

Genesis 2:4b-9, 15 ~ Matthew 13:31-32
The Kingdom of Heaven in our Own Backyard
 April 28, 2019 ~ Earth Day Sunday
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Intro to Gospel Text:

To be honest with you, thinking about Earth Day and our call to care for all of creation feels overwhelming to me. The earth is so big and we are so small. God gave “ADAM” (the man or first human) a big job and we seem to be messing it up. The rate of climate change is increasing at an alarming rate right here on our watch. And somehow, we’ve allowed this global and universal problem to become debilitatingly infected by the polarizing politics of our day. What should we do? What can we really do that will make a difference?

The short parable about the mustard seed can give us a way in. Just as the mustard seed itself is a curative plant and readily available to anyone, so too this parable brings our relationship with the earth down to size. Jesus does us a huge favor by putting the kingdom of heaven in domestic terms we can picture. You might even call it “the kingdom of heaven in our own backyard” because these two verses contain multitudes: a seed, a sower, a tree, birds, shelter: humanity and nature all working together, going out on a limb for each other, providing for one another, just as God put ADAM in the garden to do.¹

Sermon:

Has anybody given three hours of your life to see the new movie “Avengers Endgame” yet? I haven’t, but hope to see it when I’m on vacation, so no worries—no spoiler alerts coming from the pulpit today. But if you think about it, in today’s Genesis text, God gave the original spoiler alert about the endgame of creation—right when the Lord God put the man in the garden for the purpose of tilling it and keeping it. Our Genesis story, the older of our two creation stories, written probably around 900 BCE, suggests that God made humanity, or ADAM, because there was no one to till the ground. The Garden that God created depended on ADAM. Without tilling and keeping it, the garden will die. So goes the world.

Like the mustard seed parable, this story about the Garden of Eden also contains multitudes. It stands as a metaphor about the whole earth. If ADAM (humankind) fails at this calling, the real Endgame will occur. As our polar ice cap is melting and sea levels are rising at an alarming rate, these signs are already telling us--we don’t need Tony Stark to send a message as he does in the Avengers movie when he is adrift in space with no food or water with his oxygen supply dwindling down to almost nothing. God is calling us now to be the Avengers against whatever evil forces that threaten to decimate the planet and the universe.

Here’s the great Good News: Standing today in the light of the resurrection we have hope. Standing in the light of the empty tomb, we know that God has already overcome death and can therefore beat “Thanos” or any force of evil that threatens to destroy God’s beautiful creation. As Easter people, we have faith that what appears to be a death spiral for the planet

can be turned around. If the smallest of seeds can grow into a tree that provides shelter and protection for birds, Jesus' parable of the kingdom, gives us and our small seeds hope.

Standing in the light of the resurrection here on the 2nd Sunday of Easter, I am struck by the reappearance of our Gardener God in John's gospel telling of the resurrection in chapter 20. On that morning of mornings when Jesus' tomb was found empty, we have Mary Magdalene, standing at the grave weeping because she was afraid that Jesus' body had been stolen from his tomb. At that very moment, Jesus appears behind her, she turns around and sees him, but we are told Mary mistook Jesus to be the gardener. On hearing him call her name, she then realizes him to be her Lord, and the cosmic shift begins to dawn, that Christ is risen. However, in light of Genesis 2—if you think about it--Mary's misidentification was not completely wrong. As we believe Jesus to be the Second Adam, arisen to redeem all of creation, is he not also *Christ the Gardener* returned? Freeing us, calling us to get out our gardening tools and take our part in the redemption of God's creation? I hear Christ calling our names, and urging us to get serious about tilling and keeping.

Those two words, "till" and "keep" translated from the Hebrew, '*abad* and *shamar*, need some unpacking. They cover more ground than we may realize: actually our whole job on this earth. Our text reads in Genesis 2:15, "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden to **till** it and **keep** it." '*abad* also means to serve, till, dress, or work. It is found 290 times in the Old Testament, most often meaning "worthy service." The second word, *shamar*, translated in our Bibles as "to keep" also means to guard, safeguard, take care of, look after, with a loving, caring, sustaining kind of keeping. All of us are called to serve the Garden of Creation with our caring service. And like Jesus' parable about the mustard seed: It's not about the sower. It's about the seed and the results of the work of the sower. It's about the health and welfare of the Garden.

What makes our Green Team any different from other worthy environmental organizations? This question was asked at our recent new member class. The primary answer is found in both of today's scriptures: it is our sacred calling from the beginning of human creation, our role to protect and serve God's beautiful creation. The second is like it, it is the poor who suffer first and most directly from the effect of climate change, so fulfilling our call from Micah "to do justice" compels us to mind our call to till and keep the Garden of creation. This kind of serving and protecting is key to loving our neighbor, all our neighbors, as ourselves.

Have you ever heard about "Living for the Seventh Generation"? In previous sermons, I have asked us to think about what the world will be like when my thirteen-month old grandchild, Isabel, or when a baby we are baptizing grows up, which takes us two generations into the future. But today calls for a longer stretch. According to Wilma Mankiller, the first female Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation, "In Iroquois society, leaders are encouraged to remember seven generations in the past and consider seven generations in the future when making decisions that affect the people." Although we are unlikely to meet people who are more than four generations ahead or behind us, as we think about serving and keeping the Garden of Creation that God has entrusted to our care, this long-term thinking is called for. We are already

living with the consequences of short-term thinking in the treatment of our air, water, soil, and the habitats of living things.ⁱⁱ

As “People of the Book,” we share this multi-generational thinking as well: it is woven into the fabric of our Bible. Consider the genealogies listed with detail and precision in the Old Testament as well as the New Testament (You know those deadly dull chapters we don’t really read because of all those unpronounceable names). Although lists of names on the surface don’t make for inspiring reading, there is a sacred reason why they are in our Bible. In Matthew 1, careful attention is given to name fourteen generations from Abraham to David; fourteen generations from David to the deportation to Babylon; and fourteen more generations from the deportation to the Messiah, the birth and life of Jesus on this earth. If we listen, we can hear this continuity, connection and responsibility across the generations in God’s first covenant with Abraham: “I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.” (Gen. 17:7). Both our ancient spiritual ancestors and the ancestors of the First Nations of this land shared the wisdom of long-term thinking in a way that our current culture does not.

How does our care of the earth chart a course for those that are coming seven generations in the future? God is calling our names, asking us that questions as we make decisions and vote on policies today. Every time we buy something; every time we dispose of something, are we fulfilling our call to serve and protect creation? How will my purchase of that car, or the disposal of that computer impact the seventh generation? I believe this is part of our sacred calling as humans created in the image of God, as Christians called to partner in the work of redeeming creation by building the Beloved Community.

Never underestimate the power of one mustard seed in good soil, or the work of one small boy, to become habitats for birds and salvation for starfish. Perhaps you’ve heard this story. Once upon a time, there was an old man who used to go to the ocean to do his writing. He had a habit of walking on the beach every morning before he began his work. Early one morning, he was walking along the shore after a big storm had passed and found the vast beach littered with starfish as far as the eye could see, stretching in both directions.

Off in the distance, the old man noticed a small boy approaching. As the boy walked, he paused every so often and as he grew closer, the man could see that he was occasionally bending down to pick up an object and throw it into the sea. The boy came closer still and the man called out, “Good morning! May I ask what it is that you are doing?” The young boy paused, looked up, and replied “Throwing starfish into the ocean. The tide has washed them up onto the beach and they can’t return to the sea by themselves,” the youth replied. “When the sun gets high, they will die, unless I throw them back into the water.”

The old man replied, “But there must be tens of thousands of starfish on this beach. I’m afraid you won’t really be able to make much of a difference.” The boy bent down, picked up yet

another starfish and threw it as far as he could into the ocean. Then he turned, smiled and said, “It made a difference to that one!”ⁱⁱⁱ

I will end with gifts offered to us humans by the lichen, trout, the lion, and the caterpillar who offers an Easter gift. It begins with a lament offered on our behalf: “We hear you, fellow-creatures. We know we are wrecking the world and we are afraid. What we have unleashed has such momentum now, we don’t know how to turn it around. Don’t leave us alone, we need your help. You need us too for your own survival. Are there powers there you can share with us?

“I, lichen, work slowly, very slowly. Time is my friend. This is that I give you: patience for the long haul and perseverance.”

“It is a dark time. As deep-diving trout I offer you my fearlessness of the dark.”

“I, lion, give you my roar, the voice to speak out and be heard.”

“I am caterpillar. The leaves I eat taste bitter now. But dimly I sense a great change coming. What I offer you, humans, is my willingness to dissolve and transform. I do that without knowing what the end-result will be, so I share with you my courage, too.”^{iv}

Thanks be to God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of all creation.

ⁱ Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, (Harper Collins: New York, NY, 2014), 182.

ⁱⁱ *WISDOM Madison Action Day Booklet* 2019, p.3., www.wisdomwisconsin.org

ⁱⁱⁱ adapted from *The Star Thrower*, by Loren Eiseley (1907 – 1977)

Joanna Macy, *Earth Prayers From Around the World*, edited by Elizabeth Roberts & Elias Amidon, HarperCollins: New York, NY, 1991) 280.]