

51 years ago this week was the first Earth Day. In 1970, at the first one, in massive coast-to-coast rallies, 20 million Americans took to the streets and parks to demonstrate for a healthy, sustainable environment. In response to this outpouring of ordinary citizens, a rare political alignment was formed, including Democrats and Republicans, rich and poor, city slickers and farmers, CEOs and labor leaders. Everybody wanted clean air and clean water. So, Congress created the Environmental Protection Agency and passed landmark legislation: the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the Endangered Species Act. Twenty years later, in 1990, Earth Day went global, mobilizing 200 million people in 141 countries to lift environmental issues onto the world stage.

The politics may be different today, but these issues are not just political; at the heart of it, Earth Day addresses spiritual issues. Earth Day is not a religious day, but it could be. It's a day to celebrate God's handiwork. Over and over in Bible, we hear about God's glory made visible in creation:

- Gen. 1 tells the story of God bringing into being everything that is: day and night, earth and seas and sky, sun and moon and stars, the birds of air, the fish of sea, land animals, and humans, and after the creation of each new thing, the refrain is “and God saw that it was good”. God's creation is good!
- Psalm 19 “The heavens are telling the glory of God, the firmament (the earth) proclaims God's handiwork”.
- Poetry from Isaiah 55:12: “The mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands”
- In Job 38:7, there's a reference to “the morning stars singing together”.

Scholars have a term “natural theology”, which is the idea that even if someone doesn't have a Bible, they can experience the goodness and wonder of God simply by paying attention to the amazing natural world God created, full of beauty and wonder. Let's think a minute about the:

* beauty of a sunset, mountains, ocean, full moon and stars;

* wonder of bird migrations from Canada to Mexico, animal instincts on caring for young – how do they know how to do these things?

* variety of plants – everything from the mighty oak and the delicate dogwood to the tomatoes and cucumbers and green beans in a garden, with parsley, mint and basil; flowers – tulips, zinnias, and irises

* diversity of animals: everything from the hummingbird to the dolphin to the giraffe; pets who are so much a part of our lives

* healing capacities within nature: aloe to heal burns, trees breathing in carbon dioxide and breathing out oxygen; I've even heard that spending an afternoon in nature can reduce symptoms of ADD

* just water itself, such a big percentage of our bodies, and whole water cycle, of rain nourishing the earth.

All of this goodness points to God, as the Source of all life. All of this goodness is holy. John Muir said, "Creation is God's original cathedral." A Franciscan priest Richard Rohr said, "Creation is both the hiding place of God, and the revelation place of God." We experience our loving, good God through creation.

So, Earth Day is a day to celebrate God's handiwork, appreciate it, rejoice in it, cherish it, revel in it, thank God for it.

Earth Day is also a day for us to ponder the relationship between humans and God's good creation. Our primary text this morning is just one verse, Genesis 2:15, which comes toward the end of the creation story: "The Lord God took the man, and put him in the Garden of Eden, to till it and keep it." The Hebrew word translated "keep" here can also be translated as "tend" or "take care of" or "preserve or protect". So, the first task God gives humans in the Bible is to "tend the garden, to preserve and protect it, to take care of it." Yet, as we just prayed together in our prayer of confession, we as a species have not lived up to God's intentions for us: rather than tending the garden, we have exploited the garden, we have trashed the garden. How have we trashed the garden? Let me count the ways: oil spills, toxic dumps, polluted air; destruction of coral reefs, clear-cutting of forests, mountaintop removal mining, loss of wilderness, extinction of wildlife; in the Pacific Ocean, a floating raft of garbage as big as state of Texas; alarming changes in world temperatures that threaten to flood coastal areas and bring intensified, more frequent storms. And the list is actually much longer than this. As someone once said, "Humans are the only species to soil their own nest."

We have failed miserably in our calling to "tend the garden." So, part of our observance of a religious Earth Day is not only confessing to God our trashing of creation, but committing to live

differently. Because, as your parents told you when you were a child, if you say you're sorry about something you did, it's a hollow apology if you just continue doing the same thing. The way you show you're sorry is to learn from your mistakes and to live differently. It's time for us to learn from our mistakes and the mistakes of previous generations, as we and they trashed the garden; it's time for us to step up, to do the necessary, difficult repair work of preserving and protecting the garden. It's past time....

So, a religious Earth Day is a time to commit ourselves to creation care. There are plenty of things we can do as individuals: we can drink water from a reusable water bottle instead of from single use plastic bottles; we can recycle; we can purchase less "stuff" in the first place, stuff that will just end up in a landfill someday; we can use the clothesline instead of the energy hog clothes dryer; we can take reusable bags to the grocery store or other stores; we can eat food that has been grown locally; we can minimize airplane flights; we can participate in a river clean-up day; we can plant a tree.

But the widespread trashing of creation is more than we can address by individual actions alone. Even if every single person in this country did everything we could possibly do, that would not be enough. We need to work together to change public policy, to address systemic issues, like energy generation, public transportation, or the production of plastics. These larger issues impact all of us, and they have a bigger negative impact on poor communities and communities of color; it's said that these communities are hit "first and worst" by environmental issues. The social problems we face as a country and as a world – such as housing, income disparity, and racial injustice, to name a few - are only intensified by environmental and climate issues.

For example, ocean waters are now warmer than they used to be, and they create more frequent and more intense hurricanes in Florida and Texas and yes, the Carolinas; these storms destroy houses, of course, which is a tragedy on a personal level for those affected, plus there's another layer: these displaced people are now looking for housing, and that makes the prices go up for the available units, and that displaces those with lower incomes. And with a national shortage of 7 million affordable rental housing units, it means that the poor once again experience a disproportionate negative impact. So, in public policy planning, we need to connect the climate crisis and the housing crisis, because they intersect in such devastating ways.

Similarly, many communities of color are on the frontlines of climate impact because they are disproportionately located in low-lying areas prone to flooding, or near toxic waste sites, or near industrial plants that belch toxins into the air. Our national public policy over the past century has relegated poor communities and communities of color to the less desirable, less healthy locations, through red-lining and discriminatory lending practices and “whites only” covenants. Recently, researchers at The Center for American Progress have even documented that FEMA disproportionately directs disaster response funding to wealthier, white homeowners than to poorer renters of color (think disaster response to Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico).

Unfortunately, it’s becoming more and more clear that the exploitation of the earth is connected to the exploitation of people; our throw-away society throws away people as easily as we throw away “stuff”.

So, to say all this the opposite way, we see that “tending the garden” is inextricably connected to “loving our neighbor”. And that’s God’s vision for life on this earth: we are to preserve and protect this good, amazing, wondrous creation, and we are to care for each other. This well-being of all creation is described by the ancient Hebrew concept of shalom. The common understanding of shalom is “peace”, but it’s much bigger than just the absence of conflict. “Shalom” includes internal peace, within an individual, as well as external peace, between 2 people or nations, so it’s a comprehensive understanding of peace. But it’s even more broad than that; the concept of “shalom” includes completeness and wholeness and physical health; it’s a concept of the well-being and thriving of individuals and the whole community. As we tend the garden and love our neighbor, the whole community will thrive.

So, this week, Earth Day gives us this reminder to re-commit ourselves to our daily calling of tending the garden and loving our neighbor, two tangible ways of living out our love for God, who is the Lord and Giver of all life. Amen.