

Acts 17:22-31
Psalm 66:7-18
1 Peter 3:13-22
JOHN 14:15-21

“I believe in God, the Creator...”

“O merciful Creator, your hand is open wide to satisfy the needs of every living creature: Make us always thankful for your loving providence; and grant that we, remembering the account that we must one day give, may be faithful stewards of your good gifts; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever.” -- The Book of Common Prayer, page 259

Today is Rogation Sunday, the Sixth Sunday of Easter Season, when we remember and celebrate the wonders of God’s creation – and the responsibility which God has entrusted to human beings to care for it. Today is, in short, the Episcopal Church’s “Earth Day”.

Now, I could offer some “illuminating” remarks today on the value of using energy-saving light bulbs and what a bright idea they are [I hold one over my head] and how much impact this change could have on energy consumption.

Or, I could “drive home” the point of how worthwhile hybrid cars are for the environment (and for our gas budgets), and how much I like getting 45 mpg in my Prius, especially now that gas prices (even in New Jersey) are approaching Babe Ruth’s lifetime batting average (.342).

Or, I could “light up” the congregation with how we as a church are participating in PSE&G’s CleanPower Choice program, and are paying a modest premium to enable Green Mountain Energy Company to create and sell 100% renewable energy to the electric grid – wind power and small hydro, specifically.

Or, I could add that in Vermont (as I learned when visiting Tom last week), one of the local breweries has signed a contract to buy renewable energy created from methane produced by cow manure. “Cow Power,” they call it. Judging from the impressive fragrance of manure which greeted me as I drove around up there last week, I think Vermont could become “the Saudi Arabia of cow power.” There sure was a lot of methane in the air.

But I won’t dwell on those subjects, because you know these things already (except maybe about Cow Power), or could easily learn them and more from the many Earth Day and other articles about “Going Green” which have, thankfully, been flooding the media lately.

What I want to do this morning is say this: the environment is a crucial spiritual issue for Christians. It is spiritual before it is political or economic, and our spiritual beliefs should shape our political and economic beliefs and our behavior, not the other way around.

This morning's reading from The Acts of the Apostles recounts St. Paul's missionary trip to Athens, where he was (unlike in most earlier stops) talking to pagans, people who believe in many gods and who even put up an altar "to an unknown god." When preaching to people who do not even know the Hebrew Scriptures, never mind Jesus, where does Paul start? He starts with the doctrine of the **Creation**: "God made the world and everything in it" and "gives to all mortals life and breath and all things."

"I believe in God, the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth" is the start of the Apostles' Creed, which is part of the Baptismal Covenant, which we will shortly say. That doesn't mean we believe that God made the world in seven 24-hour days and then left it alone. Creation is a vast process covering billions of years and continuing this very second. We believe that God is the ultimate source of life, and *relationship with God is the ultimate purpose of life*. Human beings were made stewards of one part of God's creation – "this fragile earth, our island home" as The Book of Common Prayer puts it – which **God still owns**.

"The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it," Psalm 24:1 declares. God announces in Psalm 50:12b, "the whole world is mine and all that is in it." Human beings, who were famously given "dominion" over the earth by God (Genesis 1:28) are, in effect, "building superintendents" – an important position, but the landlord (God) still *owns* the building and also has a direct relationship with *all* of the "tenants" of "this fragile earth."

All of the tenants.

Let's look at another part of the baptismal service – the vows that parents and godparents say as their own vows and on behalf of infants, and which adults and older children say themselves. One of the vows on page 302 reads, "Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?" "I renounce them."

If we are going to take that vow seriously, we need to look at two phrases especially, ones we might not recognize the full import of. "The creatures of God," for starters – that doesn't refer just to people. All sorts of creatures of God can suffer due to "the evil powers of this world" – human organizations which, contrary to the will of God, "corrupt and destroy" God's creatures.

If we are going to take the Bible seriously, we have to admit that God created and still owns the world. We didn't and don't. We human beings have a certain amount of authority and responsibility for a limited time, and then the owner of the earth will return *and give us our final Report Card on how we've done*.

Right now, I'm *really nervous* about the grade the human race is likely to get.

If we are going to take our baptisms and our vows as Christians seriously, being committed to care for "all things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small" is not reserved for eccentric, Volvo-driving bird-watchers – it's a job for all of us. Because, as that hymn continues, "all things wise and wonderful, the Lord God made them all." If "creatures of God" are being destroyed by "the evil powers of this world", we are supposed to be allies of the creatures.

As a child, I went to overnight camp in New Hampshire in the summer, an experience which has given me a lasting love for mountains, lakes and rivers. Except for one river – the one which flowed by our camp. We were downstream from a paper mill, and untreated industrial sludge was poured into the river every day the mill was open. On a dazzling, sunny day, the Pemigewasset was slate gray, and had globs of unprocessed sludge the size of love seats floating down it, which reeked if you accidentally hit one with a canoe.

Intolerable conditions, you say? You bet – and now, no one would tolerate them. But before the Environmental Protection Agency was founded, people tolerated the intolerable regularly. And the fish, the frogs and the birds? They just died.

Many businesses in the '60s routinely announced that environmental regulations would destroy jobs and that it was impossible to have clean air, water and earth *and* economic growth. Last time I looked, the air, water and land in many (not all) parts of our country were in a lot better shape than they were 40 years ago – *and* there also are a lot more jobs than there were then. And there are places other creatures can live, now, as well, which couldn't live there 40 years ago. The problem was created by human sin, the solution was made possible by human repentance and amendment of life.

But others still die. When Elda and I were in Kenya last year, we visited the Sheldrake Elephant Orphanage. Poachers will kill adult elephants and butcher them just for their tusks. If you have a piano with ivory keys, or some ivory carving, an elephant died and left orphans so you could have those things, whether you knew it or not. That's how it works; poachers don't poach unless there's a market to sell to. And the larger point is that we are connected to all life.

Orphaned baby elephants are extremely vulnerable to poachers. (That's being subtle; to a lion, unprotected baby elephants are basically very large hamburgers.) So, the Sheldrake rescues the babies, raises them, and re-releases them in the wild as adolescents, when they are adopted into family groups. *The problem is caused by human sin, the solution is being made by human love.*

We've all heard about climate change, global warming, which is at the very least "turbo-charged" by human activity. Check this out, from the April, 2008 issue of National Geographic: "Arctic sea ice always shrinks as summer warms the top of the world. But last year's melt was a stunner. By September the ice cover had declined from its previous low, in 2005, *by an area larger than Texas and California combined* [emphasis added]...scientists predicted global warming would mean the end of a year-round polar ice cap but didn't expect it until the late 21st century. Research published in 2007, however, says the meltdown is ahead of schedule and that the polar region could be open water by summer 2030. Or sooner. One oceanographer, using a different model, says 2013 could be the end of the Arctic as we know it."

"The end of the Arctic as we know it" – perhaps before the young ladies we're baptizing this morning finish High School. This will have lots of consequences, but let's just think about one for now.

What happens to the polar bears?

They drown.

Think this might be on our Report Card as a species? How many species have we *already* wiped out? Honestly, I've lost track.

Environmental destruction and climate change imperil human life as well, of course. Climate change can mean floods and droughts, starvation, growing deserts – and rising sea levels that may wipe some Pacific islands right off the map. And malaria can be expected to appear at new latitudes and elevations as the earth warms. Anti-malaria pills, anyone?

But we people are usually more sensitive to human life. Though honestly, “more” sensitive sometimes isn't saying much. We as Christians need to recapture what Albert Schweitzer called “reverence for life”. We live in an era which glamorizes and reverences conspicuous consumption, self-indulgence and mindless waste of resources – just look at the values displayed in too many TV shows and movies and by too many celebrities, and by too many governmental policies. (Don't even get me started on luxury box seats at Rutgers Stadium.)

There are lots of things each of us can do as Christian environmentalists, and there are legitimately different approaches taken by faithful people. What isn't legitimate is doing nothing. Caring for the Creation is part of the “core curriculum” for Christians, not an optional extra. The problems were caused by human sin, the solutions will come from human repentance and love.

We want the world our [about-to-be-baptized] little sisters in Christ, Deana and Isabella, will grow up in to reflect more of God's glory and less of human sin.

In that case, we all have work to do.

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