustice. As Isaiah puts it, “the earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, and broken the everlasting covenant” (Isaiah 24: 5). Groaning of the earth community in the prophetic books is a counter argument uncovering the sinfulness and injustice inherent in the human projects of conquest and accumulation.

Seven years ago, the day after Christmas day, the coastal communities in South and South East Asia cried aloud when giant waves in the form of Tsunami invaded their shores. Death literally hunted down the households in the coast line resulting in the untimely death of hundreds of thousands of innocent people. Millions were displaced from their livelihood. The scars of the Tsunami are yet to be healed. The dominant narratives explained the Tsunami as a natural calamity, and blamed overpopulation as the reason for the magnitude of the disaster. The groaning that refuses to fade down is in fact a counter narrative: A counter narrative that exposes the structural sin and injustice that cause eco-crisis and genocide.

The coastal regions of the countries affected by the 2004 Tsunami have been undergoing tremendous changes in recent years. In the era of globalisation, as there is no salvation outside the market, it is imperative to enter the bandwagon of progress and development by linking local economies with transnational capital. Globalisation has invaded the coastal regions of these countries in two different ways: shrimp farming, and tourism. These industries have expanded at the cost of tropical mangroves, one of the world’s most important ecosystems. Mangrove swamps have been nature’s protection for the coastal regions from the large waves. They also serve as the habitat for three-fourths of the commercial fish species that spend part of their lifecycle in the mangrove swamps.

The coastal regions, the habitats of the traditional fisher people, have been converted into tourist resorts to attract tourists and thereby foreign exchange. Many of the tourist resorts that mushroomed in the coastal areas came into being by uprooting hundreds of villages of the fisher people, who used to live in a harmonious relationship with the ocean. Thousands of hectares of mangrove forests and other bushes were cleared to make the resorts beautiful for the tourists. Miles and miles of the coastline have seen the new invasion of Aqua farming. Traditional communities have been displaced from their land

and livelihood to welcome the transnational corporations to take over and abuse their land, water, and environment.

The groaning from the tsunami affected communities exposes this correlation between the ecological disaster and globalisation. This narrative is based on the very fact that the tsunami could not destroy coastal villages covered with mangroves. In other words, the tsunami was more than a natural calamity. It was the consequence of the commodification and plunder of the ecosystem for profit. Disasters are not only caused by corporate interests but they also provide the corporations new opportunities to continue their pillage in the name of humanitarian interventions and reconstruction. Naomi Klein calls this phenomenon “the disaster capitalism.” According to Herman Kumara of the National Fisheries Solidarity Movement in Sri Lanka, her country is facing “a second tsunami of corporate globalisation and militarisation, potentially even more devastating than the first. We see this as a plan of action amidst the tsunami crisis to hand over the sea and the coast to foreign corporations and tourism, with military assistance from the US marines.”<sup>2</sup> So the groaning of the creation is a public protest compelling us to perceive ecological crisis as genocide and ecocide which could have been avoided had we opted for a life-affirming and communitarian worldview and just and egalitarian social relations.

### **Groaning of Creation: A Public Witness of New Experiences of Epiphany**

Groaning of creation is more than a public protest; it is also a public witness of the God whom the wounded creation continues to meet in the midst of their sufferings and struggles. When confronted with the sway of death which takes away their life and livelihood, people often cry aloud, “my God, my God, why have you forsaken us?” Ecological crisis which lead to pauperisation, deforestation, displacement, climate change, exile, social unrest, and violence are experiences of utter God forsakenness. The victims have been told that eco-crisis is God’s punishment for their iniquities. It is in this context of God forsakenness and distorted God talk that the victims encounter new epiphanies; experiencing God as a co-sufferer who keeps their hopes alive. Such experiences of new epiphanies enable them to re-imagine God afresh in the context of eco-crisis. Groaning of creation, therefore, articulates an alternative imagination of God.

We read Paul’s theological reflections on the groaning of creation in Romans 8 where he talks about the groaning of the whole creation for freedom from the bondage to decay. And the climax of this particular narrative is the groaning of the Spirit. In the sigh of the Spirit we see the pain of God. God’s pain is described as silent sighs that are too deep for words. The unutterable groaning of the Spirit reveals the depth of God’s pain. It is an extension of God’s passion which we see on the cross. So groaning of the creation reveals the crucified God in our times.

In our biblical reflections in the previous section we began with the Genesis narrative of the groaning of Abel’s blood from the ground and saw the correlation between fratricide and ecocide. In that story we also see the pain of God; A God who is wounded by human sinfulness which led to death and destruction. The dominant reading of this story tells us that God cursed Cain for his sinfulness. A deeper engagement with the text and the groaning of God would help us to discern this text differently. God is neither cursing Cain, nor commanding the earth not to yield to its strength when human beings till and cultivate. Rather, God is reminding Cain of the consequences of violence and death which destroyed the harmony of the community of creation. To put it differently, God’s response to this primordial act of death and destruction is not one of judgment or curse,

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in George Zachariah, *Alternatives Unincorporated: Earth Ethics from the Grassroots*, (London: Equinox Press, 2011), 34.

rather God invites Cain to continue to live as God's partner in the ongoing process of creation without infringing the rights of other members of the community of creation.

The biblical narrative of the descendants of Cain is important here. Cain's son Enoch built a city. His great grand son Jabel was the ancestor of those who live in tents and have livestock. His brother Jubal was the ancestor of all those who play the lyre and pipe. And their cousin Tubal-cain made all kinds of bronze and iron tools. That means the descendants of Cain were people with creativity who contributed creatively to the flourishing of creation through their engagement in diverse creative activities such as tent making, animal husbandry, construction work, music and fine arts, and science and technology. What is the God talk that we find in this narrative? While God is wounded at the violence that was perpetuated on Abel, God is not cursing Cain and destroying him. Rather God is affirming Cain and his descendants as co-creators with the responsibility to continue the creative process in history. So the God whom we re-imagine in the groaning of Abel's blood is a God who affirms human potential to participate in God's creative process in spite of human sinfulness. Yes, God is pained by the brutal murder of Abel. God is angry too. God is groaning. But God believes in the possibility of transformation. So sin does not take away our creativity. In spite of our sinfulness we are able to participate in God's creative work of flourishing God's creation.

In the story of Hagar and Ishmael, we see the tragic experience of utter God forsakenness. In the wilderness confronting death she "lifted up her voice and wept." The story tells us that God heard the groaning of the boy. So groaning opens up a new experience of God in the wilderness as a well of water. As we read in chapter 16, Hagar named God *El-roi*, which means God who sees. So for the dispossessed who go through desert experiences, God is ever present as wells of water in their struggles for survival. In our contemporary context of growing desertification and dispossession due to global warming and climate change, the groaning of creation inspires us to re-vision God as springs of life that sustains and nourishes us in our struggles against death and destruction.

In the book of Exodus we have seen the cry of the enslaved people exposing the inherent evil and injustice of the imperial order. The Horeb episode narrates God's encounter with Moses where God appeared in a flame of fire out of a bush. The bush was blazing but it was not consumed. Then God revealed Godself as the one who observed and heard the groaning of the enslaved people. This revelation portrays God as organically present in the struggles and sufferings of the community. God is not a distant transcendent reality detached from the everyday struggles of God's creation; rather God is very much present in the midst of their struggles as a co-sufferer. It is through God's organic participation in the sufferings and struggles of the community that God enables them to believe in alternatives. God instills in them a new vision of liberation from the shackles of slavery and domination.

The symbol of burning bush is instructive for us today, as we confront global warming and climate change. We are all victims of the rise in temperature in different ways. We see burning bushes all around us. The IPCC and our governments and the UN bodies and the NGOs and even the churches are trying to convince us that climate change is a hazard or a risk that is irreversible. The only option before us therefore is to adapt and mitigate. It is in this context of the indoctrination of the doctrine of "there is no alternative," that we need to re-visit the symbol of burning bush as a site of epiphany. The primordial vision of the burning bush has the audacity to believe that the blazing fire can not destroy the beauty of the bush. Epiphany empowers us to believe in the possibility of a beyond of the present. The present is not eternal. You don't have to be adapted to the prevailing order. There is still room for hope, and we need to be infected with this hope so

that we can make hope contagious. This is the power of epiphany that emerges from the groaning of creation.

### **Groaning of Creation: The Labor Pain for Alternatives**

We have seen that the groaning of creation is a public protest and a public witness: A public protest against the unjust and sinful social structures that perpetuate death and destruction, and a public witness of the God who is very much present in the midst of our struggles keeping our hopes alive. Paul in his letter to Romans provides us yet another unique insight about the groaning of creation: “the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains.” This imagery of the groaning of creation as labor pains raises fundamental questions on our Christian engagement with the ecological crisis. The cry that we hear from the earth and its children is not a groaning that precedes death, but a groaning in labor that precedes new life. The groaning that surrounds us is not the sign of hopelessness and death; rather it is the proclamation of a new beginning for the community of creation.

Groaning as the labor pain for alternatives is a message of hope for all of us as we face the reign of death in our everyday lives. The ecological crisis should not lead us to withdraw ourselves from our social and political engagements, and to prepare ourselves to face the impending death and destruction. Rather, the ecological crisis invites us to envision a world redeemed of the sinfulness of exploitation, plunder, and accumulation where we experience the fullness of the community of creation. It is such alternative visions that inspire and sustain our struggles against the destruction of earth and other social evils. When our groaning becomes the labor pain of a redeemed world, we become an advent community, anticipating in hope the birthing of a new world. Yes, the groaning of creation is the audacity of hope to believe that “another world is possible.”

The climate change campaigns warn us about the impending destruction that we are going to face very soon. The mood that surrounds us is the mood of a death vigil waiting for our turn to be sacrificed in the altar of global warming. It is in this context that we fall back to Paul who portrays a different understanding of waiting. For Paul, the creation is eagerly waiting and longing for its redemption from the bondage to decay. Paul is not talking about adaptation or some adjustments to live with decay. Paul is affirming the possibility of the very end of decay. So, for Paul, groaning and waiting is not a death vigil: but a waiting for new life; it is just like the waiting outside the labor room of a hospital to welcome the birth of a new life. New life is hidden in the midst of death and destruction. But we need the discernment to recognise it, the audacity to believe in it, and the revolutionary patience to wait for it.

Our groaning becomes a labor pain for alternatives when we regain the courage, faith, and imagination to believe in alternatives. Unfortunately, our scientific and objective knowledge systems do not allow us to dream new visions. We are told that alternatives are not only impossible but also illegitimate. Paul reminds us that “hope that is seen is not hope.” What does it mean? The doctrine of “there is no alternative” talks about the hope that is seen. It is realistic, objective, and scientific. There are sufficient scientific arguments to prove this hope. But for Paul that is not hope. “If we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.” So hope is the hope for what we do not see. This vision of hope is absurd to the logic of our times. But still Paul invites us to dream this absurd hope because “in hope we were saved.” So the groaning of creation as labor pain for alternatives instills in us the absurd hope that tomorrow can be a different day. With that hope we are invited to be an advent community, discerning the partial blossoming of that hope in our communities through our ministries of resistance and resilience in healing the world.

## **Re-imagining Mission as Public Witnessing**

Our organic solidarity with the groaning creation invites us to re-imagine the mission imperatives in our times to enable faith communities in their public witness of healing the creation. Mission is a term with military connotations. Emperors and despotic rulers use the term mission for destroying the lives and livelihoods of communities who refuse to bow down before their might. A closer look at colonialism exposes the God talk that legitimised colonial expansion and subjugation. Mission as conquest was based on three theological convictions: the divinely destined agency of the coloniser to invade and conquer the Other; the teleological vision of an ideal state of maturity, progress, and growth which they wanted to impose upon the colonised with missionary zeal; and a strong sense of deontological call to be the missionaries of this new religion of civilising the other. We also see the same spirit of mission and conquest in the neo-liberal projects of development and globalisation.

Our dominant mission discourses are founded on similar claims. We are convinced of our divine calling to engage in mission. This understanding of mission stems from the presupposition that the beliefs and practices of the “other” are heathen and sinful. So it is our dharma to intervene in the life stories of the “other” and impose our beliefs and practices on them, and convert them into our understanding of truth. Mission has become a sacred canopy that legitimises our constructions and representations of the “other,” and our interventions in their lives to impose upon them what we consider as the final revelation of truth. Such manifestations of mission are not only accompanied by violence, but are inherently violent.

Over the years, attempts have been made to redeem “mission” of this negative legacy of conquest and violence. New paradigms were proposed to widen the frontiers of mission to respond to the groaning that emerges from the peripheries of our world. However, without a conscious attempt to go beyond the exclusive truth claims and arrogant interventionist strategies, our theological reflections on Christian mission will only contribute to the perpetuation of the prevailing sinful social relations. Said differently, an epistemological break is essential to engage in alternative discourses on mission. This leads to the fundamental question whether we can redeem the concept of mission at all. In spite of our attempts to redeem it, mission continues to be a perspective from above legitimising our aggressive interventions in the life of the “other” to forcefully incorporate them into our fold. External interventions, even if for noble purposes, disable the agency of the communities, and reduce them to the level of objects to be acted upon. It is in the light of this critical discernment that I would like to propose two tentative alternative ways of understanding mission for our consideration.

The Orthodox understanding of “mission as presence” has been creatively reinterpreted by many in their attempts to search alternative meanings of mission. Mission as presence categorically rejects the conquest mentality of the dominant paradigms of mission. Mission is not a project of intervention; mission is the commitment to be present. This understanding of mission does not view the “other” as empirical categories who are in need of our benevolent interventions of charity. Rather mission is sheer presence in their sufferings, struggles, dreams, and celebrations. Exclusive truth claims and projects of social engineering are antithetical to mission as presence. The purpose of mission is not the propagation of a higher truth and morality, rather the manifestation of the life of communion that we experience in the Triune God. The doctrine of Trinity reveals a God who refused to be alone. The Godself finds its fullness in the pericherotic relationship between the three persons of the Trinity. Pericherotic relationship is a relationship of mutual growth. Mission as presence, hence, is an invitation to live out this pericherotic relationship in the community of creation to experience the fullness of creation.

The second proposal comes from Asian theologians who are involved in inter-faith dialogue. For them, the church in Asia needs to undergo a new baptism by immersing in the religious traditions of our neighbors. Such a baptism, they argue, will demand from us a commitment to go beyond the term “mission” to articulate our presence in the community. So they propose that we stop mission and instead engage in public witnessing. What are the implications of this shift from mission to witness? Witnessing emerges from a deep commitment to the God of life, and witnessing takes place in the form of presence. So, through witnessing the church happens in our communities. The God of life can be witnessed only by becoming a healing presence in our communities. Witnessing is praxis; a praxis in community through which we participate with God in the process of blossoming the Kingdom of God in the here and now.

Healing the earth is an interfaith public witnessing. When we hear the groaning creation and hold that “persons from all religious traditions *can* see, feel, and respond to the crises facing our Earth,” we develop “a sense of solidarity as an invitation to interaction and conversation.”<sup>3</sup> The urge to dialogue emerges from the gut feeling that there is “something” within our religious traditions that draws us closer to conversations and dialogue. This “something” could be that which recognises “the needs and sufferings afflicting humanity and the earth as a common concern for persons of all traditions.”<sup>4</sup> So in our public witnessing, these common problems have the potential to bring us together transcending our religious boundaries to strive together to heal the earth and to share each others’ cherished beliefs and faith. When interfaith dialogue happens as our collective response to the groaning of the creation, we discover it in our organic engagements with the grassroots social movements and civil society institutions that are committed to transform our social and ecological relations.

### **Public Witness as Discerning the Signs of the Times**

The groaning of creation as public protest invites us to begin our witnessing with discerning the signs of the times. “You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?” (Luke 12: 56) This challenge to problematise, and to interpret the present time, demands from us the commitment to reject the prevailing epistemology of “interpreting the appearance of earth and sky.” The diagnosis emerging from the dominant discourses of analysing the symptoms will only lead to solutions that will not harm the perpetuation of the prevailing order. Discerning the signs of the times is a counter-epistemological act as it enables the insurrection of the subjugated knowledges of the subalterns of our times.

In the lamentations that we hear from different corners of the world today we hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the victims. We also recognise a convergence between these lamentations because the cry of the earth and the cry of the victims are closely interconnected. The lamentation from the forests tells us that we have been cutting down forests at the rate of 120,000 sq km a year. Which means an area of forest equal to 12 football fields is lost every minute. It is estimated that between 17,000 and 100,000 species vanish every year. Within thirty years, almost a quarter of the world's mammals face extinction. In 1989, one species disappeared each day and by 2000 it was one every hour. The annual income of the richest 1% of the world is equal to that of the poorest 57%. UNICEF reports inform us that about 25,000 children die every day due to poverty and malnutrition. 1.1 billion people in developing countries have inadequate access to water. The Gross Domestic Product of the 41 Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (567 million

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<sup>3</sup> Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005, 80.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

people) is less than the wealth of the world's 7 richest people combined. For every \$1 in aid a developing country receives, more than \$25 is being spent on debt repayment.

These statistics are more than just numbers and figures; these are the signs of our times where God's creation groans for freedom. These are lamentations that expose structural injustice and sinfulness deep rooted in our body politic and social relations. The root cause for the ecological crisis that we face today is the prevailing economic system perpetuated by the empire and consented by the majority of the middle class across the world. Discernment of the signs of the times will expose the politics of the ecological crisis and will enable us to develop alternative perspectives to respond to the ecological crisis.

The bandwagon of growth-oriented development and globalisation has literally conquered the developing world. Their economies are opened for unregulated capital to ravish the remaining rain forests, water bodies, and the land. Commons have been snatched away from traditional communities, and are auctioned to the highest bidder. Life forms and traditional cultural practices and knowledge systems are being patented. The dominant diagnosis of the eco-crisis, as caused by human beings, conceals the structural roots of the problem and absolves neo-liberal capitalism of its ecological and structural sin.

Public witness as discerning the signs of the times requires from us the courage to speak the truth of this new problematisation. Witnessing in our context involves naming the principalities and powers of our times. Along with neo-liberal capitalism, social structures and practices of exclusion and marginalisation based on race, caste, gender and the like also contribute to the destruction of life and livelihood. The consequences and effects of ecological crisis are disproportionately borne by subaltern communities such as dalits, women, children, and the indigenous communities. Hence discerning the signs of the times is a faith imperative if we want to respond to the ecological crisis. However, this process of discernment requires us to be at the bleeding points of our times where communities with almost zero carbon footprints are spearheading movements of resilience and resistance against the forces of death and destruction. Public witness happens in our organic presence in these struggles.

### **Public Witness as Theological Re-imaginings in Response to New Epiphanies**

The epistemological break that we have identified in discerning the signs of the times provides us an alternative perspective for our theological engagement with the ecological crisis. As Gustavo Gutierrez reminds us "commitment is the primary act of doing theology." For him, theology is "critical reflection on praxis," and it succeeds commitment. Mission as presence relocates us to the furnaces of our times where we experience the Divine as the burning bush; surrounded with fire but refusing to be consumed. This experience of epiphany in the company of the victims of global warming and other environmental disasters and our praxis for a world devoid of death and destruction is the site for an alternative theological imagination. To paraphrase Gutierrez, theological perspective on public witness, in the context of the environmental crisis, is a critical reflection on our presence in the sufferings and struggles of God's creation. That means a mission theology of creation care emerges from the groaning of the creation—from public protest and public witness.

Studies on the historical roots of the ecological crisis have exposed the role of medieval Christianity and its attitudes towards nature in turning God's creation into commodities for profit and wealth accumulation.<sup>5</sup> That means, the dominant theological perspective on earth is violent and life negating, and it is incapable of enabling us to

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<sup>5</sup> Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155 (10 March 1967), 1203-7.

experience Divine in the terrestrial. As a result nature is being perceived as creatures without intrinsic worth, created to serve the needs and greed of human beings. Mission imperatives in the time of ecological crisis, hence, begin with alternative theological imaginations informed by new epiphany experiences.

Our constructive attempts to re-imagine earth theology emerges from our presence and witness to heal the earth. These constructive attempts begin with our theological articulation of our new experiences of epiphany. A new vision of God as the One who indwells the whole creation, as articulated by Martin Luther, enables us to understand the pain of God in the destruction of the community of creation. If God is present in the cross of Christ, the same God is wounded and crucified at the altar of neo-liberal capitalism along with millions of human beings and a multitude of God's creation. However, the passion of God is not a passive acceptance of the brutal regime of the powers and principalities of our times. Rather the passion of God in the company of the victims is the proclamation of the advent of an alternative earth, redeemed of death and destruction.

If public witness is our proclamation of and participation in the redemptive work of God in history, we need to rethink our understanding of salvation in the context of the ecological crisis. In our dominant theological reflections on salvation, the rest of creation remains outside the realm of salvation, and salvation is a very individualistic affair between "me and my God." Such a heaven-bound understanding of salvation does not inspire us to engage in eco-justice ministries as an expression of Christian evangelism and mission. This calls for alternative re-imaginings of salvation informed by the biblical visions of cosmic reconciliation (Colossians) and redeemed earth (Revelation). In short, an alternative theological re-imagination is essential not just to help us in discerning our mission imperatives, but to redeem the earth from the violence perpetuated by the distorted theological understanding of human-nature relationship.

### ***Public Witness as Being Alternative Communities of Resistance and Celebration***

An alternative theological re-imagination emerging from our reflections on our earth-healing praxis should transform us into alternative communities of resistance and celebration. The TINA syndrome (the doctrine of There Is No Alternative) can be overcome only by becoming alternative communities manifesting the foretaste of a redeemed earth. This is not something that we invent or pioneer as Christian mission. The lamentations emerging from far and near do witness the in-breaking of alternative communities that resist the onslaught of death. They are determined not only to resist death, but also to create alternative worldviews, technologies, industries, markets, economies, and social and ecological relations that respect, nurture, protect, and celebrate life in abundance. Our public witness is not to convert these alternative initiatives into church projects, but to immerse in them through our active and organic presence and participation: Loosing ourselves to find ourselves.

A call to be alternative communities emerges from the faith imperative that "we are the ones we have been waiting for." In the words of Alice Walker, "We are the ones we've been waiting for because we are able to see what is happening with a much greater awareness than our parents or grandparents could see. Having seen the greater truth of the pervasiveness of injustice around us, we do not want to believe that we can "fix" things. But when we become baptised in this new faith we do not want to believe that the mountains are there for ever. We do not want the perpetuation of an economic order which causes the rich to become ever more callous and complacent and the poor to become ever more wretched and humiliated. We are not willing to ignore starving and brutalised children. We will not let women be stoned or abused without protest. We refuse to stand quietly by as farmers are destroyed by people who have never farmed, and plants are

engineered to self-destruct. We will not remain as passive and loyal church members as long as the church continues to legitimise the powers be. We are the ones we've been waiting for." <sup>6</sup>

The witness of Tim DeChristopher, an American climate activist associated with the movement Peaceful Uprising is significant in this context. <sup>7</sup> While protesting at an auction of oil and gas leases on public lands in the US, Tim was asked whether he was a bidder, and he said "yes." He proceeded to bid millions of dollars he didn't have, raising the price of some parcels, winning others, and eventually shutting down the entire auction, which was later dismissed as illegal by the Obama administration. Last week Tim was sentenced in the federal court to two years in prison and ordered to pay a \$10,000 fine. He was taken into custody immediately.

At the Federal Court during his trial, Tim told the Judge, "I'm not saying any of this to ask you for mercy, but to ask you to join me.... At this point of unimaginable threats on the horizon, this is what hope looks like. In these times of a morally bankrupt government that has sold out its principles, this is what patriotism looks like. With countless lives on the line, this is what love looks like, and it will only grow. The choice you are making today is what side are you on." Public witness is the art of being an alternative community of resistance and celebration. Tim demonstrated that art through his witness in his campaign against climate change. "The people who are committed to fighting for a livable future will not be discouraged or intimidated by anything that happens here today. I will continue to confront the system that threatens our future. You have authority over my life, but not my principles. Those are mine alone."<sup>8</sup> Reclaiming this historic responsibility and vocation is the challenge that we need to take up even as we equip ourselves for God's ministry. "To be inspired by ordinary human beings made by God who undergo suffering but who have the courage to imagine a different future and are willing to fight for it, and to decide to fight along with them" <sup>9</sup> is what God expects from us in our times. This is the bold theological vision that should guide us in our public witness. It is our commitment to translate this vision that makes church happen in our communities.

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<sup>6</sup> Alice Walker, *We are the Ones We have been Waiting for: Inner Light in a Time of Darkness*, New York: The New Press, 2006

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.yesmagazine.org/blogs/brooke-jarvis/the-courage-to-stop-pretending-tim-dechristopher-sentenced>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.commondreams.org/view/2011/07/26-13>

<sup>9</sup> Cornel West, *Hope on a Tightrope: Words and Wisdom*, New York: Smiley Books, 2008, 38