**Earth Day**

**Psalm 8**

**Rev. Kelley L. Becker**

*Look up at the stars and not down at your feet.
Try to make sense of what you see,
and wonder about what makes the universe exist.
Be curious.*

These wise words were said by theoretical physicist, Stephen Hawking. For generations, children have been doing exactly what he suggests as they sing, “Twinkle, twinkle little star, how I wonder what you are…” There is something magical and wonder-full about the night sky. I love a walk in the summertime when the moon is full, casting a warm glow over everything. And I love it, equally, when the moon is just a sliver, giving the stars the chance to shine. At the very top of my bucket list is to travel north and get to see the Northern Lights and watch the colors float above my head. I cannot imagine anything more beautiful and more magnificent.

A couple months ago, our Pub Theology group traded our usual evening of libations and life-changing conversation for an evening of stargazing. We met in the church parking lot and, after throwing a sweatshirt over one of our security lights, we ended up with a beautiful view of the night sky. It was still pretty chilly outside that evening, so most of us were bundled up under blankets. Even Shadow was wearing his winter jacket, looking adorable.

Our stargazing field trip was precipitated by our desire to see the “green comet.” In preparation for the viewing, I learned that the comet orbits the sun every 50,000 years. In other words, the last time it could have been visible from Earth was in the stone age, when our evolutionary relatives, the Neanderthals, would have gazed up at the stars. We didn’t catch a glimpse of the “green comet” that evening, but Evan Zorn, astronomer extraordinaire, and his telescope, treated us to a look at stars and planets, and even the space station.

More than once, one of us remarked on how gazing up at the night sky leaves us with a sense of humility and wonder, feeling very small (but in a good way) and very aware that we are just one little part of the vastness of all creation. It is a good feeling to recognize that we are part of something way bigger than ourselves. And the stars and moon pay no attention to politics and all the other things that divide us. They shine for everyone.

If the miracle of creation doesn’t inspire wonder and awe in you, I would suggest you are not really taking the time to stop and look around, pausing for a few moments just to admire it. Every tradition has its own creation story and through the Hebrew Bible, Christianity has two, both found in Genesis. Even as a child, I sensed the creation stories in Genesis weren’t meant to be understood literally. By the time I remember hearing the stories, I had already learned about the Big Bang Theory and evolution in school, so I knew those stories had to be about something other than literally how the world was created.

At some point growing up, I remember hearing adults talking about creationism vs. evolution and what children should be taught in school. I remember hearing about some parents who demanded the biblical stories receive equal time in the classroom wondering why parents would want their kids to learn something that science had disproven. I also wondered why it seemed like people thought science and God couldn’t co-exist. Who is to say a Divine spark didn’t start it all and science took it from there?

In his book*, Thank God for Evolution: How the Marriage of Science and Religion will Transform your Life and our World*, Rev. Michael Dowd writes, “Tell me a creation story more wondrous than that of a living cell forged from the residue of exploding stars. Tell me a story of transformation more magical than that of a fish hauling out onto land and becoming amphibian, or a reptile taking to the air and becoming a bird, or a mammal slipping back into the sea and becoming a whale.” He continues, “Surely this science-based culture of all cultures can find meaning and cause for celebration in its very own cosmic creation story.”*[[1]](#footnote-1)* At times I think calling us a “science-based culture” is giving us too much credit.

This week, in preparation for this sermon, I reflected on the ways in which traditional Christianity has tried to separate itself from science and from creation itself. This separation has impacted how human beings, especially Christians, see their relationship to the natural world and has negatively affected our care for the environment and the other creatures with whom we share this Earth.

My reflections led me to Psalm 8, a psalm written in celebration of God and God’s creative activity that ends up being mostly about human beings. After all, it is all about us!

This is Psalm 8:

O Lord, our Sovereign,
    how majestic is your name in all the earth!

You have set your glory above the heavens.
**2**    Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
    to silence the enemy and the avenger.

**3**When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
    the moon and the stars that you have established;
**4**what are humans that you are mindful of them,
    mortalsthat you care for them?

**5**Yet you have made them a little lower than God
    and crowned them with glory and honor.
**6**You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
    you have put all things under their feet,
**7**all sheep and oxen,
    and also the beasts of the field,
**8**the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
    whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

**9**O Lord, our Sovereign,
    how majestic is your name in all the earth!

The psalmist begins with words of admiration for God’s majesty and authority over life’s oppression, but his praise quickly shifts to God as creator in verse 3, “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established…” It seems the psalmist was a stargazer too, and in his place and time, he wasn’t alone. Some of the other ancient religious traditions looked up at the moons and stars and even worshiped them, and other objects in nature, as their gods. Each god controlled certain aspects of life. When our Israelite faith ancestors looked up at the night sky, though, they were reminded of only one god. The moon and stars, and all of nature, were evidence of their one God and their God’s creativity.

Like them, Christians connect with God in the natural world as well-in the waves of oceans and the first light of sunrises, in the tiniest details of hummingbirds and insects and in the plants and creatures with which we share this earth. In fact, based on what I know of you, I would guess that a lot of us feel most connected to the Holy when we are enjoying nature. Even beyond all of us, a lot of people find connection to God in nature, whether it’s walking along the Pathfinder, gardening (if only we had water), or playing outside with the kiddos.

So, you would think that people who profess their faithfulness to this God, whom they experience through nature, would be the ones leading the charge to protect and preserve it. If you think that, you would be wrong. Many Christians, especially conservative Christians, identify as pro-life, yet working to abolish the death penalty or protecting this planet that sustains all of life are not priorities. You would think churches would be paying for billboards about recycling or conserving water, or caring for endangered animals, instead of billboards that advertise Easter worship times and promise that Jesus saves. But historically that hasn’t been the case. And part of the blame for that rests with the traditional church’s interpretation of one word that appears not only in verse 6 of this psalm, but in the creation story recorded in Genesis 1: dominion.

“Dominion” is the English interpretation of the Hebrew word *mashal*. It is used most often in the Hebrew Bible to describe the rule of a king over the people. Because of that, to understand what it means for human beings to have dominion with regard to creation, we need to understand what God’s expectations of a king were. And, in a surprise to no one, it was not that the king would have and wield absolute and arbitrary dictatorial power. The role of the king in ancient Israel was to make certain the land was a place where people could live in peace and safety, raise their animals and their crops, be treated with justice and equity, and be cared for if they were unable to care for themselves.

So, our role as the ones having dominion over creation ought to mean something like provision for good, peace, compassion, well-being, safety, and plenty for all. But instead, we have acted as if dominion means that all creation is here to serve human beings, that we are free to use and even abuse the earth and its creatures for our benefit. In so many ways, we have approached our biblical purpose, according to our own creation stories, with a complete lack of humility.

We have forgotten that all creatures are first and foremost creatures, ourselves included. All creatures share the same Earth; and all participate in an interrelated and interdependent community. Richard Bauckman, author of *The Bible and Ecology*, writes, “Cosmic humility is a much-needed ecological virtue … We need the humility “to walk more lightly upon the Earth, with more regard for the life around us…We need the humility to know ourselves as creatures within creation, not gods over creation, the humility of knowing that only God is God.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Human beings are only one kind of creature on earth, and we have been given a lot of responsibility that mostly we shirk.

Interestingly, the Hebrew word “*mashal*” has another meaning. It also means “proverb” or “wise saying.” So, we might translate verse 6 of Psalm 8, as “you have made us wise over the works of your hands.” Wisdom IS power; but wise power does not exploit, does not “use up and throw away.” Rather, wise power is mindful of and cares for, in the same way Psalm 8:4 describes God as being mindful of and caring for human beings. I mean, if God can be mindful of us, surely, we can be mindful of other creatures and the environment in which we all live.

How did we end up in this place? Why aren’t Christians leading the charge to heal this planet? There is more to it than a misunderstanding about one Hebrew word. First, from a historical perspective, the early church was very anxious about practices and beliefs that could be confused with polytheistic traditions. For example, as I mentioned before, some other traditions understood things in the natural world as their gods. The moon was a god. The sun and other stars were other gods. Trying to steer clear of polytheism, Christianity emptied the biosphere of any sense of the Holy’s presence in natural things. Nature was not to be worshiped; it was to be dominated. Historian and UCLA professor, Lynn White, put a finer point on that when he wrote that the ecological crisis—global warming, irreversible ozone depletion, massive deforestation, higher than acceptable methane gas concentrations, is fundamentally a spiritual crisis, even saying outright, “Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Traditional Christianity was afraid to even consider that underneath an ordinary tree or sitting on the limb of a tree can be a sacred place where we experience a connection to the Holy. That does not make the tree itself divine, though I think there is something divine about everything in the natural world...even mice. To have a sense of a tree’s sacredness is not tree worship… but is rather the acknowledgement of the awesome, and the overriding and the overwhelming,

and the wonder-full, what some of us call God.

English writer, D.H. Lawrence, wrote,

*The sense of wonder, that is our sixth sense.
And it is the natural religious sense.*

In other words, nature is part of our faith, part of who we were created to be, not something separate at our disposal, waiting for us to conquer it.

There are some other reasons, aside from our history, that Christians have chosen not to make healing the planet and its creatures a priority. One of them has to do with politics. Instead of being an “all of us” problem, environmental challenges have become very partisan. On the Christianity Today website, Christian blogger, Scot McKnight put it this way, “…somehow environmental advocacy has been pigeonholed into a particular political profile and has become guilty by association.”[[4]](#footnote-4) No political party affiliation should keep any of us away from making creation care a priority. In fact, Christians ought to be insisting healing the environment be a meaningful part of any party platform. Caring for creation is literally what our sacred scripture tells us is our purpose.

Another reason Christians, especially western Christians, fail to care for the environment stems from privilege. In most cases, we don’t come face to face with the damage already done, so out of sight out of mind. We don’t see the 14 million tons of plastic that end up in the ocean every year. We don’t see the big mud pit in Haiti that used to be filled with trees. But this spring, we here in NE OK have gotten a glimpse of what people elsewhere experience daily with our smoke-filled air and water shortage. But by and large, we are sheltered from the impacts of the way human beings have treated the planet. Part of having compassion for our neighbors is caring about the environments in which they live. The deforestation of Kenya ought to matter to us. The polluted rivers in India ought to matter. The ravaging of Indigenous land right here in North America ought to matter.

Unfortunately, the overriding Christian position has far too often been “you can’t take it with you,” “this world is not our home,” and “we must care more about souls than seas.” In many ways, the church, particularly the evangelical wing of the church, has, maybe without even realizing it, “dismissed the issue of environmental stewardship as peripheral (or even alien) to the theological commitments of the Bible.”[[5]](#footnote-5) This is stunning because even the people who start to read the Bible and never finish it, at least read the creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2. It isn’t until Leviticus that people usually decide reading the Bible isn’t something they want to do. I would venture to say, that aside from the Christmas and Easter stories, the creation stories may be the most read part of the Bible, and yet so many miss the point made at the very beginning.

The point is not that the world was created in 6 days. The point, dear ones, is that we were created to care for the Earth and one another and for all with whom we share this Earth. And if we miss this, then we do not truly understand what the resurrection we celebrated last week is about. This Earth has had so much “help” from human beings in getting to where we are, we can no longer expect it to repair itself. If our faith is to meaning anything, if it is to really impact our living, caring for creation must be where we start. We must be about the work of healing this planet so that new life can continue to spring forth, so the beauty that allows us to connect to the Holy is still here for generations.

So, Recycle

Refuse plastic water bottles, carry your own water bottle or mug

Refuse plastic straws, opt for your own stainless steel one or go without

Grow clover in your lawn instead of grass

Plant flowers that bees like

Turn off lights

Buy local

Refuse plastic grocery bags, carry reusable

And keep reminding your neighbors and your elected representatives that the faith they claim and the faith they use to get votes ought to also compel them to take care of the Earth. We should all be tree huggers.

What we do, even the little things, matters. This is truly a wonder-full world. Let us recommit to fulfilling our purpose by caring for it. Amen.

1. Dowd, M. *Thank God for Evolution: How the Marriage of Science and Religion will Transform your Life and our World*. New York. Plume, 2009, 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bauckham, Richard. *The Bible and Ecology,* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. White, Lynn, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis, “Science 155.3767 (1967). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://www.christianitytoday.com/scot-mcknight/2020/june/why-dont-evangelicals-care-about-environment.html [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. https://www.christianitytoday.com/scot-mcknight/2020/june/why-dont-evangelicals-care-about-environment.html [↑](#footnote-ref-5)