

“The Theater of God’s Glory” (Earth Day) a sermon by The Rev. Keenan Kelsey
Noe Valley Ministry Presbyterian Church April 26, 2009

TEXT: Psalm 104

And God created the earth. And God saw all that God had made, and it was good. It was very, very good.

Our theme today is pretty simple, pretty straightforward: We live in a beautiful remarkable world; one that the great reformer John Calvin insisted is the *"theater of God's glory."* We live in a world that reflects God’s goodness and God’s miraculously awesome cleverness; we live in a world that is under God’s care and which lives in the ever new experience of resurrection.

The heavens are telling the glory of God, proclaims Psalm 19. *O God you are clothed with splendor and majesty, you wrap yourself in light, as a garment,* says today’s Psalm. Psalm 104 creates word pictures that remind us what the Celts have called "thin places," places where God's spirit breaks through. It holds no plea for help, no request for provision, no cry for vindication: simply pure and unclouded praise –

I invite you to consider for a moment...when have your senses been awakened to the mystery, the beauty and the miracles of life that engulf us...when have you responded with a sound of joy that pours from the throat... ah"...as a sound you cannot hold back... Think about it a moment. When has Creation spoken to you?

The first thing that comes to my mind is an experience from 15 years ago. I had driven my daughter to a boarding school in Oregon. Once we got there, however, she did not want to stay. Her resistance grew to an agony of perceived betrayal as she realized she was staying anyway. I had to drive away with her screams and sobs ringing in my ears and wrecking my own body.

It was hard. I felt quite alone. I began second-guessing my decision. It was late afternoon; it began to rain, and darkness closed in, both inside and out. But then the Creator stepped in. As I drove through the storm, in the clearings across the fields, against the mountains, I saw a rainbow. Then I saw another, then another. There were three different rainbows rising at slight angles and crisscrossing like bowing tree trunks. Then, through the clouds, above it all, I discovered one huge overriding arch, a perfect bow that spanned the heavens for many miles. My breath caught, and I cried aloud at the beauty, the gift.

As I drove on, rainbows faded into a dense, brilliant sunset and then against that fading light, a distant lightening storm with electric bolts became fireworks for me. Later that night, a perfect moon hung before me and led me home. I was overwhelmed. I experienced the magnitude of God's glory, God's presence and promise, with resounding force. "I love you God!" I shouted over and over, calling to the universe. Out of lament, I found myself in a hymn of praise and I experienced resurrection. This was qualitatively

different than saying "Thank you, God." It was joining with Creation, laughing with God. I realized that as deeply as I might be mired in dismal distress, Creation can put it back into perspective. As God does "her thing" for me, my appreciation is aroused. With acknowledgment, it swells to astronomic proportions. I was profoundly affected.

The mystery and awe of Creation walk hand-in-hand with the mystery and awe of God in human affairs. "Spirituality is the depth of soul that changes our lives and focuses our efforts and leads us to see the world differently than we ever did before" says writer Joan Chittister. Experiences with creation lead us to such union.

I had another reminder of this yesterday, less dramatic, but no less redeeming. Many of you know that a proposed amendment to our constitution has been making its way through the Presbyteries. This amendment would open the door for legitimate gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender ordination.

Last Tuesday I spoke at our Presbytery, on behalf of this amendment. The speaker before me shocked us all by launching into a horrifying and ugly, inappropriate description of his wife's coming-out and own his revulsion and struggle. These are both PC(USA) ministers, once co-pastors together, and he was unrelenting.

I had to follow him at the podium, but even as I began my remarks, I felt that proverbial elephant in the room. Should I have responded to the previous speaker? What would I or could I have said? "Because you, sir, are struggling with a family breakup and your own moral reaction does not make your ex wife any less of a called and blessed servant of God..." I don't know what I could have done, but I had the floor – and all week I have agonized about my part in the proceedings. The amendment lost in this Presbytery. Could I have done something differently?

This was not a helpful place to be. Forgetting the part in the serenity prayer about accepting the things I cannot change, I became separated from God, numb to any sense of the order of things, heedless of my trust in the bigger picture, unable to gain perspective, and lost to my quite genuine faith in God's ultimate goodness.

Finally, I went out on my deck. I took a deep whiff of a newly opened rose, and I examined the promising buds of others. I stopped to breathe what is still mercifully clean and pure air. I sat in the seductive sunshine and welcomed the friendly breeze. I put my feet into the dirt of the sloping grade of my yard and picked up some of the items on our table today.

Resurrection happened as I let go of the anguish and began to accept the truth: I did what I could, as best I could, leaning into the Holy Spirit and trusting in God to handle to outcomes... Not so dramatic as my trip home from Oregon, but equally healing, equally reassuring, equally restorative as I reclaimed my place as God's beloved.

In the embrace of God's good Earth, I remembered that Rev. Deborah Block is fond of reminding us of the ringing affirmation from women's suffrage leader Susan B. Anthony: "Failure is impossible!"

I remembered that *it's all about the witness* -- whether or not we prevail, the conversations happening around the PC(USA) are an opportunity to build relationships, to testify to our faith, to increase mutual understanding. More Presbyteries voted for the amendment than ever before, and margins were significantly closer than four years ago. I went back in the house and found on my email a welcome affirmation from former PCUSA Moderator Freda Gardner. Her group letter said: "Hang in there. Amazing things have already happened...truly amazing. The work that people have done in various presbyteries has born rich fruit which will continue to shape the way Presbyterians deal with other difficult problems in the future. We have seen a new church, a new way to hear one another, a new way to hear what the Spirit is saying to us, even when we are hurting or angry or weary.... The Gospel is inevitable."

Wendell Berry wrote

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
and I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

On this third Sunday of Easter, we live in a world in need of resurrection. Our ecosystems are devastated, water supplies are diverted and defiled, energy demands sap our renewable resources, air quality is compromised and ozone is destroyed. In a world further overlaid with wars and disease and financial crisis, we have never been more in need of resurrection. The earth is full of resurrection – renewals and revivals accomplished within nature and renewals and revivals accomplished within our own spirits. God's promises are solid.

Celebrate the Earth this day. Sing praises of joy and reverence and gratitude to our Creator for the gift. Reclaim God's word to us about our entwining, weaving, interdependence; interconnectedness with all that is. Remember that "ah" we talked about earlier, that sound you could not hold back in the face of the miracles of life-- it is in that "ah" that the depth of our spirit comes forth and we are "awake" -- for in that "ah" is a feeling of total unity with the earth and the cosmos. A complete union between you....and that. A complete union between you and God--

– and in the grand scheme of things, at least for now, that is enough. May it be so.