

Sermon Creation Care Sunday April 30, 2023 All Saints'

*God our Creator, Open us to know your Presence in all created things. Amen*

### **We are the Shepherds of God's Creation**

Good morning and welcome to Creation Care Sunday, as you can see our Green Sunday! Last Saturday was the 53rd anniversary of Earth Day, and today we at All Saints' will celebrate the care of creation. Today is also "The Good Shepherd Sunday," and what an appropriate gospel for our celebration of the Earth and all of creation. You will have noticed the package of seeds for the planting of flowers attached to your bulletins today. Please consider finding a place to plant these seeds, so that they will become a part of the beauty of creation, and also a way to promote the care of our home Earth. These flowers will not only enhance the beauty of the environment, but also serve as a source for new life for the bees and butterflies that will use them for new life of their own. Also notice the insert with the song of Chris Rice called "My Cathedral." You may want to read the words when will play it today following the sermon.

Our gospel today reveals the Christ Jesus as the gate and the shepherd. And who is this Christ? The one who was in the beginning with God, and through whom all things—all of creation—come into being, and what comes into being through Christ is life. We are also shepherds, the shepherds of creation, because it is us—the body of the universal Christ—who are the stewards of this incredible creation. We are called to care for it, to sustain its health, and to insure its viability for our children and grandchildren and for generations to come. And how are we doing with this call? Not well!

We face a global warming crisis unlike any before. Our natural world has been neglected, abused, and damaged beyond repair, scarred beyond recognition. Rising temperatures, melting polar ice caps, rising sea levels, destruction of rain forests, extreme weather events, rich life-filled soil turned to lifeless dust, extinction of thousands of plant and animal species, mass migrations of people trying to escape the ravages of these changes in the

environment. It is also called climate injustice and environmental racism, because the poor and the marginalized are affected more than the affluent. And who is responsible for all of this? We are—the human species, our consumption-driven lifestyles, our dependency on fossil fuels, and our disregard for the consequences which we are now starting to realize and living through. The balance of nature is broken. Never before has the earth and the climate changed so quickly. So many people including elected officials deny that there even is a crisis, and the divisiveness over this reality is deep. Where do we go from here? There are so many things that we as individuals, as communities, and as nations can do. There are many, and I will get to some of them today. But right now I want to try to help us move from despair into hope, and there is real hope. It is hope based on a long history of people of all cultures throughout millennia seeing things differently than the way humanity has recently begun to see; differently than what has become in the past century or so the dominant way of seeing; a way promoted by thinking as individuals rather than as a community; a way that is largely imperial, patriarchal, and dualistic. The consequences of seeing our world this way have been devastating. We must get back to seeing everything within creation as interconnected, woven together with a common destiny. We humans are not separate from, but rather are intimately inter-related and inter-dependent on the rest of creation. Pope Francis in his “Laudato si” wrote: “Everything is connected...concern for the environment needs to be joined to a sincere love for our fellow human beings, with rejection of every form of self-centeredness...we need to think of ourselves more and more as a single family dwelling in a common home.” This understanding of humanity and of creation and of our role as stewards is not new. Our own scriptures are full of it. Theologians and others throughout time have written about it. In Richard Rohr’s words: “Through the act of creation God manifested...Divine Presence into the physical and material world. Ordinary matter is the hiding place for Spirit and thus the very Body of God.” We see God throughout all that God created, and

so all of creation is sacred. The poet, philosopher, prophet, and environmental activist Wendell Berry puts it like this: “The world is maintained every day by the same force that created it. All creatures live by breathing God’s breath and participating in God’s spirit. This means that the whole thing is holy, the whole shooting match. There are no sacred and unsacred places. There are only sacred and desecrated places. So, I see these gouges in the earth, those places in our mountains ‘where dynamite explosions in fracking for coal deface and destroy their surface’ (sic) as desecrations, not just as land abuse or the oppression and abuse of the people who live there, but as desecrations, as blasphemy.” Our hope is that we will get back to that way of seeing ourselves as part of rather than separate from creation, to seeing the Divine within all created things, to realizing that we are called by God to care for it, and that as people of faith it is our moral imperative to take action.

Our rector Jim has been working on his research on Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, founders of the Romantic Movement in literature in England in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. He says he has been working hard, partly because he says the resources at the Cambridge University Library are inexhaustible. I mention Coleridge and Wordsworth today for two reasons. First, Jim wants to keep us here at All Saints’ in the loop about his work at Cambridge. Second, and particularly relevant for our Creation Care celebration today, these two poets and others of the Romantic movement can be described as early environmentalists—or in the words of our own John Halbrooks—as proto-environmentalists. The poetry of both Coleridge and Wordsworth show reverence for the environment, and by reverence I mean both poets considered nature to be sacred, an outward and visible sign of God’s being. It was a hallmark of the Romantic movement that nature is a lens through which one can see God; that the complexities and harmonies and beauty of nature are the means of God’s Spirit alive and active in the world. It is through nature, and by nature I mean all of creation, that God’s Spirit illuminates and

makes God known. Of course these Romantic movement poets lived in a pre-industrial age and would have no concept of fossil fuel pollution and global warming, and its devastating damage to the Earth, but I think it is fair to say that had they lived in our time they would have been appalled at the wanton abuse of the natural environment. Coleridge in particular, because he was a harsh social critic of the culture in which he lived, would have most surely been an environmental activist. His poem “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” reflects his reverence for nature, and implies that crimes against nature are crimes against God. In this poem the mariner/protagonist capriciously kills an albatross, a crime against nature. Because of this callous, compassionless act nature turns against him. Images of death riddle the poem’s verses. It is only when he willfully blesses the created order that the mariner is able to journey home toward redemption. Perhaps this is an environmental parable for our own time; that is to say that a crime against nature is a crime against God!

“Lines Written...at Tintern Abbey”, a poem by William Wordsworth, is a hymn of praise regarding the informing, healing, and inspiring reality of nature. From his poem:

*“I heard a thousand blended notes, While in a grove I sat reclined  
In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts Bring sad thoughts to the mind.  
To her fair works did Nature link The Human soul that through me ran  
And much it grieved my heart to think What man has made of man.  
Through primrose tufts, in that green bower, the periwinkle trailed its wreaths.  
And ‘tis my faith that every flower enjoys the air it breathes.  
The birds around me hopped and played, their thoughts I cannot measure—  
But the least motion which they made, it seemed a thrill of pleasure.  
The budding twigs spread out their fan, to catch the breezy air;  
And I must think, do all I can, that there was pleasure there.  
If this belief from heaven be sent, if such be Nature’s holy plan,  
Have I not reason to lament what man has made of man?”*

And a few lines from “A few Miles above Tintern Alley:”  
*Therefore I am still a lover of the meadows and the woods,  
And mountains; and of all that we behold  
From this green earth; of all the mighty world...*

So, Jim’s study of Coleridge and Wordsworth is timely for our Creation Care Sunday. These are just two of many poets, of the Romantic movement and outside it, and of other artists who realized the sanctity of creation, that nature is one window through which we see God. This is not a new way of seeing, but rather it is an ancient way of seeing that has continued throughout history, although mostly silenced since the Industrial Age began. Yes, there is hope. I believe that we can move beyond this historically recent though now dominant selfish way of interacting with the rest of the world, into a way of seeing the Christ in everything, the divine in creation including one another. Then perhaps we will heal our home the Earth.

Where is our hope? Our hope is ourselves. Environmentalist Bill McKibben says “The single most important thing a person can do in response to climate change is to stop being an individual.” In other words, think about the greater good. We have a covenant with God to care for our home. So, what can we do? There are so many things, and I’ll mention only a few. First, talk about this climate crisis. Make it a part of your every day conversation. Promote caring for our home Earth by enhancing other people’s awareness. And some practical things: Try to avoid using anything plastic. Eat more vegetables and less meat. Weatherize your homes, sealing up the doors and windows and duct work of your air conditioning and heating. Use less fossil fuel and promote sustainable energy. Plant a tree. Look for and vote for candidates who have “awoken” to the climate crisis. Join and/or support local organizations focused on caring for the Earth, such as our own Gulf Coast Creation Care, Mobile Baykeeper, the Sierra Club, Alabama Coastal Foundation, the Coal Ash Action Group working to

create awareness of the toxic hazard posed by Alabama Power's Barry Steam plant coal ash pit located next to the Mobile River; and others.

Yes there is hope. Our hope is the Spirit of God within us and working through us. I will conclude today with these words of the psalmist:

"O Lord, send us forth with your Spirit to renew the face of the earth,

That the world may once again be filled with your good things:

The trees watered abundantly, springs rushing between the hills in verdant valleys, all the earth made fruitful, your manifold creatures, birds, beasts, and humans, all quenching their thirst and receiving their nourishment from you once again in due season."