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“The Earth Is The Lord’s”

Genesis 1:24-31
Revelation 21:1-4
April 20, 2008

I find very few things in this world as healing as nature. When I am working really hard, and not taking time for myself, just a one hour hike in the foothills can completely restore my soul. Climbing a mountain or skiing or camping can work miracles in my psyche and spirit.

I remember visiting two patients in the same hospital a few years ago. One had a room that faced a brick wall. The woman in that room asked me what the weather was like outside, since she could not see out. She felt isolated and depressed. The woman in the other hospital room across the hall and up two floors had a large window that brought in the glory of the sky and a stunning view of Sloans Lake surrounded by trees in all of their autumn glory. She was actually much sicker than the previous woman I had visited, but she was serene, almost radiant. “Look at that,” she said with a sweep of her hand toward the window. “What a wonderful place for getting well.”

Mother nature is food for the body, beauty for the eyes, and nourishment for the spirit. Nature is the harmony of silence and sound. John Muir, the naturalist, said that when we try to examine anything in nature by itself, we cannot, because everything in nature is connected to everything else in the universe. We live amid an intricate web of unity. All the world is full of the glory of God! The fifteenth century mystic Meister Eckhart said, “If the only prayer you could say in your whole life is ‘Thank You for this beautiful world’ that would suffice.”

Now, it is interesting to me that The Bible begins and ends with an emphasis upon the natural world. Genesis talks about God giving creation a final blessing by saying that human beings are to be responsible for all of the animals and the very earth itself. While it is an invitation to responsibility, it is also a call to love and enjoy what God has created. Then, at the end of a literary trek through sixty-six books and thousands of years of human struggle, the Bible ends with the Book of Revelation promising a new heaven and a new earth. The vision of the writer of Revelation brings heaven and earth together, making them one by the indwelling presence of God. In between Genesis and Revelation, the word Creation appears countless times. So our sacred literature is permeated from Genesis to Revelation with this love of creation and the expectation that those created in God’s image will wisely care for that creation.

And yet how strange that Christianity to this day remains largely indifferent to a concern for careful stewardship of God's Creation. I think the problem begins as so many problems do, with a selective reading of the Bible. The Bible calls us not to dominate and subdue the earth, but to be stewards of the earth. We humans do not own the world or any part of it. "The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein," said the psalmist. The early writer of Leviticus heard God saying, "The land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me." We are guests and stewards here, not owners. We are not here to dominate, abuse and use the earth for our own selfish ends.

The Bible also tells us that God made not only those parts of creation that we understand and approve, but all of it. "All things were made by God, and without God was not anything made that was made," said the writer of John's Gospel. So we must credit God with the making of poisonous snakes, noxious weeds, stinging wasps, ferocious beasts, and disease-causing microorganisms. We may not fully understand why these things are here, but we should not assume that God made an error in those parts of creation. Everything that is here is here for a reason, and we are expected to honor and care for it all. This is not a political agenda, it is not environmentalism for tree hugging hippies, it is a matter of our faith in God.

God dearly loves this world, and has charged us with caring for it. Now Christians often quote John 3:16 as a quick and easy formula for getting to heaven: "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." Yet often overlooked is the great importance of those first five words: "God so loved the world." [The Greek translation of "world" here is "cosmos," not just humankind.] God became human in Jesus Christ out of love for the world. Belief in Christ should thus be inextricably linked to belief in the inherent goodness, precious value and lovability of the world.

Jesus taught that God is present not only in dedicated sacred spaces, but in all places to hear our prayers and accept our worship. Jesus frequently used illustrations from nature to call attention to the glory of God. Solomon knew after he had built the Temple that it never could be a dwelling place for God. He said, "Behold, the highest heavens cannot contain God, how much less this house that I have built." Paul preaching in Athens, said, "God that made the world and all living things dwells not in temples made with hands." God lives in the heart of all creation. To paraphrase John Wesley, "All creation is our church."

Many people have told me over the years that they don't have much use for church, because they can worship God in nature. They say that nature feeds their souls much more effectively than church. Now just being outdoors is not worship, and you really do need a community of faith to grow spiritually and become a mature disciple. Yet it is undeniable that God's spirit permeates all of nature. Native Americans have always understood this, they believe in living spirits in every rock and tree. Poets have so often given nature the role not only of mother or grandmother, but of the highest teacher, a figure of mystery and great power.

The great visionary encounters with God in the Bible seldom took place in temples, but more often in sheep pastures, in the deserts, on the mountains, in the middle of the sea. The Bible is a book about the outdoors, the wonders of creation. Nature is one of our best teachers if we will but listen.

Bill Moyers' documentary, entitled "Earth on Edge" communicated much the same message in a most powerful way. In that film, the connectedness of our lives with all of creation was made dramatically clear. From the great network of plant growth in the tropical rainforest to the tiniest microorganisms, life is a complex whole. My life and your life are deeply bound to the whole of creation.

What is more, the incredible moment of your conception is an event that astounds even the most cynical microbiologists to this day. The genetic selection of the unique you is the product of billions of years of planetary change so that in a precise moment in time, you were chosen to be you. The fact that we are here at all rests on the creative power infused into the elements of nature. It is all more miraculous than we will ever know. Over the years, the emerging elements of this remarkable universe converged in such a way as to create the possibility of your being chosen to be. The Hebrew word for chosen is also translated beloved. So we have been loved into the world by God. You and I are here by the creative and loving act of a generous God. And that same loving God has given us a truly remarkable and beautiful world.

Yet, for centuries now we have treated this planet as if it was our creation and as if its resources were inexhaustible and its future unlimited. We have acted as if the world is ours to exploit, rather than a precious gift from God. Sadly, we are now beginning to see the deadly consequences of those kinds of choices. Some people have chosen the "good" life of unbridled consumption in a way that has highly destructive consequences for the earth. This so-called "good life," is anything but good for millions of people all over this world.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change issued a report which was compiled from conferences held in Shanghai, Geneva, and Accra. This three-volume work argues that we are on the edge of a worldwide environmental cataclysm. We are pouring poisons into our drinking water and our air. Our fertile soils are being destroyed by careless and profligate use. Thousands of species of animals are being destroyed, and a new species becomes extinct on this planet every 20 minutes. Every 20 minutes! That is 1000 times faster than the norm during the entire history of the earth. When entire plant and animal species disappear from a fragile ecosystem it is in danger of complete collapse. The rain forests that supply oxygen to breathe are being cut down at an alarming and unsustainable pace. In the name of the good life, we are daily choosing a future of death for our world and for our children.

We know today that more than 5 million mostly poor children die each year from diseases related to the environment – asthma, dysentery, cholera, malaria, and more. All are exacerbated by the warming and disruption of our global climate caused by human activity. Rising temperatures lead to the spread of disease-carrying mosquitoes. Warming waters, drinking water fouled by floods, run off from heavy rains or hurricanes -- all bring bacteria that in the belly of a poor, malnourished baby may mean death, not merely diarrhea.

Climate change is getting worse and causing more and more death and destruction every year. Even President Bush has revised his original position on climate change in light of the irrefutable scientific evidence.

We knew about Hurricane Katrina which struck the gulf coast in 2005. We currently have a Mission Team working in the Katrina zone. But how many of us paid much attention when, in 1998, Hurricane Mitch-- part of this ever growing pattern of more powerful hurricanes linked to global warming --brought widespread flooding, disease, and over 11,000 deaths in Honduras? The effects are still being felt. How many of us paid attention when Dr. Jonathan Patz calculated for the World Health Organization that climate change is already causing some 150,000 people to die each year? And now climate change is contributing to the drastically increasing cost of food all over the world. The price of rice is rising 75%, in Bangladesh a bag of rice costs 1/2 of one days income for a poor family.

And of course it is always the poor who suffer the most. Robert Bullard, a pioneer of the study of environmental racism, writes that in Atlanta, one of the worst centers of urban sprawl and pollution, it is African-Americans and the poor who bear the greatest impact of environmental hazards to their health and lifestyle.

Wallace Stegner reminded us, "Something will have gone out of us as a people

if we ever let the remaining wilderness be destroyed, if we permit the last virgin forests to be turned into comic books; if we drive the few remaining members of the wild species into zoos or to extinction; if we pollute the last clear air and dirty the last clean streams and push our paved roads through the last of the silence.”

We have already done irreparable harm to our world. And yet even at this 11th hour, we do have a choice, and it is a choice that will impact all of the other choices we will ever make. It is a choice between life and death.

We can transcend our self-interests and our political loyalties. We can work together to honor God’s creation and ensure a sustainable future for our children. We can recycle, drive less, walk more, consume less, plant a tree, learn, learn, learn about ways to help, heal and save the earth.

Even small steps can make a difference. At our March Church Council meeting your elected leaders decided to affirm our churches commitment to care for the earth. We passed a resolution which I would like you to read along with me:

(Show on the screens...)

As the people of the Lakewood United Methodist Church we commit to serve as faithful stewards of God’s creation by:

- Developing better procedures to reduce and recycle
- Educate and expand awareness of our need to care for the earth
- Promote healing and wholeness of the earth in all our endeavors

We would very much like to be a green facility, which is next to impossible in a building this old. But we are going to work hard to ensure that our new church is a green facility and that we are practicing stewardship of the earth in all of our endeavors. We do this not because it is trendy, but because it is faithful.

God made the whole earth. God cares for all things. Not just polar bears, but people, penguins but the penniless, the lilies of the field and refugee. As Christians, we care about all creation; we care as much about God’s children as we do about melting ice in Glacier National Park or the destruction of the rainforests. God calls us to care, because it is all interconnected, and God has pronounced all of it good.

So let us go forth, not only to celebrate God’s good, green Earth, but to love our neighbors already suffering from the effects of climate change, in Atlanta and in Africa, in Houston and in Honduras, in Lakewood and Lithuania. May we understand the power we have to heal and bless this incredible creation.