

“AWESOME WONDER”
Karen F. Bunnell
Elkton United Methodist Church
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Earth Day

Psalm 8

Matthew 25:31-46

One of the things I like best about preaching is that it heightens my awareness of things. What do I mean by that? Well, let me tell you by means of a story.

Years ago I was on a retreat with a group of people from my church, and we were asked to walk around the grounds of Drayton Manor, which was a lovely old retreat center our conference used to own on the banks of Still Pond near Chestertown. The retreat leaders asked us to look for things that showed us God’s love.

So I walked around like everybody else, and then after the designated time period, we all gathered back under a great old tree with its spreading branches and lovely shade, to share our thoughts together. Someone said they saw God’s love and power in the water, others in the beautiful hills there, someone else in the gorgeous trees. I think I said something profound like the blue skies.

And then my pastor started talking and he said that he had been walking along the shoreline - so I knew his answer was going to be the water - but no, he continued . . .

. . . and he saw some leaves floating on the water - so I knew his answer was going to be the leaves or the trees or something like that - but no, he continued . . .

. . . and the leaves were filled with beautiful colors - so, I knew his answer was going to be the season of fall - but no, he finally said - “I looked at those beautiful leaves floating on the water, and I thought about God giving us so many wonderful seasons of life, and how He is with us through all of those seasons, and how He carries us like that water carries those leaves.” Kinda made my “I like the sky” comment sound lame!

I remember clearly thinking that day that I wish I thought as deeply as Ron did. Well, you know what? I understand now after preaching for 25 years how he did that. Preaching heightens your awareness of things.

That proved true for me these past few weeks. I’ve known for a while that I

would be preaching today on creation, since it's Earth Day, so with that on my radar screen, and my thoughts already swirling about what I might say, I noticed a whole lot more around me these past few weeks.

Like on Easter Sunday morning, at the wonderful sunrise service - the chilly mist coming up off of the pond as lightness came upon the earth, and the geese and ducks floating gently on the water, and the way the sunlight lit up the house that stands next to the pond, and the way you could see your breath in the chill of the morning.

Later that same day, as Mom and I drove down to the Outer Banks to join the rest of the family, I saw miles and miles of farmland and the beautiful bay as we crossed the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel. And then for a week I marveled at the beauty of the ocean, and the gorgeous sunrises and sunsets.

All of those experiences were vivid reminders to me of the glorious creation God has given us. The very first words in the Word, the Holy Bible, are about just that - God creating this wonderful world and all that is in it. Over and over again, as day goes into day, God creates, and as He does, He says, "It is good."

And so it is. It is very good. Jesus knew that as well, for we see Him throughout the gospels, spending time outdoors, in nature, in the midst of God's great creation. He walked miles and miles and miles in his lifetime, taught crowds on vast hillsides, and beautiful bodies of water. He used parts of creation as the stories around which his parables were centered - a grain of mustard seed, the lilies of the field, sparrows, soil.

In so many ways, Jesus lifted up the goodness of creation, and showed us with his life and behavior how to care for it, as God charged us to do in the very beginning. Today, on Earth Day, the question we are invited to ask ourselves is, "How are we doing with that? How are we caring for this wonderful creation God has entrusted to us? How are we doing as a society, as a church, as individuals?"

Now, before you get all nervous and think I'm going to start preaching about Global Warming, relax, I'm not. We could talk about that for a month of Sundays and maybe not agree about it. I am well aware that when you start to talk about how we treat the earth, things get sticky.

I don't know if I ever told you about the time that I was preaching a sermon at Aldersgate, the last church I served, and it was on Earth Day, and I was telling them about how a small group in the church had compelled the whole church to change from using styrofoam cups at coffee hour to using paper cups, as a way of being better stewards of God's creation. Nice story, huh?

Well, not so fast. Within two days, I began to get mail about my sermon, and it wasn't love mail. It was from people complaining about that sermon illustration, and how styrofoam wasn't dangerous, and wasting paper was also using precious resources. Turns out they worked for companies that were big into plastic and styrofoam production - and they sent me articles from chemical publications to prove their point! And all I wanted to do was tell a nice story!

Well, it just proves my point. Talking about caring for creation can be dicey at times, because too often it becomes political. But I want to say to you today that caring for creation is not a political issue for us - no, it is a theological issue. It's about God, and God's gift to us of this beautiful planet and its wonderful resources, and how we do what God asked us to do - which is to care for it. It is a faith issue.

That's why the Stewardship Committee is presenting the Earth Day fair today - to invite us to seriously look at what we are doing to help protect this earth. Over the years, with the help and guidance of that committee, our church has done a number of things to improve our care of creation. You see recycling bins at three different doors where you are invited to put bulletins and other papers if you're not going to save them. Every room, or almost every room now, has two trash bins - one for recyclables and one for other trash. We had several "Give Up Gas for God" Sundays where we were invited to carpool with each other or walk to church. We had several walking competitions, to encourage all of us to walk more, for our own health and for the health of the earth. We use fair trade coffee, which focuses on more environmentally friendly ways of growing coffee beans. Some of our committees use agendas that have been printed on used paper.

Those are just the things I know about - I'm sure there are others. So we're making strides, but of course, we could do more, and that is the constant challenge. The reality is that we, humanity as a whole, have not taken care of creation the way we should have. We've been more focused on what makes life easy for us, and consuming as much as possible, than focusing on what is sustainable and best for the creation and the generations yet to come.

If you're like me, you've spent some time wrestling with these issues. Everytime I pick up a plastic water bottle, I think about the cost, not just monetary, but in terms of trash, and what it took to produce that bottle. And everytime I think about buying a bigger car, or an SUV, just because I think they're cool, I wrestle with the fuel that it would use, and whether or not I should do it. And everytime I open up my mailbox and find one, two, three or more catalogs filled with stuff I generally don't need, by the way, I know I should call and get them cancelled, but I never quite get around to doing it.

There is so much more all of us could be doing to be better stewards of the earth, so I hope that today will serve as encouragement for us to take some real steps toward doing something to care for creation better than we have been.

I know some of you here do it very well already. I know of one person who catches rain water to water her inside plants. And I know of a family who has a compost pile from their kitchen waste that they use to fertilize their garden. Someone else has a philosophy of simplicity, not having tons of things in the house that he doesn't need. Others have gone to using only cold water for their laundry, and only recyclable bags to carry their groceries home. Many have changed the kind of light bulbs we use in our homes, and lots have turned down their thermostats and added blankets and sweaters to keep them warm. And I know a lot of you go to farmers markets and produce stands to buy locally, which helps in so many ways.

So we're doing some good things already, but the challenge is to do more. I know the problem is big. I could spend the rest of the sermon telling you facts and figures about how big the problem is, but you already know it. We are filling our world with trash, we're using up our resources, we're (here in the US) using more than our share of the earth's resources, while others in the world starve for them - like our overuse of water, while people in Africa are literally dying for lack of clean water.

Something's got to change. We've got to change. We've got to take seriously God's command for us to care of this incredible gift He has entrusted to us. And even though the challenge is tough, and the problems are huge, we can make a difference. The great anthropologist Margaret Mead once said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." (On-line, Earth Day Quotes for Kids)

What each of us does in little ways matters in the end. Each little step moves us toward big steps. I read a story once about a young boy and his grandfather who spent a lot of time doing things together. The grandfather took advantage of those times to teach his grandson how to do things like hunt, fish, and make things, and to do it all in a sacred way. He was trying to teach him how to live in this world with respect and reverence for creation.

One day the grandfather said to his grandson, "We will change the course of a mighty river." His grandson looked at him with a puzzled expression. He knew his grandfather could do great things, but change the course of a mighty river?

Well, they approached the river, and when they did, the grandfather "reached down into the water and picked out a rock about the size of a melon. The boy watched as the hole that the rock had left began to fill with water, and in that moment he understood that, in some small way, his grandfather had indeed changed the course of a mighty river. The old man looked at his grandson with a twinkle in his eye and said, "This is the way the great river is changed. One rock at

a time.” (On-line, “Earth Day: As Big as Christmas and Easter,” Rev. Dr. Steven H. Koski)

I want to suggest to you that that is the way our earth will be saved, one rock at a time, if you will . . . one act of caring at a time. So don't be overwhelmed by the problem, just leave her committed to moving one rock at a time. Do your part. Be aware of the glory of God's creation all around you, and determine to do just one or two new things this week to care for it better than you have been.

If you need ideas, let me know. As I researched this sermon, I came upon hundreds of them - easy ones, like turning off the water as you brush your teeth, or taking three minute showers, or consolidating your trips in the car, or walking instead of driving, or using cloth grocery bags instead of plastic ones. You get the idea, some of them are easy.

Others, not so much, and maybe, you're in a place where you want to push yourself to try harder.

Whichever you choose, will you start today? Will you remember God's words, about this world, “it is good,” and start today to live like you really believe it? As we sing the words of our last hymn today, “O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder consider all the world thy hands have made, I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder, thy power throughout the universe displayed,” let your soul sing “How great thou art,” and let your prayer be that you will do all you can to care for this world God's hands have made. May it be so.

Amen