

Holy Toledo (and Cleveland, Shaker, Chagrin. . .)!

A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: Genesis 1:26-2:3

This is a sermon on environmental concerns, requested by Fairmount's Earthkeepers group. It does not contain statistics about top soil erosion, non-renewable resource usage, or carbon dioxide emissions. It does not sound alarm bells about global warming or vanishing rainforests or the melting polar ice cap. It does not praise tree-huggers or scold corporate polluters. Its purpose is not even to guilt you and me into recycling, driving hybrid cars, or reducing our carbon footprint. As it happens, today is the birthday of ornithologist and artist John James Audubon, so you could conclude it's for the birds. . . and that wouldn't be all bad. Those feathered friends are included in the environmental trust God established, way back at the dawn of creation. Our morning text takes us back to the garden of beginnings where God placed care of the earth into human hands. Listen for God's Word in the reading from the book of Genesis, in the first chapter at the twenty-sixth verse. [GENESIS 1:26-2:3]

*When despair of the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.*

Kentucky farmer and poet Wendell Berry speaks of the lure of nature to human beings:

to escape the noise of city and traffic and madding crowd,
to breathe “fresh air” and hear bird song and falling water;
to rest from the frantic pace of daily life;
to find release from worries, and the demands pressed
upon us by commitments of all kinds;
to quiet the thousand and one concerns which fill our
moments and our years. Justto be.

In your mind’s eye, picture the place where this occurs for
you. . . .where you experience an encompassing sense of peace
and well-being. [silence]

I’m betting for most of us, that place is somewhere outdoors—
the lofty grandeur of the Rocky Mountains, for example, the
white sand beach of a turquoise ocean, the dark canopy of a
pine forest dappled with sunlight or the breathtaking view of a
hillside covered with daffodils.

Now, if I modified the instructions slightly and asked you to
picture the place where you are most likely to meet God, would
the scene change? I’ve heard gardeners swear that they are
never closer to the divine than when surrounded by green,
growing things. (Come to think of it, I’ve heard the same claim
from golfers.) As western civilization developed, however, a
divide began to occur between nature and faith. Primitive
people worshiped the powerful natural forces they did not
understand and which they could not control. The Church
countered by drawing a distinction between pagan “nature
worship” and the worship of Almighty God known through
supernatural revelation in Christ, who rules at His right hand in
heaven. They built vaulted cathedrals designed to draw
attention away from this world to the one above and beyond.
Stained glass windows depicted biblical stories and faith
heroes, but blocked the view of the outside world. I’m not
criticizing church architecture, and I know how this [chapel]
[sanctuary] space can provide spiritual solace and a powerful
sense of God’s presence. What I am challenging is the notion
that churches and cathedrals and temples and altars define
“sacred” space exclusively---relegating the natural world to the

“secular” arena, entirely devoid of God. Especially since we humans continue to divide the world between sacred and secular....a split with disastrous consequences not only for the care of creation, but also for the use of our financial resources, doing justice for the poor, and making peace among the nations.

Carving the world into sacred and secular spheres has made us far too ready to hear God’s authorizing words giving us “dominion” over creation as permission to dominate it; to make it serve our purposes alone. We have heard the biblical command to “fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over every living thing” as our blank check to use, develop, cultivate, mine, harness, hunt, crowd out, dam up and otherwise control. It’s not really a question of “how much is too much,” or how we practice conservation. It’s the basic premise that deserves consideration. What does it mean to exercise dominion over a creation we don’t own? How do we treat the natural world that shimmers with the presence and mystery of God?

It’s impossible to answer those questions apart from the whole text: God created everything and called it good. God made humankind in God’s own image. And on the seventh day even God rested. We can only understand what it means to have dominion if we take our cues from God: that we are to rule *in relationship* to creation—not apart from it--- we are to reflect God’s creative purpose, and we are to balance our work with worship, with rec-reation and renewal, tempering our human doing with some human “being”. One commentary on the Hebrew text suggested that the words “subdue” and “have dominion over” are the same ones used to speak of God’s power. It’s as if God invites humankind to share divine power, to act as God’s agents and representatives toward other people, but also toward snail darters, grey wolves, California condors, the rocks and trees and skies and seas. [*Preaching Through the Christian Year, ed. Fred Craddock and others, 302*] Just envision the environmental impact of exercising our dominion within relationships of caring and trust and praise,

rather than narrow, short-term self interest. Or to put it another way, to learn how deeply entwined our self-interest is with that of the natural world. Our organizational chart is not a hierarchy with humanity on top; rather it's a web of interconnections and interdependencies. Native Americans have understood this far better than we---for example, in the words of Chief Seattle of the Iroquois nation: *Teach your children what we have taught our children—that the earth is our mother. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons and daughters of the earth. This we know: the earth does not belong to us; we belong to the earth. All things are connected like the blood which unites one family. We did not weave the web of life; we are merely a strand in it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. . . .*

Perhaps the greatest contribution people of faith can make to creation care is to develop and promote what Thomas Merton called a “religious imagination”—identifying the world’s essential connection with its transcendent creator and reawakening a sense of wonder and awe. That religious imagination calls for greater knowledge of the natural world, from the smallest, most fundamental level of existence—the subatomic—to the largest, the space/time continuum. Whether peering into an electron microscope or gazing through a telescope into deep space, we marvel at the beauty and complexity of the universe. . .and the One who created it. And it doesn’t stop there! Religious imagination helps us look upon the face of a stranger, someone different from ourselves, see the image of the divine indelibly stamped upon it, and recognize that person as a sister or brother. Religious imagination calls us to justice and moves us to design economic structures that benefit poor as well as rich. Out of profound respect for our role as co-creators with God, we’ll make time to care for the earth, plant a tree, pick up trash and get rid of our junk thoughtfully, use low-wattage “green” light fixtures, make our homes energy efficient, preserve urban parks and green spaces, burn less fossil fuel, invest in alternative energy sources, link our city’s economic health to a sustainable future. Underlying it all is one single

affirmation, a foundation upon which to develop policies and practices: *The earth is the Lord's and everything in it; the world and all the people who live in it.*

First and last, friends, there is no division between secular and sacred space. God inhabits it all. Holy birds and holy flowers and holy wetlands. Holy frogs and holy great lakes and holy coal buried deep in holy ground. Holy Toledo! And holy Cleveland and holy Shaker Heights and holy Chagrin Falls. Holy! Holy! Holy! All of it! All of us! We are stewards of the magnificent and miraculous creation, caretakers of grace, partners enjoying earth's abundance. So help us God! Amen.

MEDITATION RESPONSE

Presbyterians never met a word we didn't like, which may be why our first impulse in response to God's grace is to write a creed or confession or statement of faith. We've been more than a little suspicious of the statues or icons used by our Roman Catholic and Orthodox brothers and sisters to nurture religious imagination; fearing they are a little too close to idol worship or the graven images forbidden by the second commandment. And we're not all that comfortable with silence. But today I invite us out of our verbal comfort zone to contemplate without words the amazing power of God's creative hand in the heavens as well as the earth. It's the image of the Milky Way Galaxy as seen through the Hubble telescope. Its swirling starlight contains the very elements which make up the cells of our human bodies. . . .inhabitants of a tiny planet in a tiny solar system somewhere amid this glorious universe. Intimately known, eternally beloved. Hold that image in your mind for a time, and silently offer your thanks and praise.