

Sunday Abundance

sermon digest

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John 1:1-5, 10-14

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Thursday will mark the 40th anniversary of Earth Day, April 22, 1970, when 20 million Americans took to the streets, parks, and auditoriums across our country in support of caring for earth. At the time, we were using leaded gas in our increasingly bigger automobiles and industries could belch out all the smoke their hearts desired with little fear of legal consequences. Air pollution was considered nothing more than the smell of prosperity. The first Earth Day led to the creation of the United States Environmental Protection Agency and the passage of the Clean Air, Clean Water, and Endangered Species acts. Four decades have seen Earth Day go global as countries around the world have picked up the banner and environmental concern has mushroomed into a shared sense of concern and responsibility.

Earth Day has become a part of the national and global calendars, but it has also increasingly become a part of the calendars of faith communities of every kind. It has become a time to wrestle with the troubling news about what is happening to our environment, but it is also a time of looking more deeply into our faith traditions and finding there an incentive not just for valuing the earth, but protecting it.

We value the earth as the handiwork of God. The Bible celebrates nature as God's good gift. Genesis, the book of beginnings, opens with a hymn of praise: "In the beginning . . . God created." Not once, not twice, but four times the story of creation affirms, "It is good, it is good, it is good, it is very good." Pronouncing God's blessing upon the plants and animals, birds, fish and humankind, Genesis' story of creation becomes, in the words of Walter Brueggeman, "a litany of abundance," "an orgy of fruitfulness" as everything multiplies and replenishes itself as an expression of the overflowing goodness of the Creator who calls it into being [*Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope*, 69]. The Torah goes on to delineate careful laws about the handling of God's good gift in terms of responsible stewardship so that it may be passed on to future generations. The psalmists sing of creation's wonder and gracious provision. Calling to mind the joyful chorus of the Jewish Seder, we can look out on creation and sing, *Dayenu*—any one of God's good gifts in creation would have been "enough," but there is so much more. The intricate beauty, the rhythm of the seasons, the expanse of oceans, the soaring of the mountains, the spectacular display of the heavens, the profusion of plants and animals—any one of these is enough to call us to praise; and yet the list goes on and on.

Our scriptures, however, go on to tell another story. The Creator's gift of abundance becomes subservient to humankind's myth of scarcity. From Man and Woman grasping for the fruit of immortality to Cain's jealousy of Abel to Jacob's embezzlement of his brother's birthright and Pharaoh's paranoia before the growing tribe of Joseph, the gripping fear is the same. "There's not enough to go around! Let's get it while we can." And creation, given from the hand of a gracious God, is subverted for selfish dominance and gain.

The tragic continuation of the story is also reflected all around us. The fear that there is not enough to go around and the conviction that we must grasp all we can subverts the beauty and goodness of all God has given. Substitute the names of modern political and economic players for the names of Cain and Jacob and Pharaoh and the consequences are breathtakingly tragic.

The prophet Hosea mourned, "The LORD has a charge to bring against you who live in the land: 'There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land. There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed. Because of this the land mourns, and all who live in it waste away; the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the fish of the sea are dying'" (4:1-3). Abuse of God's good gift is contrary to the lives of reverence, gratitude and gracious sharing to which God calls any and all who would identify themselves as a people of God. It is an embarrassment to the faith of Abraham, and it is an embarrassment to the faith of Jesus.

We value creation through the person of Jesus. *Amistad*, one of my favorite Steven Spielberg movies, relates the 1830's incident when kidnaped Africans on the slave ship *La Amistad* mutinied and were captured and tried in the heated political climate of the United States. In a particularly memorable scene, an African named Yamba shares with his fellow countryman, Cinque, what he has been able to garner of the Christian message by looking at pictures in a Bible he had come across on board the ship. Thumbing through scenes from the Hebrew scriptures, he surmises that the lives of the Hebrew people were full of suffering. Turning then to a picture of the nativity of Jesus, he continues, "Then *he* was born and everything changed."

In a simple sentence, Yamba summed up the central proclamation of the Christian message. Every aspect of our faith turns upon the moment in time when, as John puts it, “the Word became flesh and lived among us.” “In him,” the ancient hymn in Paul’s epistle to the Colossians sings, “all things were created,” and “in him all things hold together.” The centrality of Jesus is such that we look through him to interpret the meaning of creation and our responsibility for and to creation. “In the Incarnate One,” Geoffrey Lilburne says, “God enters into the deepest possible relationship with space and time;” leaving nothing the same, no stone unturned” [*A Sense of Place*, p. 91].

The Gospels seem to indicate that Jesus as an adult owned no home. Born in a borrowed stable, he often sat at table as a guest in the homes of others. His disciples borrowed an upper room for the last supper, and he was even buried in a borrowed tomb. The Gospels, however, do picture a Jesus who was at home in nature. He borrowed heavily from nature in his teaching and parables. He pointed to the sun and rain as witnesses to God’s nature. He spoke of the sparrows of the air and the lilies of the field, of trees bearing good fruit and of tress that were barren, of foxes and sheep. He hosted a multitude for dinner on a remote hillside and an intimate breakfast for his disciples along the Galilean sea. Like the prophets of old he was acquainted with the wilderness as a place of retreat, prayer, and even temptation. Far from one who merely skims the surface, Jesus is depicted as one who knew the world up close and personal. He moved through the natural world with a familiarity and freedom that seemed to reside in his assurance of its symbolic and even sacramental evidence as the living presence of God.

But more than just who Jesus was, we also affirm who we believe Jesus continues to be. Early Christians spoke of the day of Jesus’ resurrection as “the eighth day of creation” or the first day of God’s new creation. As Walter Brueggemann puts it, “From broken Friday bread comes Sunday abundance.” Far from being just about spiritual things, resurrection hope transforms how we see the world itself. No longer restricted to a hand-to-mouth existence, we find ourselves submerged in an orgy of grace, guided more by an economics of doxology than human greed. Jesus, Brueggeman suggests, reaffirms Genesis 1. Practically, this means that the world in which we move is infused with its creator’s generosity and thus overflowing with resources and abilities and practices and procedures through which we can give ourselves to the healing of God’s good earth [*Deep Memory*, 74-75].

Here on the other side of Easter, we are aware of an earth that is filled with loveliness and pain. Here on the other side of Easter, the best witness we can bear to Easter’s reality is the way in which we give ourselves to the grateful protection of that loveliness and the healing of the pain. Easter translates itself into the world in which we live as hope joined with commitment.