



**“Can We Learn to Live in Harmony with the Natural World?”**

**Scripture – Genesis 2:4b-9 and 15-19**

**Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Gregory Knox Jones**

**Sunday, April 28, 2024**

Identifying God as the creative power of the universe is so central to the Abrahamic faiths, that the first book of the Bible serves up not one, but two creation stories. Last week, we focused on the creation story we find in the first chapter of Genesis. We focused on that tricky term “dominion” and the type of power that humans are expected to exercise over the earth. We have freedom to exploit it only for our personal benefit or we can recognize it as God’s handiwork and accept our responsibility to care for it.

Today we focus on the beginning of life on earth as told in chapter two. It is a more intimate story. It does not ponder the creation of the sun and the moon and the physical earth and the oceans. Rather, it hones in on the relationship between humans and God, and humans and the natural world. It prods us to consider what it means to be given the heavy duty of caring for the earth and its creatures. When these stories were written over 2,500 years ago, it was a far simpler job. With the tremendous explosion in population and the enormous leaps in technology, we possess the capacity to inflict far greater harm than people who lived in ancient times.

The poles of our planet regulate our climate and weather patterns, and they are warming faster than anywhere else on the planet. The ice is melting in both the Arctic and the Antarctic. The gleaming white ice reflects the sun’s rays back into space. But as the ice at the poles disappears, the sun rays are “absorbed by the dark ocean, accelerating rising water temperatures and ice melt, altering ocean currents, weakening the jet stream, and changing wind patterns. The effects ripple through the global ecosystem manifesting in greater drought, and more intense heat, floods, and storms.”<sup>1</sup>

Climate change is not a distant problem. It is here. It is affecting our health, our food supply, our water supply, our economy, and the other living creatures of the planet. Each day we do not act, the situation deteriorates.

Remember last summer when the wildfires were raging in Canada? There were nearly 500 active wildfires in eleven of the country’s thirteen provinces and territories. People in New York City – hundreds of miles from the fires – were cautioned to stay indoors as much as possible because of the smoke that was blanketing the city and turning the sky orange. Last June, a report that appeared in *Scientific American*

said that “Human depletion of groundwater has shifted the global distribution of water so much that the North Pole has drifted by more than four centimeters per year changing the tilt of the earth’s axis.”<sup>2</sup> I’m still trying to picture that.

When it comes to our care for the earth, rising temperatures due to our addiction to burning fossil fuels is not the only problem. You have likely read about the dangers of micro plastics. Last summer the *New Yorker* magazine reported that scientists have discovered not millions, not billions, but “trillions of pieces of toxic ‘micro plastics’ just about everywhere on earth – from 36,000 feet below sea level in the Mariana Trench to human placentas and newborn babies.”<sup>3</sup>

For humans to be healthy and whole, the earth must be healthy and whole. If there is too much lead in the water or smog in the air or plastic in our bodies, then all of us pay a price. Following last week’s sermon, one of you shared with me a quote from the Native American Wallace Black Elk. He was asked how we can heal the earth. He replied, “We don’t have to heal the earth; she can heal herself. All we have to do is stop making her sick.”

Unfortunately, we are making the earth exceedingly ill. We have succumbed to the modern myth of unlimited material progress with little concern for its impact on the earth.

Fortunately, awareness of the negative side effects of burning fossil fuels has prompted a change of behavior in many. More people are buying hybrid and electric vehicles. In my neighborhood I’ve noticed more electric lawnmowers, leaf blowers, and weed trimmers, rather than gas-powered ones. We have switched to LED bulbs and an increasing amount of clean energy is being generated by solar panels and wind turbines. You may have seen the story just last Sunday about a start-up company named “Make Sunsets.” They fill large weather balloons with sulfur dioxide. The balloons float up into the stratosphere and then burst. “When the balloons pop, the sulfur dioxide gas turns into particles that reflect sunlight. They are one of a growing number of startups and billionaire-backed nonprofits attempting to create products that will help to cool the earth.”<sup>4</sup>

I am all in favor of technological advances to stop rising temperatures. However, we make a grave error if we think we can sit back and let science and technology fix the mess we are creating. I don’t believe the root of the problem is economic or scientific. While education is vital, I don’t believe we will stop harming the planet by merely educating everyone. I believe at its core, this is a matter of the heart. Can we learn to live in harmony with God’s natural world, or will we view it as an object apart from ourselves to be used in whatever way we desire?

Botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer recalls leading a workshop on relationships to the earth. “All the students in the class had a deep respect for nature. Most said that being out in nature was where they experience the greatest sense of well-being. Simply said, they love the earth. And then she asked them, ‘Do you think that the earth loves you back?’”

“The students were dumbfounded. Puzzled looks filled the room. No one said a peep. So, she tried another approach. She asked, ‘What do you suppose would happen *if* people believed this crazy notion that the earth loves them back?’ The floodgates opened. They all wanted to talk at once. They began talking about harmony and beauty and peace. One student summed it up like this: ‘You wouldn’t harm what loves you.’”

“Knowing that you love the earth changes you. It spurs you to defend and protect and celebrate. But when you feel that the earth loves you in return, that feeling transforms the relationship from a one-way street to a sacred bond.”<sup>5</sup> If you imagine love to be primarily feelings that two people share, it no doubt sounds bizarre or mystical to think that the earth loves us. But think of the ways that the earth is constantly caring for us with life-sustaining resources. From every breath of oxygen we inhale to the land that yields fruits and grains and vegetables to the oceans teeming with seafood to wetlands and forests that act as natural buffers against floods and erosion to trees that provide shade from the heat and a natural habit for birds. That is more than enough proof that the earth cares for us, but there is also the healing quality of nature. Spending time in nature has been shown to be a stress reliever and to boost our immune systems. The majesty of the mountains and the vastness of the oceans beckon us to connect with something greater than ourselves.

If we recognize the ways the earth cares for us, it can transform our perspective so that we no longer feel as if we are dealing with an inanimate object. The relationship grows deeper and more personal. Botanist Kimmerer “loved a man who lived most of his life in the city, but when she dragged him off to the ocean or the woods he seemed to enjoy it well enough – as long as he could find an internet connection. He had lived in a number of places, so she asked him where he found his greatest sense of place. He didn’t understand the expression so she explained that she wanted to know where he felt most nurtured and supported. What is the place that you understand best? That you know best and knows you in return?”

“He didn’t take long to answer. He said, ‘My car. In my car. It provides me with everything I need, in just the way I like it. My favorite music. Seat position fully adjustable. Automatic mirrors. Two cup holders. I’m safe and it always takes me where I want to go.’ Years later, he tried to commit suicide. In his car.”

“He never grew a relationship with the earth, choosing instead the isolation of technology. He was like a small, withered seed that you find months later in the bottom of the seed packet, the one that never touched the earth.”<sup>6</sup>

The 14<sup>th</sup> century theologian Meister Eckhart said, “If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is thank you, it will be enough.” I wonder what transformation would occur within each of us if every day we paused to give thanks for the wind, the rain, the sun, the soil, the trees, the oceans, the living creatures of the earth and the birds of the air. Deep gratitude for God’s creation holds the potential to alter our perspective and draw us closer to God. That is why the Celts spoke of having two books of faith – the little book and the big book. The little book is the Bible. The big book is the natural world.

The creation story in Genesis 1 says that God has given us dominion over the living creatures of the earth and last week we considered what kind of dominion we are to exercise. We can rule as a self-centered despot or a good shepherd. In today’s creation story, we read that God created the first human and then placed him in the garden. And the job of the first human was “to till it and keep it.” That is, humans are to cultivate the earth and help it to thrive. Then our story tells us that God created animals and birds and brought them to the man. And the story includes this fascinating detail: the man was given the responsibility of naming them. Why?

“A colleague tells about his friend, Jon, a pastor in New Jersey. Jon has two children – a boy and a girl and they begged their dad for a dog. He was reluctant, so he tried to impress upon them the responsibility that comes along with having a dog. He said, “You have to take care of a dog. You have to walk it and feed it and clean up after it and take care of it.” The children promised they would do all of those things.”

“A few days before Christmas, while the children were in school, Jon went to a shelter and adopted a black Labrador puppy. The kids were over the moon excited. As they were playing with their new puppy, Jon’s daughter said, “Papa, what shall we name him?” And Jon said, “Now listen carefully, when you name him, you have to take care of him. Once you give him a name, he is your responsibility. They swore they would take care of him and named him Bailey.”<sup>7</sup>

You name it, you take care of it. Maybe that is what this author in Genesis is saying. God calls on the human to name the animals because it is our job to take care of them. If we believe that God is the Creator of all things and IN all things, then the earth and all that dwells within it is sacred. What would it mean for you to view the creation as sacred? How would it change your relationship with the earth and how would it transform your relationship with our Creator?

#### NOTES

1. Aryn Baker, “A Truth as Cold as Ice,” *Time*, May 23/30, 2022, p. 52.
2. David Castelvechi, “Rampant Groundwater Pumping Has Changed the Tilt of Earth’s Axis,” *Scientificamerican.com* and *Nature* magazine, June 21, 2023.
3. Dan Clendenin, “The Anxious Longing of Creation,” July 16, 2023.
4. Julia Simon, “Startups Want to Cool Earth by Reflecting Sunlight,” *National Public Radio*, April 21, 2024.
5. Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Milkweed Editions, 2013,) p.124.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 125-126
7. Rodger Nishioka, “You Name It, You Take Care of It,” April 16, 2023.

### **Prayers of the People ~ Carol Hogue**

Gracious and loving God — we come to you this morning with humble hearts. We witness the resurrection again and again as we discover ways in which we are reborn into the enormity of your love. Yet we fall short again and again of sharing that LOVE. Forgive us for the frailties of our hearts and know that fear and uncertainty and inertia take a front seat more often than we want to admit.

There are many things for which we long, things we hope for, things we are working for, and things we cannot do alone. Give us persistence in our work for others and with others. We pray for all people who are sick and struggling with viruses or cancer, addictions or mental illness. May your healing power surround and comfort all who suffer.

God of all love, be with families that grieve. Draw us together in networks of strong devotion and deep compassion, that we may support and help each other. Help us to ALWAYS remember your presence. We pray for those in need because of famine, war, or natural disaster. We ask that You make your ways known upon the earth and help us to lighten their burdens. We seek your healing for each person and community struggling to bring normalcy back into their lives.

We pray for the leaders of our communities, our country and our world, may they make decisions that bring the sanctity of life and justice and peace in abundance. However limited we are, let our words and

actions reflect your love.

God of all creation, bind us together into one human family and help us care for this beautiful and fragile planet, the world you have given us. Give us the will to change our behaviors that damage the earth and make us faithful caretakers of your world.

We give thanks for those who speak words of compassion in the face of hate. It is a complicated and often confusing world. Strengthen us as we stand and bear witness to this whole life. May we reflect your grace and embody your love and acceptance in every stranger we meet.

Remind us. Still us. Breathe into us. Unite us. Restore our strength, grant us courage, and calm our hearts.

Loving God, we pray that you will enlighten our minds and refresh our souls. Whisper in our hearts your words of grace and inspiration so that we may live in ways that are bold and generous. Thank you for this precious gift of life and the blessings of each day. Help us to use our gift of time wisely.

***Praise God with trumpet sound; with lute and harp!***

***Praise him with tambourine and dance: with strings and pipe!***

***Let everything that breathes praise God!***

Now we join our voices as one as we say the prayer Jesus taught us...saying... **Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.**