

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
April 21, 2024
Earth Sunday
Luke 24:36b-48

“An Earth Day Sermon”

In 1969 massive oil spills ravaged the coast of California. These oil spills served as a tipping point for concerned politicians who launched a “teach-in” day across college campuses to educate students on air and water pollution. Inspired by the success of those “teach-ins,” activists then widened their efforts to reach the broader public. As a result, a national Earth Day was launched on April 22nd in 1970. Within that same year, the energy around Earth Day helped lead to the creation of the United States Environmental Protection Agency, the Environmental Education Act, and the Clean Air Act.

Since that time, Earth Day has become a beacon of hope around the world. Classrooms teach about environmental justice, cities hold recycling events, people visit their farmer’s markets, and many Christians sing, “For the Beauty of the Earth.”

I confess with much chagrin that I am not much of an environmentalist, but I greatly appreciate those who are, most especially my oldest son Henry who has turned his passion for the environment into a career. It all began for Henry when he was 8 years old. You see, Henry loved monkeys and had a huge collection of monkey stuffed animals. Terry and I thought it would be fun for him to experience real monkeys up close and learn something about them, so we signed him up for a day camp at the St. Louis Zoo.

Well, not only did Henry learn about monkeys, he also learned about palm oil and its effects on the rainforest and (thus) its damaging consequences for monkeys. I’ll never forget picking him up from camp. “What did you learn at camp?” I asked. “We learned about palm oil and how it’s destroying the rainforest and killing monkeys so I can never eat palm oil again!” he proclaimed. “And what food has palm oil?” I asked. “Oreos,” he said. And with that, he swore off Oreos.

Now parents, we know how these things go, right? Surely I'm not the only one with a kid who has come home from college declaring themselves a vegetarian only to be caught eating a hamburger a week later! So I naively thought Henry's boycott of Oreos would only last a few days. After all, who can resist an Oreo?

Well you know who can resist an Oreo? Henry Epling, that's who! Not only has he not eaten an Oreo since then, he's sworn off any food with palm oil; like Cheez-Its and Girl Scout cookies and many kinds of ice cream . . . just to name a few. When he lived at home, I had to read food labels. When he was in college, he wrote his Senior thesis on palm oil, and his passion for its effect on the environment is unparalleled. I admire his tenacity.

The theme of Earth Day this year is "Planet vs. Plastics". Here are some mind-numbing statistics:

Plastic was introduced in the 1950s, and as of 2017, 79% of it still sits in landfills.

The world produces each year more than [26 million tons of polystyrene](#) (plastic foam).

Each year, the average American ingests more than [70,000 microplastics](#) in their drinking water supply. These plastics originate from multiple sources but are mostly linked to littering, storm water runoff, and poor wastewater management.

So what can we do, you might be thinking? We can begin by phasing out single use plastics, push for a strong UN Treaty on Plastic Pollution, and demand an end to fast fashion. In short, stop buying bottled water, stop using plastic cutlery or plates, coffee cups and straws. And don't support fast fashion; Zara, Forever 21, and H&M are all examples of fast fashion. And if you really want to be scared into not buying fast fashion, watch the HBO documentary Brandy Hellville and the Cult of Fast Fashion. It is an eye opener.

Friends, we can all do better. But in case you're not yet sold on the idea of helping the environment or think this is some sort of "woke" idea, let me put this whole matter in the context of our faith, our theological tradition and the Bible.

Because my argument this morning is not political; it's theological and Biblical.

This morning we heard Psalm 148 which is a celebration psalm. It's also a much-needed reminder that salvation isn't just about "me and Jesus" or you and Jesus.

It is about everything in heaven and on earth. So it is that the psalmist calls upon every living thing to praise the Lord: the sun and moon and shining stars; sea monsters; fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind; and mountains and hills and fruit trees and cedars; and wild animals and cattle and creeping and flying things. All of them are called on to praise the Lord!

Now can all of those things praise the Lord? No, but that is not the point. The point is that we are all connected; that we are all literally a part of God's choir, God's creation.

Psalm 24 sums it up best: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof."

But the psalms don't stop there with their gorgeous praise of creation and the creator:

Psalm 35:

For the Lord is a great God
In his hands are the depths of the earth,
The heights of the mountains are his also
The sea is his. . . and the dry land.

In the first chapters of Genesis, the story of creation is told. Simply put, God is the creator, the creation is good, God blesses the creation and God puts human beings in it to enjoy it and take care of it. In the Bible we're given the responsibility for tending the garden. God puts people in the garden and tells them to "till it and keep it," which means we're to exercise responsibility over it. "Dominion" is the word the Bible uses. But it does not mean to pillage and pollute. It means to take loving care of it because it's a precious gift.

The goodness and fullness of God's creation and our God given responsibility to take good care of it is the first responsibility we're given. I think this makes it very important, don't you?

But in case that's not convincing enough, in the fullness of time, God came into the creation in the birth of a child in Bethlehem. And among the many meanings the incarnation—the gift of Jesus Christ—has for us is this: God loves and blesses

the world and human life by becoming part of it, by living and dying in it and by rising again to redeem it . . . the whole creation.

And Jesus lived close to the earth. He took some of his most memorable images from nature: “Consider the lilies” he said, as one who obviously had done just that. He used flowers and grain, seeds, shrubs and trees, birds and sea and sky to teach about God and God’s world and our place in it.

The Bible makes an important assertion, my friends. The place doesn’t belong to us. The earth is the creator’s—God’s. And while we’re allowed to live in it, enjoy it and use its amazing productivity, we don’t own it and so we are not free to do with it whatever we want.

The problem, though, is that we act like it’s ours alone, and in the process we seem to be creating some fairly significant problems for those who will come after us.

Why is it Christians don’t seem to care much? A Yale study a few years ago showed that the more religious people are, the less they are inclined to care about the environment. Perhaps the most famous example was former Secretary of the Interior James Watt, an evangelical Christian who said publicly that long range conservation of natural resources was unnecessary because Jesus was coming again and the world would soon end, so why bother.

Or maybe we don’t do more because the idea of saving the environment is just too big; too vast, so we kick the can down the road and leave it to our kids or grandkids to deal with. Or maybe you’re like me and find other issues occupy your time, talent, and treasure.

Whatever the reason, it’s past time for people of faith to repent and recover our oldest theological and biblical tradition. The invitation is to reclaim both the gift of the earth, and the responsibility God has given us to take care of it.

I know it can be daunting to imagine how the likes of you and me can make any difference at all. So maybe we should begin with the wise advice of Nellie McClung, an early 20th century Canadian environmentalist:

“None of us can turn the earth around,” she said. But we can “hit it a few whacks in the right direction.”

So let me suggest several possible whacks each of us might deliver. We can begin by evaluating the lives we're living—the cars we drive, the trips we take, the size of our home, the light bulbs we burn, the ways we get to and from work, or even the amount of meat we consume. Did you know [about 1,850 gallons of water are needed to produce a single pound of beef, compared to 39 gallons of water per pound of vegetables](#). You can save 133 gallons of water just by joining the meatless Monday movement and eating vegetarian for one day; this also benefits your health.

My Dad was a stickler for turning off the lights when you leave the room. It probably stemmed from being raised during the Depression, but the habit stuck with me so I always turn off the lights and so can you. Speaking of the Depression, surely my grandmother wasn't the only one to use a clean or somewhat clean sheet of tinfoil twice, was she? Use that plastic bag more than once; take a cue from your parents or grandparents and get multiple uses out of something that's only supposed to be used one time.

And log on to the Tough Talk on Wednesday about fossil fuels, and the Presbyterian Church's call to divest from the fossil fuel industry. It will be a topic of conversation at this year's General Assembly. So log on at 7pm; you don't even need to leave your home to get educated.

Friends, the stakes couldn't be higher for the human race, and in fact for the entire planet. Either we will learn new ways beyond a self-centered individualism or millions will suffer and our children and their children will inherit a critically ill world.

And in case you're still not sold, consider this:

Richard Cizik, an evangelical leader committed to saving the environment, was once asked, "What is the point of the U.S. making a lot of sacrifices for the environment when countries like China and India are only going to make things much worse as they develop?" His answer? "First, if the U.S., as the most prosperous nation in the world, won't lead the way, who will? And second, if Christians won't help lead this country, who will?" And then he said, "God isn't going to ask us whether China or India did their part, but did you do yours?"

We are people of faith and as such we believe that Jesus Christ came into the world, as the incarnation of the creator God among us. At the very least this suggests that the world God made and in which God lived is a good and lovely place which given half a chance, will continue to feed our souls with beauty and provide for our children after us.

So let us remember that we do not inherit the earth from the past, we borrow it from the children.

The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof.

Amen.

Sources:

Center for Excellence in Preaching, commentary on Psalm 148, Scott Hoeze, January 1, 2023

Dean Lloyd, "Everything is Connected", a sermon for Earth Sunday, April 20, 2008

John Buchanan, "Whose Earth Is It?", July 13, 2003