

The Bethel Pulpit

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April 22, 1016. Fourth Sunday of Easter



BETHEL

LUTHERAN CHURCH

On the web at www.bethel-madison.org

312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703

Text: John 10:11-18

Earth Sunday

The Gospel reading today speaks of **Jesus the Good Shepherd**, and how Good Shepherds care for their sheep. On this Earth Day Sunday, I want to turn our attention to another kind of caring - OUR Caring for GOD'S Creation.

First: the writers of Genesis tell us that God created, and then commanded us to CARE for His Creation – as good shepherds care for their sheep.

Second: Psalmists and hymn writers remind us of the Wonders of Creation – Creation is something worth caring for!

Third, both prophets of old, and modern prophets, warn us of when we fall short in CARING for Creation.

So Earth Day has deep biblical roots, but it also has recent secular roots that go back to the 1960s. In 1966, we saw the first photo of earth taken from the moon's orbit: we saw blue oceans, green forests, and white clouds, but we also saw that only a very thin layer of air separated us from the cold, black of outer space. We began to hear about Smog and Ozone and Carbon Dioxide. Many of us read Rachel Carson's book. She warned that the pesticide DDT was thinning the egg shells of birds. She warned of the prospect of a Silent Spring.

Wisconsin's Governor and then Senator Gaylord Nelson proclaimed the first Earth Day on April 22, 1970. He called for a nationwide environmental 'teach in'. It was a huge success. 20 million students from colleges, high schools, and primary schools took part!

Bethel Lutheran Church acted a year before this, in 1969. Led by Pastor Duane Hanson and a visionary Board, we established Bethel Horizons -- 500 acres of great natural beauty - adjacent to Governor Dodge State Park. Horizons proclaimed, as part of its mission: Harmony with God, Self, Others, and Nature. Now directed by Eric Knueve, Horizons provides summer camping, environmental and spiritual education, and a

year-round retreat center.

Those four Harmonies, with God, Self, Others and Nature, were a part of the Bethel Bible Series, a program of bible study initiated by Harley Swiggum here at Bethel in the 1960s. We live in a highly urbanized society. We live apart from nature. It is easy to forget that God intended four harmonies, not three. We tend to stop after God, self and others.

Now lets go back to God's first Earth Day message in Genesis. I want to remind us of just a few of Creations blessings, and of our responsibilities.

God created ORDER. He created the regular rising and setting of the sun and moon, the orderly passage of seasons, the orderly growth of plants and the migrations and life cycles of insects and animals. ORDER is a blessing. We should preserve it. The CHAOS of unplanned growth, of poor regulation, of chaotic introduction of new chemicals and invasive species --- they can all disrupt the ORDER of God's Creation .

God created CONNECTEDNESS. He created vegetation, AND seeds that reproduced their own kind. He created wild fish, birds and animals. AND they reproduced their own kind. The plants were nourished by sunlight and water, and they made food and fiber. The animals were nourished by the plants, and by the food chain that connected them. Nutrients were returned to the soil. Nothing is wasted in God's Creation. All is recycled. All is connected. We should keep it connected. If we BREAK connections by breaking up the land, or ecosystems, or food chains, we damage Creation.

WHEN God created CONNECTEDNESS, he also connected his Creation to the future. When God asks us to CARE for Creation, he asks us to care for its future. The future of God's creation belongs to grandchildren, AND it belongs to yet unborn animals and birds; AND it belongs to forest seedlings; AND to soils now forming and aquifers now filling. The earth's future is not ours to use now. That would be

stealing, and we should not steal.

After all of this creating, God said “let us make HUMANS in our own image”. We came last but we are NOT an afterthought – we are created in God’s Image. A spark of God is in each of us. We are special.

God wasn’t done. God created NAMING. GOD brought ALL living things before Adam to be named. NAMES connect us in a powerful way: the Monarch Butterfly, the Sandhill Crane, the Rainbow Trout, the White Oak, the Purple Coneflower. WE NAME OUR CHILDREN. GOD KNOWS OUR NAMES. AND, GOD ARRANGED FOR US TO NAME ALL OF HIS CREATION. We VALUE and CONNECT ourselves to what we Name. IF we no longer call creation by its names, we devalue Creation. If Creation contains ‘just fish’, or ‘just birds, or ‘just flowers’, or for that matter, ‘just cows’ with numbers attached to their ears – if we think that’s naming, then we devalue Creation and our CONNECTION to it.

GOD created the SABBATH. He created the need for EVERYTHING to REST and RENEW. Yes, WE should rest. But plants, animals and birds should rest too. AND - the land should rest to renew its fertility. AND - the water and air should rest to regain their purity. God gave detailed instructions for resting the land. God created natural mechanisms to restore soil fertility and purify the water and air. When we don’t let creation rest and renew, we contribute to its death. We should help ALL of Creation to REST and RENEW.

Finally, God instructed us to help CARE FOR and WATCH OVER his entire creation – in a sense, to be **GOOD Shepherds**. Biblical scholars tell us that the old phrase, ‘have dominion’, was not a good translation of the Hebrew. CARE FOR, and WATCH OVER are better translations.

So Genesis tells us that GOD created ALL things: ORDER, CONNECTEDNESS, NAMING, and RENEWAL, -- --AND we are to CARE FOR CREATION by helping maintain ORDER and CONNECTEDNESS, by RESPECTING the NAMED members of Creation, and by assisting ALL of Creation, including soil and water, to REST and RENEW.

God’s Second form of Earth Day message, is in the praise of Psalmists, and hymns of praise in our time:

Psalm 19: The heavens declare the Glory of God and the skies display HIS craftsmanship....

Psalm 104: HE waters the mountains from his upper chambers, and the land is satisfied with the fruit of HIS work

A hymn of praise put to music by John Rutter:

For the beauty of the earth,

For the beauty of each hour

Lord above, to Thee we raise, this our hymn of grateful praise.

And Herb Brokering’s hymn:

Earth and all stars!

Loud rushing planets!

Sing to the Lord a new song!

Yes, Praise and Thanksgiving are central to God’s Earth Day message.

The third kind of biblically-based Earth Day message is in the warnings of prophets.

More than 500 years before the time of Jesus, **Our GOOD Shepherd**, the prophet Ezekiel called attention to **BAD Shepherds**.

Ezekiel (34:18) warned of the BAD shepherds of Israel who had been feeding themselves rather than caring for their sheep -- and then added insult to injury by damaging what was left.

“You eat the sheep and clothe yourselves with the wool. And after taking from the good pasture, must you then tread down what is left?, and, after drinking clear water, must you then foul the remainder? “

And Isaiah (5:8) warned:

“Woe to you who add house to house and join field to field till no space is left.”

Isaiah was calling out those who buy up more and more land, and accumulate more and more wealth – and leave the rest of God’s Creation with little or nothing ---there was great disparity then, as now. And it wasn’t what God had intended.

In our own time, Pope Francis has continued this role of prophet. He recently wrote in an encyclical, or letter:

“Our Earth cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters. This attitude is now reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air, and in all forms of life.”

Francis warned that we are becoming TOO human-centered, indeed EXCESSIVELY human-centered:

“We humans are using almost ALL the earth’s richest soil, almost ALL of its freshest water, a HUGE fraction of its plants and animals, and we are leaving CRUMBS for the rest of God’s creation.”

Francis echoes the warnings of earlier prophets: we have adopted a self-centered view of creation that is EXCESSIVE.

Our own ELCA has issued similar statements and warnings. Our Caring for Creation group here at Bethel has raised these same issues over the past three years.

To sum it up, Earth Day has secular roots that go back almost 50 years, and we celebrate that today. But GOD proclaimed Earth Day long, long ago, when he created, and then asked us to CARE for His Creation. Caring is an Active Verb, not a Passive Verb.

God wants us to live in FOUR harmonies: with God, with self, with others, and with ALL of his Creation. For us as Christians, these four harmonies should stand above the ideologies of the day.

We are called to strive toward these harmonies in our own lives, in our community and in our country --- and to value not only the present, but the future of God’s ENTIRE creation.

Let us pray:

“Dear God, help us repent, rethink, and Care ANEW for ALL of your Creation. Help us live in Four Harmonies: with you dear God, with Self, with Others, AND with Nature. “ AMEN