

Sermon 4-24-22

Paul Purdue preaching

When Jesus was on the cross on Good Friday, Matthew tells us that starting at *noon the whole earth was dark*. Luke notes that the sun stopped shining. At 3pm, Jesus shouted a prayer from Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" and breathed his last breath. "Look, (Matthew inserts for emphasis) look, the curtain of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split, and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised. After Jesus' resurrection they came out of their graves and went into the holy city where they appeared to many people." Can you feel the imagery? The sun, the center of our solar systems stops shining. It is like God looked at the Cross, muttered to God's self: "Oh-those people", and fipped off our lights. The Earth itself shakes and shudders feeling grief. Then as Love-Crucified is laid into the ground, Life arises breaking the bonds of death so completely that the resurrection overflows, spilling out life collaterally healing which raises some beloved saints to join Easter's hallelujahs! Jesus' death and resurrection sends a cosmic shock wave that plays out throughout creation. (Matthew 27; Luke 24) The earth itself embodies Easter.

The apostle Paul calls this seismic Easter shift the first fruit of God's healing resurrection. "Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ." (1 Corinthians 15) Paul sings a universal song of resurrection. Try not to over-think it. Imagine Easter as a seed growing up to heal and restore life for all of us and all of creation. In Romans 8, Paul writes, "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, (for resurrection) and the redemption of our bodies." Dwell in the wonder of Paul's portrait: the whole of creation endued with spiritual longing.

Jim Croegae lyric "was it a morning like this?" ponders how the earth felt on the first Easter. Did the grass sing? Did the earth rejoice to feel you again? Did the earth seem to pound "Christ is risen!" in a never-ending round?

Colossians includes an early hymn linking Christ and creation, "all things have been created through Christ and for Christ ...and in Christ all things hold together." Picture Christ as the universal glue that holds all people, all plants, all trees, all bees, and all things together.

The closeness of God and creation fills our scriptures, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and empty but that the Spirit of God hovered over the waters." (Genesis 1) Genesis' second telling of creation goes "The Lord God planted a garden in Eden and put there the human God had formed. The Lord God grew every beautiful tree with edible fruit... God took the human and settled them in the garden to farm it and to take care of the land."

There is holiness in farming, gardening or tending the earth. To lay seeds in the ground believing dirt, toil, water, bees, and sun can feed the world speaks of faith in resurrection and life. My very quiet uncle would crumble soil into his palm like a communion prayer. He smiled deeply seeing the blue tint of the black snake that shot across the hayfield as we cut hay. He gently rebuked my desire to bruise the serpent's head saying "Honey, snakes keep mice out of the seed corn." One year he was late for Thanksgiving tramping around hollars and creek beds in 30 degree rain looking for a lost calf that slipped out. Uncle Clellon could see the sacred in the scent of honey locust blooms and taught me to not fear the spooky sounds of Barred owls in the night. Let us practice wonder.

Psalm 104 portrays God's nature as delighting in and caring for creation: "Let my whole being bless the Lord! Lord my God, how fantastic you are! You wear light like a robe. You make your home on the waters; you ride the clouds like a chariot, drifting on the wind. You pour gushing springs into dry riverbeds, providing water for every wild animal—the wild donkeys quench their thirst. Overhead, the birds in the sky make their home, chirping loudly in the trees. The earth is full of the fruit of your hands you make grass grow for cattle; you make plants for human farming and wine to cheer people's hearts, along with oil, which makes the face shine, and bread, which sustains the human heart. The Lord's trees are well watered—God planted the trees so the birds can make their nests, the stork claims a home in the cypresses. The high mountains belong to the mountain goats; the ridges are a badger preserve. Lord, you have done so many things! You so wisely made everything! The earth is full of your creations!"

Do we stand close enough to nature to feel the wonderful closeness of Creator and creation? Do we see how deeply God loves the stork in the cypress tree? Do we know that God cares if the rock badger habitat is destroyed or if the wild donkey has enough clean water? Oh, if we long after God's heart, then we will pine for the world God created.

Jesus tells us, "Look at the birds in the sky. They don't sow seed or harvest grain or gather crops into barns. Yet our heavenly Father feeds them. Notice how the lilies in the field grow. They don't wear themselves out with work, and they don't spin cloth. But I say to you that even Solomon in all of his splendor wasn't dressed as well as the wildflowers. God dresses grass in the field so beautifully." (Matthew 6) "Aren't five sparrows sold for two small coins? Yet not one sparrow falls to the ground apart from God's care." (Luke 12)

God's deep love for the world and the people living on it underlies all of scripture. The Ten Commandments include the command to "remember the Sabbath day and treat it as holy. Six days you may work and do all your tasks, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord. Do not do any work on it—not you, your sons or daughters, your employees, your animals...the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and everything that is in them in six days, but rested on the seventh day." (Exodus 20) God commands consideration, kindness and rest for animals. God's love flows into and for all creatures. The Psalmist proclaims, "let everything that has breath praise the Lord." (Psalm 150) Trees breathe! Their leaves pull in carbon dioxide and water and use the

energy of the sun to convert this into sugars that feed the tree. They exhale oxygen. One large tree gives enough oxygen to keep four people alive for a day. In a year, that tree will absorb 48 pounds of carbon dioxide. (www.usda.gov/power-one-tree-very-air-we-breathe) Maybe it is not a stretch that Isaiah 55 sings of the trees of the fields dancing and clapping their hands in praise to God.

The ancient law codifies God's loving kindness and gentle care for creation. "*The Lord said to Moses on Mount Sinai, 'Speak to the Israelites: Once you enter the land that I am giving you, the land must celebrate a sabbath rest to the Lord. You will plant your fields for six years and prune your vineyards and gather their crops for six years. But in the seventh year the land will have a special sabbath rest, a Sabbath to the Lord: You must not plant your fields or prune your vineyards. You must not harvest the secondary growth of your produce or gather the grapes of your freely growing vines. It will be a year of special rest for the land.'*" (Leviticus 25) The Divine plan prescribes rest for the soil itself!

So often we fall into a consumer mindset, treating creation like a commodity instead of a sacred trust. We trade the wonder and beauty of creation for profits. We worship money as the measure of all our climate decisions. If we follow Christ, then profits and comforts alone cannot guide our consumption decisions. Jesus says plainly, "*You cannot serve God and wealth.*" (Matthew 6) In the parable of the sower, Jesus warns that "*allure of wealth, and the desire for more things breaks in and chokes God's word and being lured away from the spiritual path the person bears no fruit.*" (expanded Mark 4) Could it be that our desire for more things is choking out God's plan for God's planet?

Practice wonder. Stand a little closer to God's creation. Feel God's love for all the world around you. Remember, God calls us to preserve spaces for the rock badgers and refuges for the mountain goats. How can godly people not care about what happens to God's creations?

Delight in the wildness of this planet God has given us. See resurrection in the return of the wildflowers or the native grasses growing in your yard for God's bees! Say a deeper thanks to God over our food. Hear the hallelujahs in the cardinals' songs and mocking birds calls. Remember, God's command to let the soil rest and to preserve this earth for the mountain goats and polar bears. God designed and loves them! Remember, how the earth quaked as Jesus died. Give up that desire for more and more, that chokes out God's Word found in Scripture, written in our hearts, and woven into God's Creation. Practise wonder. Carefully, tend to God's garden. Amen.