

Isaiah 37:28-31 ~ 1 John 3:16-24

*Watershed Discipleship*

April 22, 2019 ~ Earth Stewardship Sunday ~ 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

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A week ago today, Mother Nature had her way with us. Last Sunday, April 15, we cancelled worship because of the blizzard: She dumped well over a foot of snow that continued to fall Saturday night, Sunday and Monday. The wind drifted the snow up in piles five feet high against our doors. Yes, Don Zais was out there with a shovel on Saturday trying to clear our entryways and walkways. But the wind was working against his best efforts; back filling as quickly as he could shovel. Mother Nature was having her way.

I learned on Tuesday, that the last time worship was cancelled for snow was in December of 2010, the Second Sunday of Advent, to be precise. You may recall that 2010 was Pastor Kevin's first winter here. I must point out that your PNC neglected to mention this special initiation rite you have for new pastors during their first winter here... And silly me: being a newbie *and* it being the middle of April, I thought it was already spring here. Big learning curve here, our first Wisconsin winter.

What a difference a week makes! Today, a week later, and here we all are! Church is open, spring is in the air and it is April 22, "Earth Day": A tradition that began in 1970, instigated by Senator Gaylord Nelson, a U.S. Senator from Wisconsin. Yes, I love my new state. He established "Earth Day" as a day to focus on the environment across the nation. It is interesting to look back 48 years ago and see how one inspired person became a catalyst for systemic changes that would push us toward greater global justice: A justice that encompasses *all* creatures (animals, humans and plants) of our God and King. Of course the justice part didn't happen over night, and he didn't do it alone. Sowing the seeds of justice takes faith, time, and teamwork.

As the story goes, back in 1970, after witnessing the massive damage of the 1969 oil spill in Santa Barbara, California, and inspired by the energy of the student anti-war movement, Senator Nelson got the idea of pollinating that energy into the public consciousness about water and air pollution. He could see that this was the opportune time to bring environmental protection onto the national political agenda. He announced the idea for a "national teach-in on the environment" to the national media; persuaded Pete McCloskey, a conservation-minded Republican Congressman, to serve as his co-chair; and recruited Denis Hayes from Harvard as national coordinator. They chose April 22 since it fell between Spring Break and final exams.

And amazingly enough, on April 22, 1970, (long, long before Facebook and Social Media)--20 million Americans took to the streets, parks, and auditoriums to

demonstrate for a healthy, sustainable environment in massive coast-to-coast rallies. Perhaps some of you sitting here took part in some of these rallies?..... And perhaps you remember this watershed day: Thousands of colleges and universities organized protests against the deterioration of the environment. Groups that had been fighting against oil spills, polluting factories and power plants, raw sewage, toxic dumps, pesticides, freeways, the loss of wilderness, and the extinction of wildlife suddenly realized they all shared a common cause that unified them.

Yes, back in 1970 Republicans and Democrats, rich and poor, city slickers and farmers; tycoons and labor leaders came together around this common concern. And within one year of the first Earth Day came the creation of the United States Environmental Protection Agency and the passage of the [Clean Air, Clean Water](#), and [Endangered Species](#) Acts. Yes: Both political parties working together across the aisle; congress passing significant legislation: we used to do that. I believe we still can. ***“It was a gamble,” Gaylord recalled, “but it worked.”*** By 1990, twenty years later, Earth Day went global, and in 1995 Senator Nelson was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest honor given to civilians in the United States for his role as Earth Day founder.<sup>i</sup>

Why am I telling this story here, from this pulpit? And why has it become a tradition for our Presbyterian denomination and for FPC to focus our worship once a year around Earth Day? The truth is, Earth Day did not begin for us on April 22, 1970. Yes, that was truly a watershed day in the life of our nation and its call to accountability for how we relate to our environment. However as Christ followers, earth day *for us* began long before that. It began on our Day One. Whenever and however it scientifically happened, we believe that God created the heavens and the earth, of which we all are a part, through which we are all interconnected, and on which we all depend.

As the Navajo chant on the cover of our bulletins poetically expresses it:  
*The mountains, I become part of it...*  
*The herbs, the first tree, I become part of it.*  
*The morning mists, the clouds the gathering waters,*  
*I become part of it.<sup>ii</sup>*

This Navajo chant may be closer to our biblical tradition than we realize. Biblical scholar Patricia Tull explains that biblical Hebrew had no separate words for “human culture” and “nature.” That’s right, in our own biblical witness, in the tradition of Jesus’ faith: there was originally no distinction between humans and nature. There wasn’t even a word for it. <sup>iii</sup>For St. Francis of Assisi who wrote the words of our opening hymn (All Creatures of our God and King), there also seemed to be no distinction. As Barbara Brown Taylor wrote in her sermon ““The Dominion of Love,” I do not think Francis got the distinction between “animate” and “inanimate” any better than he got the distinction between princes and lepers. Life was life for him, and God was love. To be made in God’s image meant to be made in the image of love.”<sup>iv</sup>“*We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to love one another.*” Jesus showed us, our place on this earth is much *smaller*

and our responsibility is much *greater* than we may realize. As the prophet Isaiah warns the people of Judah, we are accountable for whether we do or whether we don't love all the creatures and creation of which we are part and parcel. God is watching. And Jesus is crying out to us.

Whether those of us insulated by race, class, or national or geographic privilege feel it yet existentially, the truth is: we are well down the road of what Derrick Jensen calls an "Endgame". James Speth, environmental analyst puts it like this: "How serious is the threat to the environment? Here is one measure of the problem: all we have to do to destroy the planet's climate and biota and leave a ruined world to our children and grandchildren is to keep doing exactly what we are doing today, with no growth in the human population or the world economy. Just continue to release greenhouse gases at the current rates, just continue to impoverish ecosystems and release toxic chemicals at current rates, and the world in the latter part of the century won't be fit to live in."<sup>v</sup>

Being brand new grandparents to a baby girl named Isabel, born on March 27, of 2018, puts Speth's statement in a new light for us. Most of us in this room will not be on this earth by the end of this century, but Isabel will, as children of this church. And our youth. *Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.* Today, after worship, Carmen and I will be working with our seven teenage confirmands on their original Statements of Faith. As part of that discussion we will consider the four questions of membership that we ask everyone in the Presbyterian Church. The first question goes like this, "Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?"

Back on Earth Day One, in Genesis 2:15, we were given our role to till, to keep, to steward the garden, a metaphor for the whole earth and the fullness thereof. Yes: our original human vocation is to serve and preserve the garden. In her book, *Inhabiting Eden* Patricia Tull, points out that the Hebrew word "abad" means to serve. A more literal translation is this: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to serve it and to guard and protect it. Serve. Guard. Protect. We are "stewards of the earth" and will be required to account for how we've served, guarded, and protected what God has given us. Serve, guard, protect, and advocate. We must amplify the voice of the natural world: Mother Nature has her ways, but cannot cast a vote.

When we fail to do this, we are sinning. It is our sacred calling, from Genesis through Revelation. I agree with Ched Myers, a Mennonite Activist Theologian who writes, "The church is being called to diagnose the root pathologies within and around us while also drawing deeply on the roots of our faith traditions. Yet these also must be practical, empowering deliberate steps toward significant change. Our task as Christians is nothing less than working to help turn our history around—which **is** the meaning of the biblical discourse of repentance. I believe this is one of the ways we are called to "Go Deep" here at FPC.

My sermon title comes from Myers' essay, "Watershed Discipleship." This is the core of my message today: Because of our call to be stewards of the earth from Day 1, we are being called now to love the Earth in truth and action. Why? Because there is no denying that we are in a watershed historical moment of crisis which demands that environmental and social justice and sustainability be integral to everything we do as inhabitants of specific places.

That's the second part of this double entendre: Watershed Discipleship acknowledges what Myers calls, "the bioregional locus of an incarnational following of Jesus. Our discipleship and the life of the local church inescapably take place in a watershed context.<sup>vi</sup> Marshfield is part of three watersheds: Black, Castle Rock, and Lake DuBay. What are we doing to serve, guard and protect them? "Watershed discipleship believes, as the prophet Isaiah put it, that only by "taking root downward, can the surviving remnant again bear fruit upward." To which I would add: Watershed Discipleship is the call to be local "pollinators" of sustainability for all creation.

Gaylord Nelson called his "Earth Day" idea a gamble, as he said, "It was a gamble, but it worked." You might say God's creating the earth and then sending Jesus to redeem creation, a gamble. A gamble since God gave us the free will to choose to be stewards of the earth, or not. The church has always been a gamble since it began, with scared and amazed women at the empty tomb. But now in 2018, its future is a different kind of high stakes gamble. I believe we are at a watershed. Will we sow the seeds of ecological justice faithfully? Let's embrace this inflection point as a call to unify, to activate, to serve, guard, protect and advocate for Mother Nature, like we never have before: for our children and grandchildren and all of God's children everywhere.

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<sup>i</sup> Information on the history of Earth Day gleaned largely from:

<https://www.earthday.org/about/the-history-of-earth-day/>

<sup>ii</sup> Navajo Chant, Earth Prayers edited by Elizabeth Roberts & Elias Amidon (HarperCollins, New York: NY, 1991), p.5.

<sup>iii</sup> Rebecca Barnes, "Taking or Giving to God's Creation?", *The PHP POST*, Spring 2018 p.2.

<sup>iv</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Dominion of Love," as reprinted in *The Green Bible*, (HarperCollins Publishers, New York: NY, 2008) p. 1-90.

<sup>v</sup> Ched Myers, "Watershed Discipleship," Chapter 3, "Reimagining Ecological Theology," in *Faithful Resistance: Gospel Visions for the Church in a Time of Empire*, by Rick Ufford-Chase, (San Bernadino, CA, 2017). pp. 58-60.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, 62-63.