

Homily for Earth Day 2019
Delivered at First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Eastertide, Sunday, April 28, 2019
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Genesis 1:20-23

And God said, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the firmament of the heavens.” So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. And God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” And there was evening and there was morning, a fifth day.

The Goodness of God, Earth, and Humanity

A couple was very concerned about their water bills.
As much as they sought to conserve water, their bills went up and up.
They checked their pipes for leaks and took shorter showers, but no change.
One day the husband was sick and stayed home from work.
He heard an odd noise and followed it to its source.
The family cat was leaning over the toilet watching the water flush out.
When the tank refilled, the cat stood on its hind legs
and, using both paws, pulled the lever. Again and again and again!
You and I have undoubtedly watched as dogs and babies played in the commode.
Now you can see a video of the cat playing with the toilet on *YouTube*.
I wonder how they solved their feline problem.

We have some problems to solve before us as well.
We have a responsibility for the water and the land and air.
We are stewards – caretakers – of Mother Earth.
You can read about it in the Bible if you want.

Many of the Psalms in the Bible were written by King David.
Before he was king of Israel, David was a boy shepherd.
He sang psalms and spiritual hymns to God while watching over his flock.
He appreciated God’s gifts of fields and streams and providential care.
Later, when David was King of Israel, he wrote what we know as the 23rd Psalm:
The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.

The 104th Psalm celebrates God's gift of creation and God's power to recreate.
O Lord, how manifold are your works!

*In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.
Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there,
living things both small and great.
When you send forth your spirit, they are created;
and you renew the face of the ground.*

Our souls sing hymns and psalms of thanksgiving as well.
Our souls yearn for green pastures, fresh water,
and enough so we shall not be in want.
What song would emanate from our souls if this were not the case?
What in the world are we going to do
in response to
Do you claim a moral and social responsibility
to ensure that the green pastures and fresh water and sufficient foods
we've enjoyed continue for current & future generations?

The first Creation story in Genesis 1 celebrates
the glorious creative power of God and the goodness of all that God made.
There is a second Creation story, found in Genesis 2:

*"In the day that the Lord*⁵
*when no plant of the field was yet in the earth
and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—
for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth,
and there was no one to till the ground;*⁶
*but a stream would rise from the earth,
and water the whole face of the ground—*⁷
*then the Lord God formed [humanity] from the dust of the ground,
and breathed in... the breath of life...*⁸
*And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east;
and there God put the human whom God had formed.*¹⁵
The Lord God ... put [the human] in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it."

God plus Earth creates Humanity.

In grateful response for the gift of life,
Humanity tends the Earth and follows God.
In response for such stewardship,
Earth feeds Humanity
and as both Isaiah and the psalmist say,
"all the trees of the field clap their hands."

You've heard the story of the scientist who challenged God to a creation contest.
The scientist said, *"God, I challenge you that I can make life out of dirt."*
God said, *"I'll take you on. You go first."*
When the scientist reached down for a handful of soil,

God said, "Hold on there, my friend. You have to get your own dirt."

From the creation of the first human beings
made by dust and breath (*ruach*) of life,
through the groundbreaking faith of Abraham and Sarah...
From the liberating work of Moses and Miriam and Aaron,
through the wisdom & hope of psalmists and prophets,
priests and people of God...
From the birth of Christ through the first 1,500 years of church history...
the triune that sparked spiritual imaginations
consisted of God, Earth, and Humanity.

These three were on the table together.
God the Creator, the Molder, the Potter, the Shepherd, the Redeemer.
Earth the land and sea made by God to nurture humanity
and for humanity to practice faithful stewardship.
Humanity, the blessed creation of God to build the kingdom of God on earth
as it is in heaven, to till and sow and reap
blessed bounty from Mother Earth.
From Genesis to Revelation, from the Psalms to the Gospels
the Holy Scriptures point us to a loving God who loves all of creation,
including the world and those who dance on her soil.

Alas, something happened.
In 1450 the printing press was invented in Gutenberg.
By the 1600s, over 2,500 cities had printing presses.
Literacy led to an ever-greater thirst for knowledge,
the birth of science, the age of reason, and soon the industrial revolution.
For its first 1500 years the church of Jesus Christ
taught a mighty trilogy of God, World and Humanity.
After 1600 the song the Church sang changed.

With literacy and greater illumination
came greater self-interest and preservation.
Our spiritual ancestors began to objectify the world.

The earth and seas and trees -- and even people -- came to be seen as resources.
Resources to be used and, if need be, abused for the building up of humanity.
When the earth is seen as a resource and not a blessed third of a holy trinity,
we become that much further removed
from a sense of kinship with the world.
Martin Buber might point out that we've sacrificed an *I-Thou relationship*
for a more expedient *I-It non-relationship*.
Today is Earth Sabbath, also known as Earth Stewardship Sunday,
and we pray to be effective and responsive stewards of the world.
The Word speaks to and for a warming world.

Effective theology engages God, Earth and Humanity.

We Disciples of Christ are not escapists, seeking how best to avoid
difficult or tricky or messy subjects or trials we find before us.
Disciples of Christ are emboldened by the Spirit of God to rise to the challenge,
incorporating faith and reason and spiritual discernment.

Nor do you hear Disciples of Christ advocating
we take a theological stance or biblical interpretation
that salvation is a blessed escape
from the Earth or worldly responsibilities.

Thank God that this is no pie in the sky religion,
one that claims that all you need do is believe
and you can effectively escape from reality
or responsibility or relationships with the rest of creation.

Disciples of Christ are delighted to proclaim that salvation is communal,
that in Christ we are redeemed with and alongside God's blessed creation.

Disciples theology engages God, Earth and Humanity.

Before and during World War II

Americans rallied together to confront the twin headed monster
of political evil and economic depression.

Tom Brokaw called this "The Greatest Generation."

We sent soldiers strong and true across the Pacific and Atlantic oceans
to defend freedom and combat fascism.

On the home front we rationed gasoline, bought war bonds,
started victory gardens, scrimped and saved to make ends meet.

Fuel and food and natural resources were needed for the war effort.

Nothing was wasted

because everything was important, valued, and essential.

Everyone pulled together; everyone did their part; we put up a united front
to save precious resources,

to save our European, Asian and African brothers and sisters,
and to save America.

No one can tell us it can't be done today; we know better.

Have you ever watched *Extreme Home Makeover*?

Want to see me cry? Change the channel to *Extreme Home Makeover*.

By the time the community shouts "*Move that bus!*" tears of joy are flowing.

Through you and me and all of us serving together for the greater good
God is creating a new humanity to meet the present need.

When you observe and participate in the power of people coming together
to make a difference for someone other than themselves,
you are changed. Transformed. Encouraged. Energized. Engaged.

We can do anything we invest our minds and will and resources to accomplish.
We have to decide whether something is a priority,
and everything flows from there.
So, how important to us are green pastures and fresh, still waters?

Records show that surface temperatures have risen about 1.4 degrees F
since the early 20th century and about 1-degree F since 1978;
in Canada, the temperature has risen 2.7 degrees Fahrenheit.
The phrase "Climate Change" is growing in preferred use to "global warming"
because it serves to convey the reality
that there are changes in addition to rising temperatures.
We see our lake water levels drop and rise and drop, and we are concerned.
Somalia has seen Lake Chad all but evaporate and the results are alarming.
Even "Sports Illustrated" has gotten interested in climate changes.
SI devoted an issue to sports and climate change (March 12, 2007),
observing that as we do damage to Mother Earth,
the games we play are impacted.

This is no game.

We need to talk about this, you and I, here in God's church, and we need to act.
Climate change is a moral, ethical, and spiritual issue.
Climate change is becoming "a core issue for people of faith
because of its effect on the poor,
because of its short-term and long-term health impacts, and
because of the threat it poses to future generations."

(paraphrase, Karen Coshof, e-mail)

Recently many of our sister churches have come to this same conclusion,
including both progressive and fundamental congregations,
whether oriented toward social justice or evangelism or both.
Many fellow Christians are not taking a reactive stance,
nor are they saying this is a matter for other people to figure out alone.
They are proclaiming, in effect, that addressing social and environmental concerns
is a significant part of our vocation.
God is calling to all of us, together, to be faithful stewards of Mother Earth.

Recently I saw a Baptist church bus with their motto printed on the side:
"Exploring God's Creation"

After 500 years of seeing the earth as a resource to be used,
churches today are reclaiming our engagement with God, Earth & Humanity.
Churches across the nation are standing up and saying it is not okay,
it is not acceptable, that Clean Water and Clean Air acts

passed under Richard Nixon and subsequent administrations
both Republican and Democrat,
are being stripped of their muscles and intent.
It is not acceptable for birds or sea creatures or other living beings
that reasonable rules and regulations
stipulated by the Environmental Protection Agency
are being undermined or undone.

It's so easy to get distracted and diverted by tweets and chaos and mayhem.
While we are distracted by the shiny and the loud,
wizards are hard at work behind the curtain.

Over the past two years the EPA has systematically
made it okay for industries to dump toxic waste into local streams,
allowed power plants to spew poisons,
rescinded bans of offshore drilling in the Atlantic and Arctic oceans,
& supported the USA's withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement.
An environmental scientist who worked for 50 years to protect God's earth just retired;
she wrote a letter published in *The New Yorker* magazine
that everything she did for 5 decades to protect creatures
who live on the land, sea, & sky
was undone by the current EPA in a matter of months.
At her current age, she does not have the energy to fight the battle again.

Who will act to protect our Mother Earth?
Who will take up the banner?
Will the Church of Jesus Christ stand up and say, "Here I am, Lord. Send me!"

Sixty years ago we united as a nation and a world;
we know we can do so again.
The World Wide Battle for today's great generations
requires being good stewards, reducing, reusing, and recycling.

There is much we can do individually and collectively.
A Georgia Tech professor explained to our school PTA
that every time we start our car engines
we use the same amount of fuel as we do to drive 25 miles.
As you may well be aware, our church is 'going green'; we're a Green Chalice church.
We're enjoying our coffee and tea with ceramic mugs instead of Styrofoam cups;
we purchased a more energy efficient stove and dishwasher;
we replaced the roof and added insulation.
We recycle paper, glass, cans, plastic and cardboard, as well as ink cartridges,
reducing our weekly trash output by at least half;
we changed all the bulbs we can to compact florescent spirals;
we installed programmable thermostats;

and we have already seen results.

We saved as much as \$7,000 a year in lower utility bills.

We're intentional about using tithes and offerings
for Georgia missions, not Georgia Power

Growing victory gardens, intentionally using fewer fossil fuels,
recycling, reducing, reusing that which we borrow from the Earth...
are not only possible, not only are moral imperatives,
they are a matter of life and breath.

From tending and tilling in the Garden of Eden
to caring for Mother Nature in these Piedmont foothills,
our vocation is to be engaged with God, Earth and Humanity.

The Word for a warming world is not finished.

The first climate that must be changed is within us.

God is creating a new humanity to meet the present need.

This is the new beginning that is borne of the Holy Spirit,
a global resurrection with its genesis in an authentic humanity.

We begin afresh our congregation, our dialogue, our community action,
our spiritual growth,

our igniting of spirit-fed passion

for the very survival and healing

of this blue planet spinning in the sky.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!