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Creation Care Sunday/Earth Day 2018

“The Earth is the Lord’s”

A sermon by Mindy Douglas

4th Sunday of Easter (Year B)

April 22, 2018

Acts 17:22-28

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. God said let there be light and there was light. God said let there be sky, and there was sky. God said let there be waters and dry land, trees and fields, birds and fish and creeping things. With a word, God created humankind in God’s own image. And God saw creation and knew it was good (Gen. 1). And it was good. And it is good.

The many religions of our world may not agree on many things, but this is the one thing that most religions agree on – the other-worldly power behind creation. Though we don’t always agree on *how* the world was formed, or when, or even why, many people in our world, across many religions, understand their deity as a creating God. Certainly, this is true for us as Christians. In Genesis, we hear the story of God creating the world and all that is in it. The power of God’s creation – wind, fire, water, earth, storm – appears throughout the Hebrew Scripture and in the New Testament. The prophets honor the power and majesty of the earth; the psalmists sing of its beauty and grandeur. Throughout scripture, nature is alive and in concert with God – trees of the field clap their hands, eagles soar on high winds, deserts blossom, springs burst forth from dry ground, the mountains smoke at God’s touch. Even in our Acts passage for today, Paul knows that God is our *creator* God –

The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands . . . in him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:24, 28).

And we know this to be true, don't we?

I invite you to close your eyes and go with me to the beach this morning. Close your eyes and imagine you are standing alone on an empty beach. It is cool on this beach, but you can feel the gentle warmth of the sun on your face and a soft breeze on your skin. Breathe in the fresh salty air. Can you smell the ocean? Can you detect the faint odor of fish? Can you hear the sound of the waves and the seagulls? Breathe in again.

Your feet are bare and the sand gives way with your steps. The sand is cool and damp from the receding tide. Feel the millions of sand crystals as they cushion your steps.

As you look ahead, the sun rises into the sky, ducking behind soft clouds, sending beams of light into the sky around you. Below the clouds, the water glistens brightly as wave after wave moves toward the beach. And in the other direction, the water stretches endlessly into the horizon. Let your mind empty as you rest in the beauty of this scene.

There are very few of us who could be in such a place as this and not feel overwhelmed with awe and touched in some way by God. Most of us who stand before the vastness, beauty, and power of the ocean end up, if only for a moment, breathless and awestruck, filled with a peace, joy, and gratitude for the God of creation.

If we had time today, I would take you on a similar trip through the night sky and invite you to consider our place in the vastness of the universe. Or I would take you the opposite direction into the intricacies (*in-trick-a-seas*) of a single cell. Awe is the best word we have to describe what we feel in these moments. Awe is our best way, perhaps, of sensing God.

What is truly amazing, perhaps, is that all of this, and so much more, is God's creation. All of this, and so much more, is the earth that God has given us to live in, to connect with, and to care for. We, who have been made in God's image, are stewards of creation. We are caretakers of the world around us. We are called to tend the garden, care for the soil, and water the earth. We are called to care for God's creatures, from the smallest cell to the largest whale. We are called to care for the abundant life that flows and pulses through the created world around us. As God's created ones, we are called to this.

WENDELL BERRY, well-known poet, essayist, and farmer, writes the essay, "Christianity and the Survival of Creation."¹ I share a portion of this with you today. He writes:

If we read the Bible, keeping in mind the desirability of those two survivals--of Christianity and the Creation--we are apt to discover several things that modern Christian organizations have kept remarkably quiet about, or have paid little attention to.

We will discover that we humans do not own the world or any part of it: "The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof: the world and they that dwell therein" (Ps. 24:1). There is in our human law, undeniably, the concept and right of "land ownership." But. . . [i]n biblical terms, the "landowner" is the guest and steward of God: "the land is mine; for ye are strangers and sojourners with me" (Lev. 25:23).

We will discover that God found the world, as [God] made it, to be good; that [God] made it for [God's] pleasure; and that [God] continues to love it and to find it worthy, despite its reduction and corruption by us. . . .

We will discover that the Creation is not in any sense independent of the Creator, the result of a primal creative act long over and done with, but is

¹ *Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community*, (New York: Random House, Inc., 1993).

the continuous, constant participation of all creatures in the being of God. . . . Creation is God's presence in creatures. . . . Thus we and all other creatures live by a sanctity that is inexpressibly intimate. To every creature the gift of life is a portion of the breath and spirit of God. . . .

We will discover that, for these reasons, our destruction of nature is not just bad stewardship, or stupid economics, or a betrayal of family responsibility; it is the most horrid blasphemy. It is flinging God's gifts into God's face, as of no worth beyond that assigned to them by our destruction of them. To Dante, "despising Nature and her gifts" was a violence against God. (n3) We have no entitlement from the Bible to exterminate or permanently destroy or hold in contempt anything on the earth or in the heavens above it or in the waters beneath it. We have the right to use the gifts of Nature, but not to ruin or waste them. We have the right to use what we need, but no more, which is why the Bible forbids usury and great accumulations of property. The usurer, Dante said, "condemns Nature. . . for he puts his hope elsewhere."(n4)

William Blake was biblically correct, then, when he said that "everything that lives is holy."(n5)

The Bible leaves no doubt at all about the sanctity of the act of world-making, or of the world that was made, or of creaturely or bodily life in this world. We are holy creatures living among other holy creatures in a world that is holy. Some people know this, and some do not. Nobody, of course, knows it all the time. But what keeps it from being far better known than it is? Why is it apparently unknown to millions of professed students of the Bible? How can modern Christianity have so solemnly folded its hands while so much of the work of God was and is being destroyed? Wendell Berry

These are important questions we must ask as Christians. Why do we forget that we are holy creatures living among other holy creatures in a world that is holy?

Recently, I learned of the watershed discipleship movement. This international movement of Christians recognizes “the current watershed moment of ecological crisis alongside the call to care for creation in the scriptures.”² In this movement, Christians are called to re-covenant with the ground beneath their feet and to re-learn the watershed of creation all around them. We are called to remember the intimate ways we are connected to every part of creation. The way the air we breathe and need to live has been produced by the plants around us and how the air we breathe out is essential for the life around us. We are invited to listen to the world, to listen and hear what it says to us about the ways we are holy creatures living among other holy creatures in a world that is holy.

Now, imagine you are sitting on a porch in the mountains somewhere and are *listening* to the sounds of nature and an early summer rain as I read this poem from Thomas Merton:

*In the forest, at night, cherished by this
wonderful, unintelligible
perfectly innocent speech,
the most comforting speech in the world,
the talk that rain makes by itself all over the ridges,
and the talk of the watercourses everywhere in the hollows.
Nobody started it, nobody is going to stop it.
It will talk as long as it wants, this rain,
As long as it talks I am going to listen.*

The world is speaking to us. Holy creation to holy creation.

May we listen.

May we love.

May we heal.

May we care.

² <https://watersheddiscipleship.org/about-us/>

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Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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