

For the Beauty of the Earth
Preached by
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United Church of Fayetteville
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Third Sunday of Easter

Hebrew Scripture Reading: Psalm 148 (adapted)

Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from heaven!

Praise God, all of you who are divine messengers!

Sun and moon, praise God! All of you bright stars, praise God!

Do the same, you waters that are above the sky!

Let all of these praise the LORD's name because God gave the command and they were created!

God set them in place always and forever.

Praise the LORD from the earth, you sea monsters and all you ocean depths!

Do the same, fire and hail, snow and smoke, stormy wind that does what God says!

Do the same, you mountains, every single hill, fruit trees, and every single cedar!

Do the same, you animals—wild or tame— you creatures that creep along and you birds that fly!

Do the same, you kings of the earth and every single person, and every single ruler on earth!

Do the same, you young men—young women too!— you who are old together with you who are young!

Let all of these praise the LORD's name because only God's name is high over all.

Only God's majesty is over earth and heaven.

Gospel Reading: Luke 4: 16-19

¹⁶When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ¹⁸"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Message: For the Beauty of the Earth

As we know, this week brings with it Earth Day, a day when we pay attention to creation and the community offers opportunity for cleaning up trash and all the winter detritus that has accumulated. Next Sunday, our own congregation will be cleaning the two miles of roadside we have committed to as part of our service to the community. We will read articles throughout the week about water use, land erosion, recycling and sustainable farming and planting practices. All year, we have read about the impact of climate change and its implications for the spread of disease and human interdependence with—not power over—all the other creatures on the planet. While we have often thought of taking a deep breath as a relaxation or other technique, we have lived through a year when "inhaling" ceased to be a political joke and became a health risk.

In a year when, as a nation, we have come to appreciate creation perhaps more than ever—have spent time outdoors and perhaps begun gardening either vegetables or flowers, it is a good time to reflect on our faithful obligation for the stewardship of the planet.

I never thought of tending the creation as a controversial topic until the day a worshipper yelled at me at the door for "cramming politics down his throat." I was startled on a number of levels, including the fact that despite what I thought more controversial topics that have been addressed over time, that is the only time/topic which generated such a response to me.

That being said, I think it would be helpful to state a number of underlying assumptions about our community of faith and our relationship to creation. Given the intellectual and cultural perspectives of our community, we are going to assume that the scientific presentation is accurate—that global warming, in particular, is occurring, is a result of human behavior and is not a conspiracy effort by any number of interested parties, for any number of supposed purposes, nefarious or otherwise. We will further agree that same global warming is contributing to varied and unpredictable weather patterns that are affecting, health, famine, migration, and commerce. We will agree that consumption, using more than our fair share and related practice contributed to the earth's burden, as well as developing states of anxiety and being overwhelmed which are real and present. Those "sermons" are being preached in every secular place and will not be reproduced here. The specifics, debate, and possible responses are a matter for education events and discussion.

We will focus on developing a theological perspective for understanding the church's role and human participation in relating to creation in positive and healing ways... Most of us are probably aware that earlier Judeo-Christian interpretations of dominion over creation have been corrupted into unquestioning consumption of the gifts of creation, without parallel care and regard for that creation. That is particularly the case in the west and in the earlier developed nations, mostly found in the northern hemisphere. The image of dominion increasingly has been replaced with one of "stewardship"—the responsibility for the care of creation. It was/is an improvement over the old idea of dominion, but still isn't taking us far enough.

In "Song of the Prophets; a global theology of climate change" Christian Aid, a UK Charity dedicated to the eradication of poverty, takes another theological step, using a scriptural base to emphasize humanity, not as above, not as controllers, or even caretakers of creation, but as an integral part of creation—interdependent with it. They point out, not only the traditional texts of the story of creation, but the call of, particularly, the 8th century BCE prophets for the healthy use of land, and who point out its unhealthy use promotes poverty and injustice. They point not just to the traditional Pauline writing of the groaning of creation, but of Jesus' comfortable relationship with creation, living peaceably with the animals during the Temptation, stilling storms, and his prophetic role in announcing good news, even while bringing a demanding message.

I found that revisioning humans as a fully integrated part of creation, despite its appeal, to be an intellectual challenge in overcoming years of thinking. I have tried to be intentional, not about "breathing in" the fresh air of spring, but thoughtfully trying to "breathe with" the earth as it came to life again.

Kelyn and I spend a lot of time on the Erie Canal Trail and we've watched the herons come back, the ducks in pairs, but now alone, which means eggs have been laid; the young turtles sunning, but the great turtles have yet to lay their eggs. The shrubs and trees are very slowly and on independent schedules, pushing out buds. The algae bloom on the water has not yet begun to show itself.

At home, I am preparing the vegetable garden soil, planning for some perennial transplanting, enjoying the bulbs and flowers which are naturalizing in my backyard, and trying to understand why the only thing that seems to naturalize in my front yard are an extraordinary variety of weeds.

I've made a lot of energy saving updates, but those decisions all have been less about reducing the use of consumable, irreplaceable resources than about saving money. Budget-guided, as are we all, I don't have unlimited resources to use only passive energy. I try to recycle as much as is feasible and provide for the safe disposal of appliances and other similar items, but confess to occasionally being weary of all the detailed restrictions and methods—and am convinced that safe and accurate disposal consumes a lot of water and gasoline.

The practice of "Breathing with" all of these things has helped me to begin to understand my relationship with the earth differently. I encourage everyone to begin to breathe with the earth in ways they are connected to it—whether it means "breathing with" instead of "breathing in" the sea or mountain air when on vacation; whether it's in the garden, or at the farmer's market, enjoying fresh fruits and vegetables or fresh cut flowers; rather than simply inhaling, smelling, eating—that is

consuming, the creation. Let's attempt to breathe with the earth in order to discern how we are affected and how the creation is affected by us through these small acts. We can't all do everything, and we can't all do everything at once, but we will find our behaviors changed day by day the more we experience our interconnected relationship with creation.

But an issue as critical and as time sensitive as climate change requires more than our individual gradual evolution into a new relationship with creation. This is where the church's voice comes into play, using its historical understanding of its role in the world. It requires prophetic voice and prophetic action, but we also need to understand what those things mean in their authentic identities.

First, the prophetic voice of our faith is always one of hope, not of doom. The church can and should call us to act with urgency, but continue to point out that with intense and committed response, change is possible and redemption can be at hand.

The prophetic voice always emphasizes necessary elements to bring about needed change and why we are called to do so as a people of faith. They are familiar to us.

The first is a need to repent. We need to be honest with ourselves about our personal and communal histories and current practices that are using resources disproportionately to our presence on the planet, to the ill health of ourselves, the earth, water, and air, and to the other species with whom we are related through the vision our shared Creator. Scientists predict that a climate tipping point can be reached whereby some changes will not be possible and some brutal consequences cannot be avoided. If we look at those numbers and think "I will be dead by then" or "My grandchildren will be very old" shame on us. Let's be sure to repent of that thinking. The church's first call is for us to say to ourselves and the world. "We did it. We do it. We own it. God help us change and help us change now. "

The second is to recognize that climate change disproportionately affects the poor—people to whom the faithful have ever and always been called to be responsive. If we can spend a few more cents for green products or for scarce water, if we can buy our way out of immediate consequences, we are obliged to remember those who cannot. Let's look to other parts of the less industrially developed world to realize that people who, in fact, make less contribution to the current state of challenge are being disproportionately affected by floods, draughts, related disease, migration, resulting violence and death. We have obligations to those peoples that involve more than sending money or food, but in changing the way we live that we all might live.

The third familiar element is that of a call to justice, greatly intertwined with our obligations to the poor and our need to repent. The prophetic voice of faith reminds us that justice is not for ourselves alone, not for the planet's wealthy, whom we are among, have no question, but for all God's people in every place. The faithful are called to use our resources not for our own benefit alone, but for the sake of all God's creatures in every place.

So, if those are the historic and familiar elements of faithful prophetic calls, why are they not resonating more than they are? Calls to change generally fail when one of two things (or both) is present: denial and despair. In general, while there are still pockets of disbelief, denial is diminishing that climate change is a real thing with increasing negative impact on the life of all creation.

Despair may be a more critical issue. If there is any criticism of the widespread public discussion of climate change, and its voices, it may be that they are often the voices of Cassandra singing doom rather than prophets singing hope. Again, this is where the voice of faith can have a critical positive impact. In order to engender repentance, care for the poor and the establishment of justice, we need to give voice to vision of the world that is possible if we change, and if we re-establish our deeply interdependent relationship with all of creation. The human spirit will move toward utopia not dystopian visions of violent hunger games. Only inaction, born of despair will take us in the direction of dystopia.

In response to climate change, we are invited to embrace the historic strength of the church through its prophetic voice; speaking hope; speaking the coming of good news; the possibility of a year of the Lord's favor, which is already among us; and sing of the image of a new earth made possible where poverty is not endemic and where justice prevails for all creation. That is our call to conspiracy –

which literally means – "breathing with". Let us conspire—for the sake of the beauty of the earth and all that dwells upon it. In this case, let us breathe with creation, understanding that it is not a choice, but a necessity, if we are to survive together' but also that the life beyond urgent and immediate sacrifice is richer, fuller and more peaceable for us all.

Prayer for Others and Ourselves

Compassionate God: We come to you in prayer this day, freshly aware of the gifts of creation, renewed in our appreciation of it and aware of the new creation that is possible in Christ.

In silence, we give you thanks.

We come to you with hope. After more than a year of limited activity and changed lives, we are grateful for the work of science, for humans committed to growth and healing and are looking forward to the widening aspects of life and relationship in these days and the days ahead.

In silence, we give you thanks.

We come to you in grief. As life and possibility expands, we struggle greatly with the fact that an early effect of renewed openness seems to be more mass shootings that weeks in the month, and additional officer involved shootings. We don't know what to do and we don't know what to say.

In silence we wait.

Most holy God: grant us your grace, your wisdom and your Spirit as we seek to live and lead in the name of the one through whom you overcame death; through whom you promised that mourning shall be turned to dancing and that one day we shall cry no more.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day, our daily bread.

Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors

and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,

for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.