

Sermon April 19, 2020

“For the Beauty of the Earth: The Healing Power of Nature’s Beauty”

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Ecclesiastes 1:4 “A generation goes and a generation comes but the earth remains forever”.

Psalms 139:9-10 "If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast."

Job 12:7-10 “But ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds in the sky, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish in the sea inform you. Which of all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In his hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind.”

Matthew 6:28-29 “And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.”

John 1:1-5 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

It is the month of April, National Poetry Month. The Academy of American Poets, recognizing poetry as vital to our culture, inaugurated it in 1996. I recently heard poetry described as “that lovely backdoor to consciousness, bypassing our habitual barricades of thought and feeling to reveal reality afresh.” The image of poetry that immediately came into my mind was that of a kind gardener who just dropped by with a basket full of nourishing produce now waiting for us on our back doorstep. We are also living in the traumatic time of the Covid-19 virus, ravaging the lives of thousands upon thousands of people across the globe; bringing death, illness, joblessness, economic ruin and the heartache of separation and all this with no end in sight. And finally, we are approaching the 50th Anniversary of Earth Day, which arrives this Wednesday, April 22. We usually call this Sunday, Earth Sunday. Poetry, a pandemic, and an address of our pollution of mother earth. That’s a great deal to tackle in one sermon. At the risk of appearing sentimental or naïve, I have decided not to. I have decided that our yearning for the beauty of poetry, the hope and assurance of scripture, the avenue of prayer, the joy of music, the comfort of shared community and a deep reverence for the earth, must win out as our focus for today. The distressing topics of a rampant virus, of climate change,

even of social injustice may just be too much for our burdened hearts and spirits to contemplate at this one moment in time. I believe today, our spirits seek uplifting.

Yet, before I divert from these distressing topics, I want to recognize something beautiful happening in the earth in this time of Covid-19. As people around the world have closed work places and stayed at home to slow the spread of the virus week after week, a not surprising but interesting effect has occurred. The earth is healing itself. When the frenetic energy of human beings has been forced to withdraw, life continues, the rains continue to fall and the sun shines, green grass grows, birds soar and creatures run in the wild. Across clear skies, the distant Himalayan mountains can be seen from a city in Northern India for the first time in decades and the people are marveling at what has been there all along and they can only now see. Nitrogen Dioxide pollution levels in China, South Korea, Europe, India and the U.S. have dropped dramatically. Though it is unlikely that we will have the political will after this crisis is over, to maintain these levels, we have seen what is possible and that we do have the capacity. The Union of Concerned Scientists recently declared this, "We already have all the tools we need that would allow us to have cleaner air all the time, irrespective of the pandemic and social distancing. We could be switching from coal to renewables. We could be adapting national standards for clean energy. We could get off fossil fuel subsidies. We could be electrifying more vehicles and allowing states to go further with their vehicles' standards. We know what the solutions are." Nature has tremendous physical and spiritual healing power. The Bible speaks about our bond to the earth over and over, turning to the elements and seasons, the creatures, the trees, the birds, the plants, the sun, moon and stars, the rocks and rivers and mountains as our teachers. Humanity shares this earth as part of God's wonderful creation. When we look beyond scripture to the next 2000 years of Christian history and tradition, we find that these understandings of the sacred coexistence of humanity and the natural world, have often been misunderstood and discounted. A biblical understanding of "God gave humankind dominion over the earth" was distorted-- turned on its head to justify belligerence and greed. For many years, people of the Christian faith, holding the belief that the heavenly realm was far superior to the earthly one, developed a disdain for the natural world and for the human body. Dualistic thinking saw nature and spirit, earth and heaven, human and divine, as separate realities. It was only one step from seeing them as separate realities to finding them to be opposite realities, even conflicting realities. One place within Christian tradition that did not succumb to this dualism but continued to speak and live in a sacred relationship to the earth was among Christian mystics like St. Frances of Assisi, the 12th Century Friar, Hildegard of Bingen, the 12th Century German Abbess, and Meister Eckhart, the 14th century Dominican and writer.. Listen to the powerful words of Hildegard of Bingen-- Benedictine abbess, writer, composer, philosopher, Christian mystic, and visionary.

The high, the low, all of creation God gives to humankind to use. If this privilege is misused, God's Justice permits creation to punish humanity. God is the foundation for everything God undertakes. God gives, such that nothing that is necessary for life is lacking. Now humankind needs a body that at

all times honors and praises God. This body is supported in every way through the earth. Thus the earth glorifies the power of God. Remember, this is a voice from the Middle Ages and a woman's voice at that. If we jump ahead a thousand years, we find this earth centered perspective continuing in the many Christian mystical thinkers of today. One of my most cherished is the late Celtic priest, John O'Donohue. He lived on the west coast of Ireland, with its dramatically beautiful and verdant landscapes until his death in 2008. The following excerpts are from a 2008 interview with John O'Donohue by Krista Tippett, shortly before his death. I have adapted them for use in this service. ... I think it makes a huge difference, when you wake in the morning and come out of your house, whether you believe you are walking into a dead geographical location, which is used to get to a destination, or whether you are emerging out into a landscape that is just as much, alive as you are, but in a totally different form. If you go toward it with an open heart and a real, watchful reverence, you will be absolutely amazed at what it will reveal to you. ... I think it was one of the recognitions of the Celtic imagination — that landscape wasn't just matter, but that it was actually alive. What amazes me about landscape is that it recalls you into a mindful mode of stillness, solitude, and silence, where you can truly receive time. ...An awful lot of urban planning, particularly in poor areas, has doubly impoverished the poor by the ugliness which surrounds them. And it's understandable that it's so difficult to reach and sustain gentleness there. ...But it's not just a matter of the outer presence of the landscape. I mean the dawn goes up, and the twilight comes, even in the roughest inner-city place. And I think that connecting to the elemental can be a way of coming into rhythm with the universe...There is a way in which the outer presence, even through memory or imagination, can be brought inward as a sustaining thing. ... it's the question of beauty...there are individuals holding out on frontlines, holding the humane tissue alive in areas of ultimate barbarity, where things are visible that the human eye should never see. And they're able to sustain it, because there is, in them, some kind of sense of beauty that knows the horizon that we are really called to. I love Pascal's phrase, that you should always keep something beautiful in your mind. And I have often, in times when it's been really difficult for me, (tried to) keep some kind of little contour to glimpse sideways at, now and again. (In this way) we can endure great bleakness. Beauty isn't all about just nice loveliness. Beauty is about more rounded, substantial becoming. And I think, when we cross a new threshold, that if we cross worthily, what we do is we heal the patterns of repetition that were in us that had us caught somewhere. And in our crossing, then, we cross onto new ground, where we just don't repeat what we've been through in the last place we were. I think beauty, in that sense, is about an emerging fullness, a greater sense of grace and elegance, a deeper sense of depth, and also a kind of homecoming for the enriched memory of your unfolding life.

O'Donohue says, "The outer presence, even through memory or imagination, can be brought inward as a sustaining thing." Ahh... poetry. He says that "beauty is an emerging fullness, a deeper sense of depth," "a substantial becoming." Again... poetry. Whether in the form of the ancient text of scripture, the classics, romantics, modern or in this post-modern time, poetry opens a backdoor into consciousness. It is a clarion call that awakens us, a balm that lubricates and heals the heart. It

enters the pores of our body and changes human perspectives, possibilities, lives. Poetry about the natural world, through the imagination, can bring the beauty of landscape “inward as a sustaining thing.” When this is done, nature’s wondrous beauty is revered. That which is revered is safeguarded and protected. That which is reverence is prioritized in every person and every culture. Beauty that is intimately known is held with veneration and a desire to protect. Rachel Carson was a marine biologist and writer who stirred up the world in the first half of the 20th Century with her style of writing about science with the aesthetic of literary beauty. I remember as a child, seeing her famous book, *Silent Spring*, lying on the coffee table in our living room. Her poetic approach to science is credited for inspiring the modern environmental movement. On this Sunday before the 50th Anniversary of Earth day, (designated in 1970). I will close with Rachel Carson’s words.

A large part of my life has been concerned with some of the beauties and mysteries of this earth about us, and with the even greater mysteries of the life that inhabits it. No one can dwell long among such subjects without thinking rather deep thoughts, without asking himself searching and often unanswerable questions, and without achieving a certain philosophy.... Every mystery solved brings us to the threshold of a greater one.

We can say, these 50 years later, we are still at a threshold of wonder and new understanding. This earth and our Creator are giving us another chance to see the Holiness within us and all around us and to emerge from this dark time into the light that brings life.