

Sermon TUMC – June 5, 2016 – Creation Care: Transformation

Isaiah 40:21-31

Luke 7:1-10

Several years ago we were visiting San Francisco and decided to rent a car and drive down the coast on the 17 Mile scenic drive up to Pebble Beach. The idea was that we'd enjoy a bit of nature -- from the vantage point of a car, I know.

At one point on this drive I had the bright idea that we should stop stick our feet in the actual ocean, not just look at it. So we pulled off and we climbed down some rocks and put our feet in the ocean.

But then my sense of smell started to tell me that something wasn't quite right. Suddenly we realized that those odd shapes just over there weren't rocks but they were the decomposing corpse of a whale, who had found that spot to follow the life cycle. Ew! Our lovely romanticized connection with nature, connected us instead with the reality of life and death of that particular eco-system.

And there you have it. Thinking about the environment in our time, is not all about the warm and fuzzies. It quickly brings us to some pretty harsh and gruesome realities. Aside from the inherent brutality of some aspects of nature herself, we now have human made decay and violence to deal with. Do I need to name some of them to you? Rivers filled with mercury? Water being stolen from communities and put into plastic bottles for our convenience? Tailing ponds enticing water fowl to their deaths? And on and on.

Romanticized notions of what it means to care for the created world will not do. But neither will despair.

So how *do* we think about this? What do we do as people of faith?

Knowing how to deal with climate change, or our addiction to fossil fuels, plastics and electronics can be overwhelming and paralyzing – at least for me. Knowing about the injustices and the poverty that are the result of the world's greed for resources can be disheartening. But we can have hope, "... in spite of doom and gloom God has not finished God's work with us yet, and neither has God finished the work in creation."¹

If I've learned anything in our short sermon series on Creation Care, it is that death and resurrection, and the power of transformation are at the very heart of how God is present in our world. And this notion has for the most part been missing in most of the theology I've inherited. It's been a theology that has been individualized, overly spiritualized with no connections with bodies or to the land, except to farm it and have dominion over it.

¹ Simon Davis in *A Heart for Creation*, Chris Polhill, Wild Goose Publications, 2010.

So, for those of you who haven't been able to be here, or who unlike me didn't yet get an excuse to go to the TUMC website and review the sermons in this series, I offer a bit of a review, on this last Sunday of the series.

In her first sermon in this series on April 12th, Marilyn reminded us that God's narrative has always been about creation and redemptive transformation. She compared this truth to God's breath, exhaling creative energy and inhaling redemptive energy.

The word creation, she clarified, in this context does not apply to a scientific understanding of our world's origins, rather to the "truth that the Earth comes from a divine source."

I would add that the word redemption is about restoring to wholeness, or salvation, as it has sometimes been called.

That first Sunday, Alison Li showed the kids a picture of Earth taken from the Apollo 8 mission to the moon in 1968. It was the first time humans photographed our planet as a whole. She talked about the profound shifts that happened in humanity's understanding of ourselves with this bigger point of view. Among other things we learned from seeing our planet, we gained new insight into the futility of war, the connection of all things and the beauty of our planet. All of us here have inherited that perspective, maybe even without realizing it.

If you really want perspective there's a fascinating video showing the size of the earth in relation to other planets and stars in our galaxy. ²

In a way the Isaiah passage we've read today serves the same kind of purpose of gaining perspective. It also encourages us not become weary: "those who wait on the Holy One find a renewed power: they soar on eagle's wings, they run and don't get weary, they walk and never tire." (Isa 40:31) Perhaps this applies to our perspective on creation care, as much as it does to our inner spiritual struggles – which is the way I had always received this verse.

Today we conclude this series on Creation Care, but concluding is really the wrong word. Because talking about creation care is in fact a huge shift in perspective when it comes to how we understand God's work in our world and our role as people of faith in that work and in that world. It is something that needs to undergird our faith in ways that we haven't had a chance to do very often.

In a sense, care for creation, or integration with creation, or breathing with creation, is not a category in our faith journey, it is the whole point.

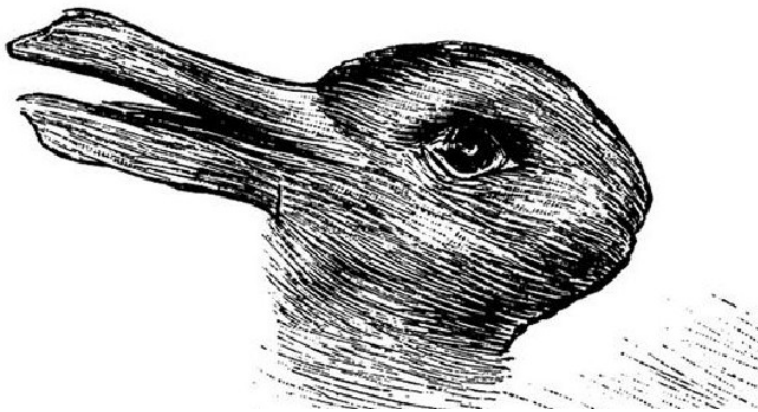
² If you really want to get an idea of our size, check out this video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HEeh1BH34Q>

Simon Davis, one of the authors in the resource book we used³, says it this way. [We must “reconnect with our human vocation as God’s earth-keepers...To be a disciple of Jesus is to be aware of being part of God’s creation and Jesus’ work of healing it, reconciling us to God, to each other and to the whole of the cosmos.”

He also says that “Jesus was not an ecologist in the modern sense, but his teachings make it clear that he was a son of the soil, someone who had taken the time to contemplate the world around him and to learn from it.”⁴

To illustrate this I brought a picture. I hope you can see this lovely picture of a ? (optical illusion from 1892) (*Show picture of optical illusion of duck/bunny and elicit response*).

This is the shift of perspective. Once we have seen bunny or duck, you can’t unsee them. Once we have seen how care for creation (resurrection and transformation) permeates the narrative of God’s work in the world, you can’t go back to just seeing bunny or duck.



In her second sermon, Marilyn asked the question, “What do we do to get in on God’s work that is going on in all creation?”

We were encouraged to look outside our own walls and to see God already at work and then to align ourselves with it. “The struggle for change doesn’t start with us, we join what God is already doing.... If we think that we care, how much more God?”

I think the passage in Luke where the centurion calls on Jesus to bring healing to his servant is an illustration of that. The centurion didn’t even necessarily embrace the Jewish faith (maybe, since he built a synagogue), but he recognized God at work in

³ Simon Davis in *A Heart for Creation*, Chris Polhill, Wild Goose Publications, 2010.

⁴ *A Heart for Creation*

Jesus. And Jesus in turn recognized God at work in the centurion. He even said “son of Abraham” (the seal of approval) without ever even meeting him face to face, God’s power was named and God’s healing was effected through that interaction.

Speaking of aligning ourselves and God at work beyond our walls...

This week I read an article about a now deceased Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, “The Rabi who loved the Earth” According to the article “[He] had lived a spiritual life with a gusto and love for people and their beliefs that is uncommon in even the most open of religious leaders. He believed that the many streams of worship were each a unique flavor belonging to a “region” of the world, to the soil and the people that inhabit a specific place.

He longed for the day [don’t we all!] when we would tell our religious stories a little differently, not in a triumphalist way, but each finding a cosmology and way to understand reality that our “Mother the Earth” would want us to have, a story that would see to the needs of the Earth as more important than the growth of our businesses. He compared each tradition to a vital organ of one body. If we want to contribute to the healing of the planet, each tradition had to make sure they were healthy in order to heal the Earth.”⁵

Christendom may certainly do with some adjusting of triumphalist tendencies to say the least. Maybe, just like glimpsing the blue planet gave humanity a better perspective on ourselves, Christians can gain a better perspective of our faith by re-incorporating the narrative of earth-care.

To quote Simon Davis again: “At one time we did not understand the effect humanity has on our planet’s ecology, but now we do, and must reform our spirituality, our convictions and our actions in light of what we know.”

On Pentecost Sunday (May 15), while fires raged in Fort McMurray, Marilyn guided us through a reflection on fire and through a prayer of lament for how humanity has mishandled our job of caring for the Earth.

The sermon acknowledged that “before the industrial revolution it was only God who made the mountains smoke” and that “In our hands the earth has become so much less than [God] dreamed of.”⁶

That powerful and profound prayer is posted on our website, and I would invite us to go back to it and repray it as many times as you find necessary in the spirit of confession and lament over humanity’s impact on our planet.⁷

⁵ <https://creator.wework.com/personal-profiles/the-rabbi-who-loved-the-earth/>

⁶ It also referenced the CBC documentary series 8th Fire.

Our resource book was full of prayers, reminding us that prayer is also part of what needs to be done. Not only physical actions but internal reflection as well.

I particularly like (and plan to adopt) a prayer by Simon Elliott (Bin Day Confession – see page at the end of sermon pdf) to be said on throwing away garbage in the different bins. I was saying to Marilyn and Laura this week that every time I throw out that broccoli that’s been rotting in the fridge for a few weeks I feel a need to say a prayer of repentance and forgiveness. (A broccoli confession) Now I have one! I have a few copies of it if you would like one see me after the service.

On the May Long Weekend, Laura Carr-Pries preached her first sermon here. She reminded us how taking care of the environment can easily become one more pressure in our busy lives. “We need something bigger than adding creation care to a growing list of concerns.” Rather, “we must fix our eyes on God so that we will be filled with light, becoming empowered to live a life governed by the wisdom of the earth rather than the priorities of our society.” Laura called us to Wisdom.

Wisdom tells us that “the struggle for change is only possible when we let go of our checklist of things we need to do for change to happen and truly listen to the groaning of the earth.” Wisdom invites us to delight in creation. The very act of pausing to take in the beauty of the created world is a force for change. Believe that!

The wisdom of the earth exceeds our own memory and time span, we are participating in a story that is larger than our own.

And so we come back to Isaiah 40 and to Isaiah’s reframing of our perspective (selected verses from the Inclusive version).

I will use the word “Hashem” which means “the name” to refer to God.

Did you not know? Have you not heard?
Was it not told to you from the beginning?
Have you not understood since the earth was founded?

[Hashem] sits above the vaulted roof of the world,
and its inhabitants look like grasshoppers!
God stretches out the skies [the cosmos] like a curtain, and spread them out like a tent for mortals to live under.

...

Lift up your eyes and ask yourself,

⁷ God of Creation and Care, by Pat Bennet. Adapted by Marilyn Zehr.
<http://tumc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/20160603-Prayer-of-Lament-God-of-Creation-and-Care.pdf>

who made these stars, if not the One who drills them like an army calling each by name?

Because God is so great in strength
so mighty in power
not a single one is missing.

...

Do you not know? Have you not heard?
[Hashem] is the everlasting God,
The creator of the ends of the earth.
This God does not faint or grow weary;
With a depth of understanding that is unsearchable.

God gives strength to the weary, and empowers the powerless.
Young women may grow tired and weary
Young men may stumble and fall,
but those who wait for Hashem find a renewed power.
They soar on eagles wings
They run and don't get weary.
They walk and never tire.

Thanks be to God.

Ideas for further reflection:

Do a search about Creation Care at <http://www.commonword.ca>

Try the "Six week challenge" available in the book, A Heart for Creation.

Follow :The story of stuff on facebook

BIN-DAY CONFESSION

(You might need to alter the colours and bins/boxes/bags as local collections determine)

On 'brown bin day', I offer these things not as rubbish to be thrown away, but with the hope that the potential within them can be released into live-giving nutritious compost:

Grass cuttings
Pruned twigs from hedges
Dead flower heads
Failed vegetables....

I offer them as a confession of my need for perfect lawns, neatly trimmed hedges and tidy flowerbeds.

As I give them up let them be a reminder to be less concerned about the edges of the lawn and the shape of the hedges, even to enjoy the shape and colour of the weeds.

On 'blue box day', I offer these things not as rubbish, but with the hope that they have the potential to be recycled into something new by those who need these previous resources:

Plastic milk bottles
Glass jars,
Food packaging,
Tin cans...

I offer them as a confession of my hunger for processed foods, convenience meals, exotic treats preserved and shipped from all corners of the world.

As I give up these things let them be a reminder to shop locally, eat seasonally and buy unprocessed foods.

On 'blue bag day', I offer all the paper that has come into the house:

Half-read newspapers,
Junk mail,
Envelopes,
Shredded bills and bank letters,
Catalogues full of stuff we can live without and ill afford...

I offer these with the hope that they can be created into new paper – new words and offers that may inspire, teach and re-create.

As I give these up I remember the hours of work that have gone into the writing, editing, printing and publishing, all giving employment.

On 'black bag day', I give up my share of what we all cannot deal with.

As I fill this bag with all the unwanted things that cannot be recycled I am joined to others, linked with those who take away our rubbish and hide it from our eyes. I add to this bag worries and hurts caused to others, the unseen consequences of past actions, pledging to put out a slimmer bag next week.

Stuart Elliott, in *A Heart for Creation*