

Earth Sunday: Reflections

April 24, 2022 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Ariel Ackerman, Claire Hunt, Laurie Burt

Texts: Job 12: 7-10

John 20: 19-31

Job 12:7-10

Our first reading is from the Book of Job. Chapter 12, verses 7-10.

Ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds of the air, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and she will teach you, or let the fish of the sea inform you. Which of these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In God's hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all humankind.

John 20: 19-31

Our second reading is from the Gospel of John, chapter 20, verses 19-31.

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked in fear, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again, Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As God has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Reflection by Ariel Ackermann

One of my favorite hymns is "I Wonder as I Wander." The mystical hymn we often sing in epiphany. But when I first heard it as a kid, I thought the two 'wonders' were the same word. While it changes the meaning, it also works and takes on its own meaning about the connection of 'to wonder' as a synonym for "to ask," and 'wonder' as a synonym for 'the state of awe.'

So, when I first read this passage from Job, I was struck by the challenge to 'ask' non-human creatures about the hand of God. I wonder, what would we hear if we asked a monarch butterfly how it knew to fly to the oyamel fir forests of Mexico, when it has never made that journey before, nor its parents or grandparents, but rather its great-grandparent who made the journey the previous year.

I wonder, what would we learn about the hand of God from the common octopus, who despite its short life cycle and often solitary existence, also is curious, resourceful, and most surprisingly, emotionally intelligent.

Even more fascinating, I wonder what we would learn if we could ask the “mother trees” of the forest – the term that author and forester Suzanne Simard assigns to those trees she describes as “the majestic hubs at the center of forest communication, protection, and sentience” – if we could ask them to tell us their, and God’s secrets.

As I stated at the beginning, the reason I find this verse from Job so transformative is that it challenges our perspective as tiny humans with an inflated sense of importance. I suspect that, once we start asking questions, we’ll not only realize our arrogance, but if we let the answers -or the lack of answers -truly humble us, we’ll gain a commitment to coordinate our efforts with the other creatures of the earth, and maybe ask how they can help us mitigate the effects of a deteriorating climate.

For those of us who aren’t scientists or don’t have the tools at our disposal to try to answer our questions, what is the value of this state of wondering? After all, in our Godly Play curriculum used at First Church, we start questions with a simple prefix of ‘I wonder,’ and my understanding of this idea is that it helps us to open our minds and expand our perspectives, to decouple our understanding of the world from our individual experience and make room for a multiplicity of understandings. Wondering aloud, and being in a state of wonder or awe both allow us to make space for different perspectives and help us realize our human fallibility, our human tendency toward making assumptions, our western tendency toward behaviors defined as integral to white supremacy culture such as: either/or thinking, worship of the written word, only one right way, fear of open conflict, individualism, and the right to comfort, just to name a few. Put simply, asking and wondering is our best bet to decouple ourselves from society’s pressures & instead practice living according to Jesus’s example of revolutionary creativity.

Here is our challenge: the next time you carve out some time to watch your bird feeder, dig in your raised garden beds, to take a walk in the woods, I invite you to take an ‘I wonder’ mindset with you.

Reflection by Claire Hunt

As many of you know, I grew up in the church where Dan Smith was prior to coming to First Church. After leaving that community, I tried to find a church that worked best for me. However, week after week, I found myself more drawn to the woods, to the mountains, to my personal relationships, to find God among these wonders as opposed to within a church community that didn't quite fit. In the early days of the pandemic, seeking human community, I checked out where Dan might be and found myself drawn into the racial and social justice work that First Church had on its website. I felt that not only should I enjoy my walks outside, but I can connect with other people who care about similar things to what I care about! Before coming to First Church, the entirety of my adult churchgoing had been attending my own church with the trees.

Working with Carlyle these past two years in Call to Return, I have learned that my work with racial justice and justice for the Earth connected much more to my return to Christianity, my return to the church, than I could have thought. For those of you who are unfamiliar, the Call to Return sessions ran for 6-8 weeks at a time over the past two years, and they have been about gaining understanding into our own relationship with white supremacy, with racial injustice, and how this can be held within our relationship to God and spirituality. The most recent third part had been about our connection to the Earth and how spiritual ecology has played into inequities, and how we can use the same principles of returning to God to connect with, give back to, and learn from the planet. Carlyle had asked us to think of how we were able to orient back to God through this work. Given that my initial pull back to being in a physical church was solidified due to the justice work being done, I believed I was in the right place. It has been a journey of growth in understanding how we are all connected, and how we can honor that fact more than we are right now.

While I am so happy that I am here at First Church, I still sit most close to God when I am among the trees. One of my favorite things to do on hikes is to look up at the ways the branches of trees make designs against the sky. It is in that quiet peace that I know there is more connectedness out there than I could ever understand. To me, being out in the woods is about that quiet peace, that connection to being small in the best of ways. Being in church means being connected to other people. Both of these ways lead me to connect to God on Earth.

Okay story time – Robb and I were looking for some trees to plant in our yard last weekend, and we were initially just doing some general research on what the cost of certain ages of trees might be. Robb doesn't know that I am telling this story. We got to a tree farm up in Boxford (so cool, by the way!), and we were exploring for a bit. One of the workers there told us that a certain tree had been hit by a customer's car and the pot had broken. He was mostly telling us this story to share about how he had drilled a makeshift pot, but I was completely sold. That day, I convinced Robb that we needed to buy this 20-foot, resilient tree. We named him Lazarus. I had written this out earlier in the week, and unfortunately, we learned yesterday that Lazarus can't come home with us because of some issues with his roots, but we are hoping that it is possible that he can take some time to heal and come home with us next year. We are looking forward to learning from him as well as the other trees we will bring into our yard and into our family. And we are holding our own special connected ceremony, our wedding, in the blue green hills of Vermont. It all feels very sacred to us.

Instead of thinking we have all the answers or that relationship to God is human to divine alone, it is my belief that we need to stop and listen to how connected we all are, and how much more we are as one. There is that divine connection between two people, within a group of people, between a person and God, and between a person and every living piece of Earth. We make life giving foods and life-saving medicines out of plants. Even in the Bible's creation story, the world was created long before humans. We would not be where we are today without the Earth, without its greater spiritual connection, and we must find a way to honor that by treating the Earth with the kindness and grace that we would a good friend.

Reflection by Laurie Burt

Greetings, I am Laurie Burt, a recovering environmental lawyer and believer in Nature and its power to touch our mind, body and spirit to feel connected to and care and respect the Earth and all its creations. I am also a child of the 1960's (dating myself) and participated in the first EARTH DAY on April 22, 1970, at college in Madison, WI. Senator Gaylord Nelson was my senator and hero in a state that was already doing much to change its policies and views toward man's role in the degradation of our air, water (rivers and oceans) as well as public health and the survival of many animal, bird, and fish species.

Earth Day was created to appreciate the environment and support our laws to protect it. Over 12 million people showed up at “teach-ins” and rallies that day around the US, reflecting a collective awareness and outrage at the natural world on fire. This was the culmination of mounting disasters- the Santa Barbara, CA oil spill (Jan 1969) when millions of gallons of crude oil fouled beaches killing seals, otters, birds as all Americans watched in real time on TV; the Cuyahoga River (June 1969) literally on fire in Cleveland from years of chronic pollution; the toxic pesticide DDT’s destroying our national American Eagle and Osprey and with such pervasiveness in the environment that it was showing up in mother’s milk (front page of the NYT).

Earth Day was a pivot point in our care for the planet. Times were different then, when Congress still acted swiftly across party lines to address matters of common national concern & urgency. Then President Richard Nixon (R) proposed creation of the EPA that same month, April 1970, a law was passed in July and implemented by that December. Between 1970 and 1974, Congress passed the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, Endangered Species Act, National Environmental Policy Act, Oil Pollution Act and Safe Drinking Water Act (and others), unanimously or by wide bipartisan margins. The laws were amended often to be made stronger, more efficient and durable. The Superfund Law was passed in 1980 to address polluted industrial sites like Love Canal, and many sites in MA and across the country. The Clean Air Act was strengthened further under Geo. H. W. Bush in 1990 – and then, that bipartisan, strong environmental leadership sort of stopped, not globally but in the US. The collective will to support environmental protection, to create a healthy environment and cleaner sustainable economy became partisan or stalled by special interest and other competing priorities. While states have continued to be the laboratories of democracy, passing brave and innovative laws to address Climate Change and accelerate a clean energy future, virtually no major federal environmental law has been passed since 1990.¹

¹ Author’s note: In truth, several environmental laws have been enacted since 1990, but none at the scale of the groundbreaking laws in the first 20 years since Earth Day and certainly none to address Climate Change on a wholesale level. Post 1990 laws included several energy independence/security efforts putatively to support Energy Efficiency and Renewables but balanced against the reliability, access and cost of dominant fossil fuel energy sources. Several laws were passed with the goal of improving risk assessment and public health impacts from chemicals, especially in food and for children; many feel that loopholes and exemptions plague the efficacy of these rules today.

What happened? What is happening? What about Climate Change? What about Environmental Justice? What about extreme weather, drought and floods, climate refugees? The Earth is still crying. There is still so much to do.

I submit that our climate crisis is not just a physical & political one—it is also a spiritual crisis. Intertwined with Earth Day is the question – what is the role of humankind? What is our relationship to and responsibility toward the EARTH and its creatures, how have we forgotten the **sacred** nature of Creation?

This has been a major tension in theological and philosophical thought for centuries, especially the last. The Western world largely reads the Bible (and other religious text) as a human-centric, separate from and superior to nature. The fancy word is **Anthropocentric** – meaning humankind is the “central most important element of existence.” It is built on the notion of human superiority, interpreting the poetry of Genesis chapter one, for example, in which humans are created in the “image of God,” and instructed to “subdue the Earth” and have “dominion over” all living creatures. This patriarchal worldview based on human superiority and the inferiority of other creatures also has a dark history of human oppression (slavery, colonialism, harsh treatment of women, Indigenous and people of color, immigrants). The consequences of this view cannot be lost here – it is alive and being acted out in our world today.

Other ethicists, such as theologian **Ellen Davis** and poet, farmer, activist **Wendell Berry** and other philosophers/environmental thought leaders, offer alternative readings of this Hebrew text of Genesis that is more **biocentric**- in essence, regarding humans as one species among many, not the superior and only one for whom all resources and animals were created to exploit & enjoy. They posit that the natural environment has intrinsic value independent of its usefulness (exploitation) by humans.

Berry and David lament that we’ve lost what they call “*the Art of Being Creatures.*” That we’ve lost the sense of the **sacred**, the sacredness of the Earth that God created not for just for us but for all living things. To Indigenous peoples, sacred is found in place, the Earth, something spiritually alive and culturally essential, deserving of respect with our whole being. To be in the presence of Nature, to go into the Wilderness (indeed, as Jesus and other prophets did) is to have that overwhelming sense of smallness, humility, fear, joy, connectedness with something bigger than yourself and of which you are a part, to feel truly present in and a part of Nature, to feel God’s (or the Great Spirit’s) hand and

presence in this amazing natural order.

As Wendell Berry notes “we cannot save what we do not love, and we can neither love nor save what we don’t experience as sacred.” There is still a chance. We /you and I can find and experience the sacredness of the Earth again. Berry asks – in his poem “Earth’s Desire” – what does the Earth really want, what does the Earth want when it calls us back home to place, to be one among all things. If we listen, the Earth has so much to teach us – it is there to be given freely, to be shared.

The first reading of Job (12:7-10) today picks up on this oneness with Nature, what we can learn from Nature, the animals, the fish and the Earth if we listen. It resonates with me as does the Creation Story of the Skywoman from our native people in the Great Lakes and rivers of the Northeast. It is a story I heard many times as that is where my family is from in Northern NY, the land of the Iroquois or Turtle Island (5 nations of Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca) near the St. Lawrence River. Let me briefly recap this beautiful creation tale – with apologies in advance if I miss details or misspeak. I ask you to take a breath, relax and listen to a different relationship of humankind to the Earth and the Great Spirit.

Skywoman fell through a hole in the other Skyworld - down, down toward the cold dark sea in this World, and was caught on the wings of a flock of birds who gently set her down on the back of the big Turtle. All the creatures and animals greeted her warmly, but quickly realized that she did not know how to swim in the oceans and needed firmer ground than the turtle’s back to live. They had heard of mud at the bottom of the sea, so one by one the otter, beaver, loons and swan tried to dive deep to fetch mud. None could reach the bottom or find the mud. Finally, the small muskrat took a try – he was not a strong diver but had a big heart. He dove and was gone for a long time, the animals all worried, and finally he floated to the surface, limp and drowned but with his fist firmly gripping some mud. The Turtle instructed others to quickly place the mud on his back, and the Skywoman danced with joy on the mud spreading it out and the land grew, and the earth was born.

The Skywoman had not come to Turtle Island empty handed; she brought seeds of fruit, plants, wild grasses and flowers which she sowed as she danced, and these plants grew and soon all the animals had plenty to eat. The Skywoman was also pregnant and so gave birth to the first Earth humans. As botanist and native Robin Wall Kimmerer notes in her epic book “Braiding Sweetgrass”, the Skywoman was the

first immigrant, Turtle Island was her Plymouth Rock, her Ellis Island, she came to a land where much was already created and known, where the animals knew how to care for each other, the plants already knew how to make food and medicine and gratefully shared their gifts; and through her actions of *reciprocity* this original immigrant became Indigenous to place (respecting and caring for the place she landed and all its inhabitants and acting like she intended to stay). And so, the Original Instructions of the Great Spirit to humans were those of humility, reciprocity, responsibility, to care, love and live in balance with all living things, to know that all creatures and the Earth are teachers, that humans are the “younger brothers and sisters of Creation” and that “we need to learn to listen.”

This story captures the sacredness of the Earth, of Creation – can we love it, care for it, save it and ourselves? What can we learn? Can we act, take each step, as if we intended to stay here?

One last tradition to share from the circle of stories from Indigenous Wisdom – that of Sweetgrass, as told so beautifully by Ms. Kremmerer. Sweetgrass is believed to be the hair of Mother Earth, growing in the interstitial zones of water and land, on the marginalized edge or the thriving ecosystem that connects the two – traditionally, braiding sweetgrass is said to show loving care for Earth’s wellbeing, and then it is given away as a sign of kindness, gratitude and hope (3 strands), telling a circle story of both history and prophecy, of the path behind and the path of the future.

I share with you this braided Sweetgrass and invite you to love and trust the sacredness of the Earth.

Amen.