

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, 2016
All Saints Episcopal Church, San Leandro
The Rev. Justin R. Cannon
Claiming our heritage as Earthkeepers

The Reverend Thomas Berry was a Roman Catholic priest, a cultural historian, and an eco-theologian. As one who studied cosmology and geology, Father Berry preferred to describe himself as an “Earth scholar.” Three sentences of his witness about the connection between humanity and the earth have struck me deeply to the core, and throughout my life and ministry continue to echo as a guiding, prophetic voice. He writes:

“There is no such thing as ‘human community’ without the earth and the soil and the air and the water and all the living forms. Without these, humans do not exist. In my view, the human community and the natural world will go into the future as a single sacred community or we will both perish in the desert.”

These words are sufficient unto themselves—the rest of my sermon really is just commentary, because Fr. Berry has so perfectly captured the truth that all of life, all of creation, is connected in a web of interdependency and our existence is intimately connected to even the most basic things like soil, and air, and water. The environmental crises of our day are not just worldly problems, but deep spiritual crises of a fractured relationship between humanity and the earth.

Today we celebrate Sacred Earth Sunday in solidarity with thousands of people honoring June 12th as an International Day of Prayer for the Earth. June 12 marks six months after the Paris Climate Agreement and joins in the celebration of International Environment Day (June 5) and the first anniversary of the publication of Pope Francis’ Encyclical “Laudato Si” (June 18). On this very day in Chile the Ecumenical Coalition for Creation Care is organizing a major interfaith Earth act while meditation actions are taking place today at the Mall in Washington DC, outside Shell Oil London’s headquarters, and the Buddhist group One Earth Sanga is holding meditation today for the Earth. Mobilizations are happening all across Latin America including Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Honduras, Colombia, and a multi-faith action of prayer in Santigao’s main square, bringing together religious leaders, scientists and school children on Guanabara Bay in Rio de Janeiro. As Sacred Earth falls within the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, the Muslim community is joining in by hosting ‘Green Iftars.’ An Iftar is the evening meal when Muslims end their daily fast at sunset. These ‘Green iftars’ will focus on promoting local and sustainable foods.

The eyes of religious people around the world have opened to the reality that the environmental crisis is a deep spiritual concern. In today’s Eco-Theology workshop, we explored scripture and the voices of the saints concerning the Earth. I wish to share with all of us, just a taste of two of these quotes:

Saint Gregory of Nyssa, a 4th century bishop writes, “For when one considers the universe, can anyone be so simple-minded as not to believe that the Divine is present in everything, pervading, embracing and penetrating it? For all things depend upon God who is, and nothing can exist which does not have its being in God who is.” This may sound borderline pantheistic to you, but

actually the earth Christians embraced an understand of God's spirit permeating all of creation. You see, pan means *all*. So pan-theism, means all things are God, God is all things. Early Christian embraced the idea of panentheism—all in God—God in all.

Saint Augustine, bishop in the fifth century explains, "Some people, in order to discover God, read books. But there is a great book: the very appearance of created things. Look above you! Look below you! Note it. Read it. God, whom you want to discover, never wrote that book with ink. Instead he set before your eyes the things that he had made. Can you ask for a louder voice than that?" Here in the Bay Area we are spoiled being surrounded by some of the most amazing parks and green spaces in the country—Muir Woods, Mount Diablo, and the mighty wonder of the coast. The Old Testament scripture we heard today, however, has been distorted and twisted in ways that have led humanity to lose sight of our original role in the relationship we have with the earth. "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."

This verse has been used to teach that the earth is given to humanity to use for its own purposes, to control, suppress, and dominate, that we might be fruitful. Sadly, this interpretation has resulted in violence to the earth, an abusive use of the of the earth's resources leading to extinction of thousands of species, depletion of resources, and possibly irreversible damage to the waters and atmosphere. The Hebrew word for subdue, however, in its original language focuses on cultivation, which was a very difficult task in those days. As one commentator explains, "*God's command passes on to humans the responsibility to act on behalf of creation and to work within the boundaries of our humanness, dealing properly with nature in a way that helps bring forth food and values resources. This has nothing to do with abusive control.*" In other words, to subdue the earth means to work and tend to the earth in ways such that it might flourish and bring life. Similarly, to have dominion over the earth does not denote abusive control and power, but rather a rule similar to the dominion that God has over us. We are called to work and rule over the earth in the same way a gardener oversees her garden. You want it to flourish and grow, to be sustainable, and vibrant. If anything—these scriptures establish our role on this earth as earthkeepers—those who tend to the care of the creation. This was part of our original mandate from God.

One of the most profound experiences of my life was the summer of the year 2000. I was 16 years old, and it was the summer between my sophomore and junior years of high school. On July 15, 2000 I flew alone to Utah for a 25-day Outward Bound wilderness adventure, which changed by life. We hiked across the Moab dessert, over mountain passes, rafted for days along the Colorado River (sleeping on the rafts at night). We woke with sunrise, and fell asleep with the sunset, usually not even setting up tents unless we suspected rain. It's hard to explain the effect this trip had on me—perhaps you could say it set everything in perspective: how little we need to live, as we carried everything on our backs, and how much excess we fill our lives with. It opened my eyes to the simple wonder all around us—the miracle in each tree how it purifies the air, the power of the sun, how dependent all of life was upon the river, and I observed the birds and even mosquitos long enough to be inspired to write poetry about them both.

It was startling coming back from this time of living close to the earth, into the frenetic rush of

our ever quickening pace of society, with constant upgrades, and an obsession—no a plague of busyness. I found myself alien in this silence-fearing, ever-busy, human commoditizing, screen-gazing, resource-hoarding culture, and since then have struggled with how to live in our culture while nurturing a renewed relationship with the rest of creation. Holy Hikes and hiking on my days off are my source of life and strength—as is the Holy Communion where the elements of the earth—wheat and grapes—are lifted up and consecrated to be holy, the creation becoming the physical nearness of the Divine. My love affair with the earth you could say, took another delightful turn in August 2002, when at age 18 I embarked for college and signed up for an August Wilderness program. This involved a 23-day wilderness adventure. During this adventure there was a solo day when we each were left to a space where we stayed a day and night alone, and we had the assignment to write a letter to ourselves, that would be mailed to us a year later. From mine, I share an excerpt with you:

“Take moments away from everything...moments where you can take a friend to a place where God’s abundance is totally visible. Find a place where you can rest in God’s grace. These moments are good reminders of the more important things in life. Sure...movies and games may be fun, but is not feeding one’s soul much more satisfying. Remember your list of things that make you feel close to God: lay out under the stars, sit by a stream and listen to its stories, sit in the woods and feel the wind, watch tree branches rustle in the wind, let the sun bathe you...clear your mind of all thoughts, care, and concerns and let your spirit breathe. Share the moment in silence with someone. Do not feel anxious to get somewhere or do something. ‘All is well, all will be well’...allow that to fill your mind before all else. Breathe in the wellness of everything, and exhale all your concerns. Be with the oneness—rest in this divine peace.”

I draw a parallel between this and today’s Gospel where Jesus teaches, “But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.” Both have to do with surrendering ourselves to the present moment, where we will encounter God. In the Old Testament God reveals God’s name as “I AM” – often transliterated YHWH or Yahweh. God’s name was not “I WAS” or “I WILL BE” but “I AM,” which is an invitation for us to enter more deeply into the here and now where we will encounter God. Where we are reminded that the power of God to bring about healing, transformation, and change is greater than all the items on our to-do lists and when harnessed can effect deep change in our lives and the world.

It is in the present moment, too, that we are invited to renew our commitment as earthkeepers—caring for the most vulnerable people and creatures alike, tending to the wounds of our cities and our rivers alike, and defending the rights of the vulnerable children and endangered species alike. The more deeply we can enter into the present moment, I believe the more directly we come face to face with God and our special role within God’s creation. Find moments in life for stillness and quiet. Claim your heritage as earthkeepers. More than any other social cause—racism, sexism, homophobia, feeding the poor, building homes for the needy—the environmental crisis we face is paramount because if we make this planet uninhabitable, all these other causes would become moot.

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What can you do in your life today—what small actions, what changes can you make to work towards the building up of that single sacred community? What can we do as a community? I raise these questions and invite you to join me in the days, weeks, and months ahead in exploring actions that we as individuals and a community can take to renew our common call to be earthkeepers in the beautiful and sacred earth.

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