

Season of Creation, 2023 (All Saints' 9/17/2023)

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B; Gospel Matthew 18: 21-35

Creator God the Source of life, open our eyes and our hearts and our minds to see you in all things. Amen.

Good morning, and welcome to our celebration of the Season of Creation. You will notice that our liturgy is different this morning, with the focus on caring for our home Earth. The Episcopal Church is now celebrating the Season of Creation, an annual event which runs from September 1st through October 4th, which is the Feast Day of St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of ecology. It started in 1989 when the World Council of Churches embraced it, and it is now a worldwide ecumenical celebration which calls among others over 2.2 billion Christians to come together to care for our common home Earth. It is a time for repairing and restoring our relationship with God and with all of creation—the worldwide church family united to pray, protect, and advocate for God's creation. Our Bishop Kendrick has written that the Diocese of the Central Gulf Coast joins this international effort for prayer and action for climate justice to put an end to the ecological destruction which now threatens all of life on Earth. Each year has a new theme, and the theme for this year is “Let justice and peace flow,” from Amos 5:24 when the prophet Amos cries out “But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!” We are called to join the river of justice and peace, like the river Amos describes. We are called to take up climate and ecological justice, and to speak out with and for communities most impacted by the changing climate. We are called to reverse the injustice suffered by those people worldwide who are the least responsible for our changing environment, people in third world countries or impoverished areas where these changes are most devastating. As God's people we are called to work together on behalf of all Creation, as part of that mighty river of peace and justice.

We hear a lot from this pulpit about social justice. Well, today you are going to hear more. A little different perspective perhaps, but what I will talk about today is the dominant social justice issue of our time. It is the mother lode of social justice, the issue that affects all of the other social justice issues we face. That issue is climate change. Surprised? Probably not! The liturgy today is from the Season of Creation guide for Episcopal Parishes, and our Bishop Russell is one of nineteen bishops in the Episcopal Church who has approved this guide for worship. In lieu of reading from an epistle, one of the options was to use a quote from Walter Rauschenbusch. He lived from 1861 until 1918, and was the voice of the Social Gospel Movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This was the movement of the church back into politics after the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, an effort to move the church away from the idea of dominant individualism at the expense of those on the margins, back to caring for the abused men and women and children living in the slums of filthy cities, working in unsafe oppressive conditions of long hours and little pay; in short back into living out the Gospel message of caring, as Jesus says “for the hungry and thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner.”

Rauschenbush became the major spokesman for the Social Gospel movement when he in 1907 he published *Christianity and the Social Crisis*. He believed that the Gospel calls us to social justice action, that it is political, and that it has more to do with love and service for the community than with individual salvation. In his book *A Theology of the Social Gospel* he says this: “We have a social gospel. We need a systemic theology large enough to match it and vital enough to back it.” Caring for our home Earth was part of the social agenda, even back then over 100 years ago. Listen again to the words we heard a few minutes ago: “Enlarge within us the sense of fellowship with all the living things, our little brothers, to whom thou hast given this earth as their home in common with us. We remember with shame that in the past we have exercised the high dominion of man with ruthless cruelty, so that the voice of the Earth...

has been a groan of travail.” He had a sense over a century ago that we were abusing our home Earth, as indeed we continue to do today.

Let’s look at just a few of the ongoing changes we are witnessing due to the now disrupted and unstable climate. The web of life as we’ve known it is unraveling before our eyes. There has already been mass extinction of species and forced migration of millions of people. Over just the past fifty years 60% of the planet’s mammals, reptiles, amphibians, birds, and fish have been wiped out by human land development and habitat destruction, the highest rate since the last mass extinction. Oceans are becoming acidic and are warming, and living fish are being displaced by huge areas of plastic, one such area the size of Texas sitting on the bottom of the Pacific Ocean. Polar ice is melting, sea levels rising, coral reefs dying, and ecosystems collapsing. We have all experienced the record-breaking and intensifying weather patterns. Just a few weeks ago we reached 106 degrees in Mobile, the highest temperature ever recorded. Floods, droughts, storms, and suffocating heat—our emergency rooms this summer have been overrun with people suffering from heat exposure. I had a friend in Birmingham die from a heat stroke last month. Deforestation—removal of millions of acres of trees—is destroying our once beautiful life sustaining rain forests in South America and elsewhere. Food and water supply systems are being disrupted with increasing starvation worldwide. And perhaps most painful of all the consequences, the futures of our young people are now threatened. What kind of world are we leaving them and their children? The urgency grows. This environmental crisis is indeed **the** crisis of our time.

Caring for the Earth is a moral imperative, moral because our scriptures and church tradition, and our faith in the Creator God tell us so. What exactly does our faith say about this? What does Christianity have to do with ecology, with climate change? God through scripture is clear about the sanctity of creation, about God’s presence within it, and of our calling to be its stewards. From Psalm 19: “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament

shows God's handiwork." From Psalm 24: "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it." From St. Paul: "Ever since the creation of the world God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood through the things God made." The theologians of our church tradition have affirmed this. From Alexander John Scott: "Creation is a transparency through which the light of God can be seen." From Martin Luther: "God writes the Gospel, not in the Bible alone, but also on trees, and the flowers and the clouds and the stars." And what about our calling from God to be the caretakers of what God created? From Genesis 2 we see that we are part of the created order, not separate from it, and our first call by God is to be caretakers of creation.

The Gospel today is about forgiveness. Forgiveness for what? For sin! And what is sin? There have been hundreds of theological books written about sin. The Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms defines sin as "the human condition of separation from God that arises from opposition to God's purposes." And further "It needs forgiveness by God." In my simple way of understanding it, I would define sin as anything that separates us from God. How do we deal with sin in our own lives? We seek forgiveness, and then we repent, that is turn and walk in another direction, that being toward God. Indeed it requires forgiveness, sometimes over and over again, as Jesus says "I tell you not seven times, but seventy-seven times." Our sin of abusing creation, of "walking heavily upon the Earth," needs forgiveness. We must forgive ourselves, and forgive others, and then change our ways. For creation care this means changing how we live—repenting and then changing how we view our home Earth, ourselves as an integral part of it, not separate or in any way "above" it, and act to redeem it—repair the damage we have done to it—to help fulfill God's plan for the redemption of all creation.

The 80th General Convention of the Episcopal Church recognized climate change as "an all-encompassing social and moral emergency that impacts and interconnects every aspect of pastoral concern including health, poverty,

employment, racism, social justice, and family life and that can only be addressed by a Great Work involving every sector of society, including the Church.” We must make peace with our home the Earth and on Earth, and at the same time repent or turn from our lives as usual, and change our attitudes and actions. Something must change. In his encyclical *Laudato si*, Pope Francis says, “everything is connected. Concern for the environment needs to be joined to a sincere love for our fellow human beings, and rejection of every form of self-centeredness, if we truly wish to care for our brothers and sisters and for the natural environment,” and further “We need to think of ourselves more and more as a single family dwelling in a common home. We cannot continue to see ourselves as somehow separate from the rest of creation.” Environmentalist and author Bill McKibben has said: “The single most important thing a person can do in response to climate change is to stop being an individual.” Our activities—the way we live—impact others, our neighbors that Jesus calls us to love. I think much of the cause of the crisis we now face with our environment is because we have not seen or thought about creation as a gift from God and an expression of God; and also because we have not realized how our failure to care for creation impacts the lives of our neighbors today, and has lasting impact upon the lives of others including our children and grandchildren who will follow us. In some ways it seems like this crisis has happened suddenly, doesn’t it? It began in earnest when the Industrial Revolution, which started in 1760, brought forth the Industrial Age of manufacturing. That’s about 260 years ago, which is a millisecond in terms of how long Earth has been here, over four and a half billion years. Yet it has clearly now reached a point beyond which, if things continue as they are now, our home Earth will not be able to sustain life as we know it. So change we must, and quickly. Theologian and environmentalist Gus Seth said this, “I used to think that if we threw enough good science at the environmental problems, we could solve them. I was wrong. The main threats to the

environment are selfishness and greed and pride. And for that we need a spiritual and cultural transformation.”

So what do we do? We become educated and aware. We wake up. We become “woke!” We talk to our friends. We spread the word. We make caring for creation a part of our everyday life. We make it a priority. There are lots of actions we can take, and all the little things we can do will go a long way. We can choose to eat, travel, spend, invest, and live differently, to think not only of immediate interests and gains but of the future benefits of building the Kingdom of God.

Yes, caring for God’s creation is a spiritual and moral imperative. In choosing to live our lives with respect and care for all of life we are choosing the way of love, of justice, and of righteousness, those same things the prophet Amos spoke about three thousand years ago.

Rev. Dr. Bob Donnell

September 17, 2023