

**04/23/23 Encountering God in Creation: The Earth Is the Lord's
God's Counting on Me, God's Counting on You
Genesis 2:4b-8; 15-20; Psalm 24:1-4; 104:24-30; Matthew 5:13-16
Rev. Tom Carr**

When Pastor Scalise asked if I'd be available to preach on this Sunday, it was during the season of Epiphany. Now, many of us Baptists may not be too familiar with this season (heck, I'd never heard of it until I went to seminary!), but Epiphany begins on January 6th thus ending the "Twelve Days of Christmas," and is represented by the Magi, the 3 Kings, who followed the light of the star to the home of Jesus and his parents. It is the time in the Christian year of the revealing of the Light of the world which comes for all, the whole world.

Now, I bring this to your attention on this second Sunday of Easter **and** the day after Earth Day, because over 35 years ago, I had an epiphany, a light that went on in my head and my heart, which ignited a fire within me whose flames became and remain a deep spiritual conviction that has led me into many layers of involvement in the work of creation justice. It occurred in 1987 while watching the NBC Nightly News with Tom Brokaw who was reporting on a huge barge that was floating up and down the east coast of America looking for a place to dump 9 tons of garbage. Up and down, back and forth it went, with no place to dump its load. Do any of you remember that? It became known as the Garbage Barge and to compress a rather long story into a sentence, a light came on for me, an epiphany, leading me on a continuous journey of spiritual discovery and the recognition that protecting, preserving and conserving life on Earth – human and other-than-human – is fundamental to our human vocation. It is a calling of the Spirit.

Today, I want to share just a couple of things I've gleaned over the years related to this that have shaped my soul and the whole way I look at things today including the work to which we are ALL called as stewards of God's creation.

I begin with a story, a folk tale. It seems that two men were fighting over a piece of land in a village, each of them claiming ownership. To resolve their differences, they agreed to put the case before the pastor of the village. The pastor listened carefully to both of them but could not come to a decision. Finally, he said, "Since I cannot decide to whom this land belongs, let us ask the land." And so, he bent down, got on his hands and knees, put his ear to the ground with eyes closed and listened. For a long time, he kept his ear to the ground and finally, he straightened up and said, "Gentlemen, the land says that it belongs to neither of you. You belong to the land."

That's a good place to start: remembering that we belong to the land, to Earth. We're not something separate from or foreign to. We are a part of Earth, emerge from Earth, which is God's planet. That's where the Bible starts – at least in the second creation story in the book of Genesis. In the second chapter, there's an amazing scene. Picture it in your minds' eye: here is God, the Creator of everything!, bending, kneeling on the ground and slowly, with great care, like the most delicate and precise of all sculptors, shapes a creature from the dirt, the soil – the **adam**. The first of its kind – an Earthling. Which is remarkable because the **adam** doesn't just appear out of nowhere – thin air, as we say. The **adam** (which is the Hebrew word for “the man”), comes from, emerges from, is part of, the **adamah**, the Hebrew word for the ground, the soil. In Latin, it is the **human** created from the **humus**. So, right away, we have the picture of the human emerging **from** Earth, as part **of** Earth, derivative of Earth which is primary – an Earthling. And then, God breathes into the Earthling, the breath of life. And with that breath, the **adam** becomes a living being alongside all the other living beings God creates. The Hebrew word for “breath” is **ruach**, which is also translated wind and spirit and it is the same word the authors of Genesis use for the beginning, in chapter one of Genesis when the “**ruach** of God moved across the face of the deep,” bringing life to Earth. It is also the same word the singer of the 104th Psalm uses to praise God for all creatures:

“O Lord, how manifold are your works!
 In wisdom you have made them all;
 the earth is full of your creatures.

 “when you take away their (**ruach**) their breath, they die

 “When you send forth your (**ruach**), your spirit
 They are created and you renew the face of the ground.”

Can you see it – this intimate connection? We belong to Earth. We belong to one another. We belong to all other beings and life in this marvelous creation of God's. And because we belong, we are interrelated; we're all connected, one to another and with all life. Martin Luther King, Jr. understood this. You may remember this amazing statement of his:

“All I'm saying is simply this, that all life is interrelated, that somehow we're caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. For some strange reason, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. You can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality.”

Well, Dr. King; it's not really a "strange reason." That "interrelated structure of reality" is a biological reality! Did you know that you and I are made up of the same stuff that's in the farthest stars in the farthest galaxies, that we are literally "star dust" from the Big Bang 13.8 billion years ago, as well as the great Supernova explosion that gave birth to the Milky Way galaxy and our Sun and our planet home? You may have heard of the human genome project which studies DNA in humans and all living beings. Well, that study has found that there is virtually no difference, whatsoever, in the genetic make-up across every racial and ethnic group of people on the planet. And even more than that, did you know that we share 98% of our DNA with chimpanzees **and** the majority of the same genetic material with a banana and an oak tree and most other life forms? Yes, there are differences! Those differences are what makes for this wild, diverse, amazing, fruitful planet home we call Earth and these differences are what keeps life moving, changing, growing! But the point I want us to see is what the biblical writers knew, deep in their souls: **ALL** is one. **LIFE IS ONE**. **ALL** is intertwined, related. Like the great conservationist, John Muir wrote 140 years ago: "When we go and pick out anything in the universe, we find it hitched to everything else."

Why do you think that so many of us have deep affection and love for other people – and pets and the ocean and forests, trees, birds and so many places in nature we consider sacred? And when those with whom we pour out our affection die, or places we stand in awe and wonder of are destroyed, we feel the pain so deeply? There is an instinctive bond which we human beings feel with other life forms. This is why the authors of the book of Genesis tell us in chapter 2 that after he is created, Adam is told to give names to all the animals. Which shows that the human being is engaged in a relationship of recognition and intimate interaction. The human is exhibiting what we know as an "I-Thou" relationship, NOT "I-It." The animals in this story are not vassals or objects or "things" or resources for us to exploit and use any way we choose. In fact, in the Torah, which is the first five books of the Bible, the language used for insects, animals and people, is **nefesh chaya**, which literally means, "a soul of life." **Insects. Animals. People.** Decades ago, the late, great E.O. Wilson, a pioneer in evolutionary biology, entomologist and expert on human biological nature, introduced the idea of **biophilia**, meaning that we human beings are hard-wired to love Earth and our fellow inhabitants in this shared home. Not primarily because it is in our self-interest to do so but because we are all connected, never separate or apart from any life-forms.

We belong. We belong. Wouldn't it be the great miracle of our time if we actually began living that belonging, the connection and oneness that is the very heart of life? What if we actually recognized and celebrated the biological and spiritual truth that every human being and every life form on Earth is a unique expression of this great singularity? It was Albert Einstein who said that "Separation is the great, conscious,

optical delusion.” The fact that we don’t accept and recognize this deep, biological and spiritual reality is, in my opinion, the underlying, fundamental reason for so many conflicts between human groups. And it’s why we’ve been waging a war against our very own home, Earth. I won’t bore or terrify you with the numbers, but I will say that the devastation that’s happening to Mother Earth and all her creatures including us humans, is because we have forgotten who we are, created in the image and likeness of God, “the light of the world,” as Jesus called us. We’ve forgotten that we are part of Earth – not masters over but part of. In fact, in Genesis 2 the 15th verse, we read that the first person, the Earthling, is set in the Garden to “work it and take care of it.” (Till and keep is the usual English translation). And the two Hebrew verbs used here are very significant as the first verb literally mean “to serve it,” while the second verb means “to guard it,” and that verb is used later in the Hebrew Bible to describe the responsibilities of a guardian of property that belongs to someone else! In the case of the planet, it’s God’s! We belong to Earth, interconnected with everything and called to live and work and guard what is God’s.

Sixty-one years ago, Rachel Carson wrote her well-known, incredibly powerful and important book, **Silent Spring**. Though she was harassed, called a naïve fool and was the target of a multi-million-dollar assault on her character, credentials and her very life, she stood strong and was proven right. Outside all the science in that book, one of the things we’ll find in it is the following:

“We stand now where two roads diverge. But unlike the roads in Robert Frost’s familiar poem, they are not equally fair. The road we have been traveling on is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed but at its end lies disaster. The other fork in the road – the one ‘less traveled by’ – offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of the earth.”

We are at a crossroads; more so now than 60 years ago – or 30 or 10 years. You know that. All the scientists know that. Just look at the recent United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report that came out last month telling us that we are “on thin ice,” that we have seven years to drastically reduce our carbon emissions to have a sustainable future. The species that are on the edge of extinction know this. The oceans filled with more plastics by weight than fish know this. The nearly 50 million environmental refugees around the world, according to the United Nations, know this. And our children know it and our grandchildren and their children will know it. As the Lakota Native American proverb puts it: “We do not inherit the Earth from our ancestors. We borrow it from our children.”

What will be our response? How will we live on and with Earth, our home, in a mutually enhancing way?

“The Earth is the Lord’s and everything in it,
the world and those who live in it”

so sings the Psalmist. This is God’s world, not ours! But we belong and are entrusted with the vocation to serve it and guard it with love and a way of life rooted in the way of reciprocity.

Many of us call this faithful stewardship which reminds me of an old story of an Episcopal bishop who preached on stewardship at a very wealthy parish church. After the service, he was invited to the estate of one of the members of the congregation who took him outside and showed him the 100 acres of incredible land. The man said, “Bishop: all that you can see is my property. Are you telling me that I don’t own this?” And the Bishop replied, “Ask me that 200 years from now.”

O, it’s not easy, this thing being a faithful steward of life. Never has been but even more so, these days. But that’s who we are – the light of the world!! – and it is how we are called to live. Because, guess what: “God’s counting on me. God’s counting on you.” Our children and grandchildren are “counting on me and counting on you.” The weakest and most vulnerable people here and around the world are “counting on me and counting on you.” The oceans and forests are counting on me and counting on you. The birds and streams and animals, the fish and flowers are counting on me and counting on you. They are counting us to join together as one, as partners with one another and with God, to live and create a way of living that is life-giving, mutually enhancing for all.

And remember: you and I are not alone in this. We are empowered by the Spirit who is alive within all life, within each and every one of us. We are empowered to **BE** the light and get busy, to work for the sake of the whole world that God so loves. And this God who is closer than a prayer and breathing in your breath (1), is counting on me and counting on you. God’s counting on me; God’s counting on you. So, let’s get busy.

1. This phrase is borrowed from a book by Bishop Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu, “Made for Goodness: And What It Makes All the Difference.”