

“GOD’S EARTH DAY”

Psalm 104:1-15, 31-34

A city preacher went to call on one of his parishioners who was a farmer. As he stood with him admiring his spread, the preacher said, *"You certainly have been a good steward of what God has given you. You and God have done a beautiful job with this farm."* Unimpressed with his city preacher's theology, the farmer replied, *"Maybe so, but you should have seen the place when God was working it alone."*

So, does God have anything to do with all of our concern about the environment? There is a lot of hype in the media today about the environment. Last Tuesday was Earth Day. The first EARTHDAY was started 38 years ago in 1970. That first Earth Day ushered in the environmental age: prior to the original Earth Day ecology was a minor field of study and environmentalists were generally viewed as "kooks" at best and alarmist extremists at worst. 38 years later, last year a documentary on global warming won the Academy Award for best documentary. Even our president who has long expressed his severe skepticism that global warming is actually occurring, much less is a problem, acknowledged in last year's State of the Union address that changing global climactic patterns are cause for real concern. Every store in town has done something to show that they are with it and that they support Earth Day. Even Wal Mart was handing out Earth Day bags! But despite all the science behind our understanding of climate change as a real problem, we are still divided in this country over this issue. On one side are those who believe that climate change is a lie and that this is normal because the earth changes every once in a while. On the other side are those who study the evidence and believe that climate change is the biggest threat to our world today. But where is God in this mix? Does God have anything to say about this? Does God even care?

Our Psalm today, Psalm 104, has a lot to say to us about God's care for the earth. Psalm 104 is an amazing poem about God as the creator and sustainer of the universe. This was the common understanding of the Israelites and also the other cultures around them. Thousands of years before smog, acid rain, global warming, and the so-called butterfly effect—the awareness that a butterfly flapping its wings has at least some tiny physical impact on the environment on the other side of the planet—the poet who wrote Psalm 104 was an environmentalist. The psalmist knew about the intricate interconnectedness and subtle interdependence of air, soil, water, plants, and animals, including humans. The psalmist knew the truth revealed in the etymological connection between the Hebrew word for "humanity" (*da Adam*) and the word for "ground" (*adamâ*): Human beings really are creatures of the earth. The origin and destiny of humankind is closely connected to the origin and destiny of the earth. The same truth is revealed in the connection between the English word human and the Latin word humus, "soil."

But as we talk about the psalmist being an environmentalist, we need to realize his or her care was different than that of most contemporary environmentalists. Much of our concern for the future of the earth comes from our desire to maintain our current standard of living without trashing things so terribly or depleting natural resources so severely that we cannot pass the same style of life on to our children. Our primary concern is ourselves, and our major motivation is fear. The famous Riverside Church pastor William Sloane Coffin once wrote, *"We have divorced nature from nature's God. We view nature essentially as a toolbox...What we need beyond caution is reverence. Unless nature is 're-sanctified' we will never see nature as worthy of ethical considerations similar to those that govern human relations."*

What Psalm 104 invites us to is a deeper level of care for God's creation. This is not only about our selfish concern for our survival but it is because of our love for God that we would see God's creation as sacred. For the psalmist, relating to the world begins with praising God. The motivation is not fear but rejoicing in the Lord (vv. 33-34). Praise involves the acknowledgment of God's sovereignty and the commitment to live under God's rule (see vv. 1-4, 33-34). Taking the psalmist as an example, we would have to conclude that concern for the environment begins with praising God. To be sure, this sounds hopelessly simplistic, scientifically and technologically naive. But if we start with this kind of orientation, we would approach our lifestyle issues in a very different way. We would see that our care for the earth is not just a political commitment but an act of faith. Psalm 104 affirms that God has made every arrangement and provision for the life of the world. The only problem is when we disrupt God's design and destroy the delicate balance God has put in place.

If you have come to worship today and are hearing this and struggling because you have held a different position for a long time, I hope that you will see that that this is not about a political agenda. This is about our faith in God. And sometimes our faith leads us to uncomfortable places. When we talk about being followers of the way of Christ, we know that it is a way of commitment and sacrifice. When we come into worship, we are opening ourselves to be transformed by God. Our views and priorities may shift and change as a result. Annie Dillard once wrote, *"It is madness to wear ladies' hats and straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews."* God can really change your life!

Our call to view the world as sacred and to care for God's creation does not mean that we are all called to sell our homes and live in the woods and go back to the Stone Age or become hippies. The poet Wendell Berry, in speaking of the earth, speaks of the essence of sacrament. *"I do not mean to suggest we can live harmlessly or strictly at our own expense; we depend upon other creatures and survive by their deaths. To live, we must daily break the body and shed the blood of Creation...When we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration In such desecration we condemn ourselves to spiritual and moral loneliness and others to want."*

So, the invitation is for all of us to see how we can love our world as a gift from God for all of creation. Psalm 104 puts us in our place—with springs and hills and trees and creeping things. If our motivation for facing our own future and the future of the earth were to glorify God, we might even have the humility to ask ourselves what it would really mean to live in partnership with a tree or with a wild goat or with the thousands of species whose disappearance causes hardly a ripple with attention, primarily because we are convinced that nature exists to serve us. Quite simply, Psalm 104 asserts that this is not the case. Rather, to serve God will mean ultimately to serve God's creation. The famous theologian Sallie McFague suggests we view the world through the lenses of Martin Buber's famous distinction between I/THOU and I/IT: the world is not an "it", not merely a tool in human hands to be used and then discarded. The earth and humankind stand in an I/THOU relationship, in which we appreciate the earth as earth and fellow expression of our creative God. McFague goes so far as to portray the earth as the BODY of God. Not that the EARTH is a God or GOD is the earth. In your bulletin today (Faith in Action), there are some ideas about simplifying life in an effort to live a life that is more aligned with God's spirit. On the piano, there are also some more ideas for being better stewards of energy in our homes. I hope that you will look at these and other resources and consider ways that you can be mindful of the sacredness of life. The good news is that people are caring more about the earth. In his book *In Pursuit of Land Tenure Security*, Henri Dekker wrote, *"According to several contemporary philosophers [humankind] is approaching a new paradigm in viewing our environment and our world as a whole. A new order dawns at the horizon, one of 'enough is sufficient.' This is replacing the almost universal human attitude of more and still more that dominated the last century. In this new order we will curb our desire for more and replace it with one of using less."*

Native Americans have long known the sacredness of the earth. In 1851, the following words were attributed to Chief Seattle as his response to a request from the president of the United States to buy some land:

"The President in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land. But how can you buy or sell the sky, the land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air or the sparkle of the water, then how can you buy them? Every part of this Earth is sacred to my people; every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every meadow, every humming insect. All are holy in the memory and experience of my people. We know the sap that courses through the trees as we know the blood that courses through our veins. We are a part of the Earth, and it is part of us. The perfumed flowers are our sisters. The bear, the deer, the great eagle: these are our brothers. The rocky crests, the juices in the meadow, the body heat of the pony, and the [humans] all belong to the same family. All things are connected."

May we always see the sacred in nature not just on Earth Day but every day of our lives!

Attached: Faith In Action for week of 4-27-08

FAITH IN ACTION

In 1851 Seattle, chief of the Suquamish and other Native American tribes around Washington's Puget Sound, delivered what is considered to be one of the most beautiful and profound environmental statements ever made. The speech was a response to a proposed land treaty. Here is some of what was said,

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Here are a few ideas for you to consider for your stewardship of the earth:

- Start by limiting unnecessary purchases. Ask yourself if the item you're considering is something you will still want a few years down the road... or if it really is something you want or need.
- Think carefully about how you are spending your time. Is your life full of activities or scheduled events that are meaningless to you? Frugality of time is sometimes more important than frugality of money. Start doing things that bring you joy and stop doing those things that cause you stress.
- Appreciate your family life and enjoy the people you love. Spend time with each member of your family and build strong relationships.
- Do it yourself and become more self-reliant.
- Make a connection with nature. A short walk, time spent working in the garden, outdoor activities, or just being outdoors and enjoying the beautiful day that has been given to you can all bring amazing amounts of relaxation and peace.
- Re-think the way you shop for groceries and the foods you eat. The old adage of “you are what you eat” is even more true today. Good nutrition... eating REAL food and a diet as free of preservatives and additives as is possible will help make you healthier and happier.
- Try to find a balance between work and relaxation. Everyone needs some downtime, both physically and emotionally.

(From www.choosingvoluntarysimplicity.com)