

Beside Still Waters
Fourth Sunday of Easter
Celebration of Earth Day
April 21, 2013
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Texts: Acts 9.36-43;
Psalm 23;
Revelation 7.9-17;
John 10.22-30

I have to confess that when I went to seminary in the early 1990s environmental theology wasn't something we talked much about. In those years it still felt to a great many people like a political conversation more than a theological one. Some of the first Earth Day sermons I heard felt a bit like an environmental version of what I image a fire and brimstone sermon to be; trading on fear to motivate change. I suppose from a purely pragmatic perspective that can be an effective starting point. In the same way a health scare motivate a person to get serious about eating right and exercise. Fear may be an effective way to get our attention. But it rarely motivates life-long change.

One of the ways this question comes into play with our observance of Earth Day has to do with our liturgy. Earth Day being April 22nd usually falls into the season of Eastertide. The practice at Hope Church in the season of Eastertide is to drop the prayer of confession and to share together a prayer of praise and adoration instead. As I said in Early Worship last week, it's not because we have nothing to confess. We do this because the good news of the resurrection is so overwhelming that it demands our praise. So the question on Earth Day is do we depart from this tradition and insert a prayer of confession. It seems appropriate. We have so much to confess when it comes to our care for creation. Nonetheless, in the past several years I've been inclined for theological reasons to say no.

I want our theology of creation care to be doxological. You know this word from the *Doxology* we sing. It means an expression of praise. When you to turn to Scripture asking the question "why should I care about the natural world around me?" The answer from Genesis chapter 1 is because God created this world and called it good. The beauty of the earth, the creatures that live within it, the food that comes from it, they are good. Meditating on the goodness of creation seems to me a much better place to begin a conversation about our care for the earth. As human beings, we exist in this web of creation to delight in its goodness and to participate with God in having dominion within this creation. Clearly the place of confession for us is our miserable misunderstanding of what dominion means: not domination but a careful and attentive cultivation and stewardship of this earth.

But those aren't the texts before today. When I first turned to the lectionary for this Sunday and knew that we would be celebrating Earth Day, I initially scratched my head wondering how these texts might speak to the question of creation care. When I noticed Psalm 23 and the references in that iconic Psalm to elements of the natural world I initially wrote that that off as a rather simplistic and forced connection. But when I began to think more about why this Psalm is iconic

and so central to our spiritual lives, genuine connections began to emerge. The imagery of God as our Shepherd has long captured spiritual imaginations. Jesus expanded upon this metaphor in his teaching about the Good Shepherd. These passages from John and from Revelation today all pick up on the images that begin in Psalm 23. The one story that is told each and every year in our Children and Worship centers from Pre-K through 5th grade is the story of the Good Shepherd.

The images of this text guide and shape so fundamentally how we understand who God is and how we walk with God throughout our lifetime. God is the One who makes us to lie down in green pastures and leads us beside still waters. As God does these things, God restores our soul. Lying down in green pastures being led beside still waters – these are metaphors meant to evoke for us a sense of being nurtured, fed, and soothed. Peter Boogaart wrote an article for the May newsletter in honor of Earth Day and in it he mentions that word *human* plays on the word *humus* or earth. In the creation story the *adam* (or creature) is taken from the *adamah* (or earth). So Peter concludes that “the ground of our being is quite literally ground. It makes sense that the Psalmist would draw on images of creation to describe how God restores human souls. Because we are creatures of the earth when we live more closely connected to that earth - spend more time in natural environments - as we meditate on the rhythms of creation, we learn more about who we are, who God is, and how the world was meant to work. Our souls are restored when we are drawn in wonder to this glorious creation. When you know something to be good you are much more inclined to keep it that way.

Few traditions in western Christianity have kept this biblical and organic connection between creation care and soul care with perhaps very few exceptions. The spirituality of Celtic Christians is deeply rooted in creation. The Iona community in Scotland intentionally draws from this tradition. I’ve mentioned before that my morning prayers come from a book out of Iona called *Celtic Benediction*. Every single prayer in this prayer book, like Psalm 23, draws on the wisdom inherent in creation. The longer I pray in this way, the more attentive I have become to the natural world around me. The more I intentionally spend time outdoors noticing these rhythms of creation; the more my prayer life is shaped by these rhythms the more I became aware of how God restores my soul through them. The ways of creation are the ways of human being.

Let me give you one example that has profoundly shaped some new insight and some new practices in my life. When I am faithful to them, I feel so much more fully human:

“For the night followed by the day; for the idle winter ground followed by the energy of spring; for the infolding of the earth followed by bursts of unfolding...thanks be to you, O God. For rest and wakefulness; stillness and creativity; reflection and action...thanks be to you. Let me know in my own soul and body the rhythms of creativity you have established.

Let me know in my family and friendships the discipline of withdrawal and the call to engagement. Let me know for my world the cycles of renewal given by you for healing and health; the pattern of the seasons given by you for the birth of new life.”¹

¹ J Phillip Newell, *Celtic Benediction: Morning and Night Prayer*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 76.

Learning how to live into that natural rhythm of rest and retreat that then fuels the movement outward again toward engagement has been so transformative for me. When I lose the rhythm, the consequences are harsh. This is not a luxury but a necessity.

Lessons like these on how we are to live as human beings are everywhere in creation. Scientists are forever discovering new things about how the world works and these discoveries create advances not only in technology and medicine but also in our understanding of what it means to be human. So I hear compelling a Word to us for this Earth Day celebration about the place where our souls are restored. I joked earlier this week about titling this sermon *Get Outside!!*

As the Psalmist sings today, letting God restore our souls is the beginning of finding the right path. I've long argued that the sweetness that sometimes surrounds this image from Psalm 23 betrays the strength and grit and faith of this text. God leads us beside still waters to restore our souls so that we can find the paths of righteousness and be made ready to face what comes in the dark valleys. Creation is more than just beauty. Danger lurks. And the Shepherd does not stop those predators from coming. There are dark valleys filled with shadows and the presence of the Shepherd does not prevent us from walking through them. The news out of Boston this week makes that so abundantly clear.

But the Psalmist points to yet one more image for us today that speaks a relevant word in a week when our fears for our enemies have been heightened once again. It's the image of the table set before us in the presence of our enemies. The vision of this Psalm is for the healing and restoration of all creation; a table that includes even those whom today we might consider our enemies.

As we come to this table today, let us come with all these images in mind: of the magnificent glory of creation, of the places where God restores our soul, of the day when all creation will be made new and this table will be set before us even in the presence of our enemies.

So come...come for all things are now ready.