

“Make Every Day Earth Day” a sermon by the Rev. Keenan Colton Kelsey
Noe Valley Ministry, a progressive Presbyterian church April 25, 2010

TEXT: Psalm 8

O GOD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.
Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.
When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor.
You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,
all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas. O GOD, our God,
How majestic is your name in all the earth!

WHAT IS IT ABOUT HUMAN BEINGS that permits us to pursue activities that threaten our very survival? – What is it that is so important to us that we are apparently willing to destroy the planet and ultimately ourselves to boot – even though, increasingly, we know the consequences? What does this tell us about our society and our own values? Can our faith inform these values?

I hope so. Today we celebrate Earth Day, the day set aside for a special reverence for the Earth. Yes, that was the idea, even from the start: reverence; paying attention, in amazement, to God's handiwork; realizing how big, how awesome, God is, how the earth reflects that unimaginable mystery and magnificent mastery which yields a resilient, intricately interwoven, balanced, renewable Creation; and how we are only a part, a very special part, but only a part of the whole equation.

*O Lord, how manifold are your works
In wisdom you have made them all
The earth is full of your creatures.*

And we humans, we are there, a little lower than angels but charged with the care of Creation. How are we doing?

Many of you know that I was a part of that scruffy idealistic group who worked on the first Earth Day in Washington DC. We did not use words like God or creation or even awe or reverence, but that was the feeling, the reality, that informed our fears and passions. We followed the lead of Senator Gaylord Nelson who selected April 22, 1970 as a nationwide environmental teach-in, a series of events based on a decentralized, grassroots effort, in which each community shaped their action around local concerns. Overcome by the devastation after the horrific oil spill off Santa Barbara in 1969, and outraged by Washington's political inertia, the Senator declared "I am convinced that all we need to do to bring an overwhelming insistence of the new generation that we stem the tide of environmental disaster is to present the facts clearly and dramatically."

I joined Denis Hayes, a Harvard grad student, who traveled to Washington to get involved. Nelson eventually asked Hayes to drop out of Harvard, assemble a staff, and direct the effort to organize the whole United States. He not only pulled it off, he established Earth Day as an annual event and took it international in 1990. Earth Day is now observed in virtually every country on Earth.

It was Margaret Mead who declared: "Earth Day is the first holy day which transcends all national borders, yet preserves all geographical integrities; spans mountains and oceans and time belts, and yet brings people all over the world into one resonating accord, is devoted to the preservation of the harmony in nature and yet draws upon the triumphs of technology, the measurement of time, and instantaneous communication through space.

Forty years later, Earth Day still rallies enthusiasm and awareness and action. Sometimes I worry that it has become another Mother's Day or Father's Day, a Hallmark event where you pay attention for a day and then are off the hook until next year. As people of faith, we cannot let that happen. We cannot let this awareness be relegated to one day, for our plight and the earth's plight are one.

As the caretakers, we begin with our love and reverence and respect for our earth. In other words, We are called to model the relationship that Jesus sets up in the parable of the Good Shepherd. The sheep and the shepherd cannot be separated. The sheep answer the shepherd's call because of the intimacy of the relationship and their instinctive desire to belong to the one who calls. Likewise the shepherd, who loves the sheep and stakes his life on caring for them, understands their role of interdependence. There is an intimacy of trust and security, a sense of belonging to each other.

This is the balance we are called to maintain between ourselves and our natural resources. So far the earth still sustains us, but how much longer can we take without giving? If our planet is not healthy, we cannot be healthy. Indeed, it was recently pointed out to me that the earth will continue to sustain itself. We are not threatening the planet as much as we are dooming ourselves. The human species will suffer and die before the earth itself will suffer and die.

We are not Lords of Creation. We are part of Creation.

And as the species with the most advanced consciousness and ability, we are asked to care for our resources, not abuse and exploit them. Certainly creation is calling us to change our behaviors, warning us with strange weather patterns, increasing severity of storms, droughts, floods, even lack of fish in the oceans. We don't see Chilean Sea Bass or swordfish or even abalone on menus anymore, do we? Nature is crying for us to change the consuming wasteful habits we have acquired, begging us to stop complaining, and start solving. There's no question that we already do a lot: San Francisco, in fact, is the number 1 rated city for environmental conservation in every category except home water use. Apparently we don't turn off the faucet when brushing teeth or refrain from long daily showers or garden watering. It is specifically because we have a highly raised consciousness, that we owe the world our voice and our continuing example. Global solutions are stymied by political and economic barriers. Neighborhood and city and state measures can have impact -- our behaviors count. And we can do more. At a recent conference on Global Philanthropy, a 13 year old girl cried to us, "Why do you adults destroy species and take open space when you cannot bring them back? Stop breaking things if you don't know how to fix them!"

But all the activism we can muster will be fruitless unless it is grounded in an intimate respect and appreciation of nature. The heavens are telling the glory of God and all creation is dancing for joy. Let's keep the heavens and the earth alive and aligned so that God's glory can support and inspire and delight.

Since our response to the planet is rooted in relationship, I invite you to pick up an item from nature. We are a part of all that is, and God works through that connection. I am going to ask you to spend five minutes with your article. Examine it. Feel it, imagine the journey it has been on and what it has to tell you. Make up a story about it. After five minutes I'll ask you to turn to another person and share your experience.

Earth Day 2010 can be a turning point to advance climate policy, energy efficiency, renewable energy and green jobs. Earth Day Network is galvanizing millions who make personal commitments to sustainability. Earth Day 2010 is a pivotal opportunity for individuals, corporations and governments to join together and create a global green economy. But first and foremost, it is a day for celebrating and connecting, a day for reverence and awe. And always, great gratitude.

May it be so.