

Earth Day Sunday – Festival of the Earth
Native American Awareness Sunday
April 23, 2006

Priests of a Cosmic Sacrament
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Genesis 1:1 - 2:4

¹In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

³Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

⁶And God said, “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” ⁷So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. ⁸God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

⁹And God said, “Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so. ¹⁰God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. ¹¹Then God said, “Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.” And it was so. ¹²The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. ¹³And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

¹⁴And God said, “Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, ¹⁵and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.” And it was so. ¹⁶God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. ¹⁷God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, ¹⁸to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. ¹⁹And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

²⁰And God said, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.” ²¹So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. ²²God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” ²³And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

²⁴And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.” And it was so. ²⁵God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

²⁶Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” ²⁷So God created humankind in God’s image, in the image of God God created them; male and female God created them. ²⁸God blessed them, and God said to them,

“Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

²⁹God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. ³⁰And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so.

³¹God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

²Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. ²And on the seventh day God finished the work that God had done, and God rested on the seventh day from all the work that God had done. ³So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that God had done in creation.

⁴These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

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“The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein.” So concludes the psalmist. Isn’t that what the creation story intends to convey? That God lovingly created the earth, the land and the sea, and all of the living creatures that fill the sky and the oceans and the fresh waters and the land itself. God is the source of all life and we? we human beings have been given the privilege of caring for and tending God’s magnificent gift of creation.

Earth Day Sunday or as it has come to be known, Festival of the Earth Sunday, is a day set aside to ponder the wonder of creation as well as our awesome responsibility of being earth keepers. Do you remember when Senator Gaylord Nelson came up with the idea for Earth Day in 1969, after visiting an oil spill off the coast of Santa Barbara, California. He and others were astounded that over 20 million Americans joined the first Earth Day event on April 22, 1970, cleaning creeks, recycling tin cans and learning about ecology. 36 years later, there is indeed an urgency to observe Earth Day, not just once a year but every single day of life.

Yes, today we celebrate the Festival of the Earth as well as Native American Awareness Sunday. The two belong together. Given the Native American love and care of the land and the waters and the air and all creatures great and small, what better day to celebrate their wisdom than on Earth Day Sunday?

It was over 10 years ago in 1995 that I enjoyed the gift of a 3 month study leave. I spent the first month with a Navajo United Methodist clergywoman in Phoenix, Arizona and the last two months in Israel, Palestine, Jordan and Egypt. While staying with Rev. Tweedy Sombrero in Phoenix, we visited her family for a week on the Navajo reservation. There I gained insights into the Native American respect for creation. I heard many of their wonderful creation stories including stories about Coyote, the great trickster and Spider Woman, who always left a mistake in her weaving as an acknowledgment of our imperfection as human creatures.

Here is a story about White Shell Woman that Tweedy’s dad, Leslie Sombrero, told me. Listen to the wonderful earth images throughout the tale and picture them in your mind’s eye as I recount the tale.

When First Man came to the top of the mountains, he heard a baby crying. The lightning striking all about and the murk caused by the hard rain made it difficult to see anything. He discovered the baby lying with its head towards the west and its feet towards the east. Its cradle consisted of two short rainbows which lay under it. Crosswise, at its chest and feet, lay red rays of the rising sun. The baby was wrapped in four blankets – dark cloud, blue cloud, yellow cloud and white cloud. Along either side was a row of loops made of lightning and through these a sunbeam was laced back and forth.

First Man, not knowing how to undo the fastenings, took up the baby cradle and started home. When he arrived he called out, “Old woman, it is a baby. I found it there where it is black night with rain clouds.”

Together they opened the cradle and declared “It’s a girl!”

A day was the same as a year. The second day the girl was up and when two days had passed she looked around and when these days had passed she danced...and on the tenth day, at dawn, she was named White Shell Woman.

Can you see how everything in creation is sacred to the Navajo’s? I cannot begin to tell you how much they resent the economic imperialism of the “white man” who they see as desecrating creation.

Can you also understand how, after my brief Navajo experience, I associate Earth Day Sunday with Native American Awareness Sunday? They belong in tandem with each other.

I heard this week about a lawsuit that a group of parents filed against a school that celebrated Earth Day. The parents claimed that a teacher had violated the constitutional principle of the separation of church and state when noting that we are made from earth and someday to earth we will return. The objection was overruled.

I mention this because I would guess that some of you are wondering whether ecology and the environment and the policies and politics surrounding them are appropriate topics for a Sunday morning sermon. Without reservation I would defend the environmental issue as “God’s politics.” I love that phrase that Jim Wallis has coined and used as a title for his most recent book. Wallis’ thesis is that *God’s politics* are not partisan or ideological. *God’s politics* are based on biblical truths and mandates that remind us of the necessity of addressing political issues that affect the poor, the vulnerable, the left behind. The environment is one of those issues. *God’s politics*, claims Wallis “reminds us of the creation itself, a rich environment in which we are to be good stewards, not mere users, consumers, and exploiters.” (p.xv, intro, *God’s Politics*).

How appropriate it is that we use our precious Sunday worship time to praise God for creation and to recommit ourselves to the care of Mother Earth. When people ask me “What can I possibly do that will make any difference in the environment?” I encourage them to begin by thinking about their theology of creation and its stewardship. And I would like to invite us, this morning, to do just that. Has our theology of creation and our stewardship of creation evolved over the years? What does the bible say? And do we need to rethink biblical mandates?

I would contend that in reading the first Creation Story in Genesis, it is easy to see how we have gotten into such a troublesome, life-threatening place in our relationship with the environment. God tells humankind that we “have dominion” over the earth and that we are supposed to “subdue” it. For too long, this has been interpreted to mean that humanity’s God-given duty was to exploit the earth in meeting needs and fulfilling desires. Such arrogance! Such exploitation! And unfortunately, for the sake of economic imperialism, such theology still prevails.

Writes Father Thomas Berry: “Planet earth will not long endure being despised or ignored in its more integral being....nor will it submit forever to the abuse it has had to endure. Already the earth is taking away the oxygen we breathe, the purity of the rain, our protection from cosmic rays, the careful balance of our climate and the fruitfulness of the soil.”

It was the great orator and Squamish Chief Seattle who over 100 years ago warned us of the long term consequences of ecological carelessness. The version of his speech to the Great Chief in Washington, D.C., as the United States government was trying to buy his ancestral lands, is a favorite of environmentalists. You’ve heard these familiar words of Chief Seattle quoted many times. “If we sell you our land, love it as we’ve loved it. Care for it as we’ve cared for it. Preserve it for your children and love it as God loves us all.” But what is often not quoted are a few lines in this same speech in which he said: “This earth is precious to God and to harm the earth is to heap contempt on its creator. The whites too shall pass; perhaps sooner than all other tribes. Continue to contaminate your bed, and you will one night suffocate in your own waste.”

If we continue to make it our duty to exploit and have dominion over creation, surely we will fulfill Chief Seattle’s prophecy.

Now retired Bishop Dale White has been passionate about inviting United Methodists to rethink their theology

about God's creation and our role. I am forever grateful for his work on environmental justice and particularly, his paper titled "In Praise of Creation II." No longer can we interpret scripture literally, suggests Dale White. Let's work on our theology of creation and rid ourselves of a theology of domination. Instead of subduing the earth, we can be wise caretakers of the earth. Yet, suggests White, even a theology of stewardship is limited. For most people, stewardship implies a managerial relationship. So, stewardship merely continues the mindset of acting as if we are in charge of life on this planet.

Bishop White concludes that we need to learn how to trust and co operate with creation rather than trying to be in charge of it. We need to listen to what the earth and its creatures say to us. We need to fall in love with creation all over again and see it as a sacrament, something precious and grace-filled. We need to become partners with creation, loving it as one would one's own life partner. We need to become prophets of a new age who read the earth and celebrate God's creation. White implores us to become "priests of a cosmic sacrament."

Think about the implication. Priests...those who have been set aside for holy purposes...of a cosmic sacrament....which suggests that all of God's creation is sacramental, sacred, to be handled with awe and care. The waters of baptism ...would we ever think of polluting them? The bread and the fruit of the vine...would we ever contaminate them with toxins? Could not everything that God created be as sacred as these sacraments? And could we not all be priests, expected to treat life as holy?

Did any of you see the documentary *The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill*? It's a true story about Mark Bittner, who I would describe as a Bohemian St. Francis. A homeless street musician in San Francisco, Bittner falls in with a flock of wild green and red parrots. When he first noticed them on Telegraph Hill and began befriending them, there were 26 parrots. He named each one and kept a detailed journal of his day-to-day interaction with the flock. Bittner listened and watched the habits of these birds. He "reads the earth" and from the parrots, learns everything that he needs to know about life itself.

That's the kind of relationship that I believe Bishop White is suggesting. It is one in which the natural world teaches us and we then learn how to better love God's creation.

In Clarence Jordan's *Cottonpatch Version of Scripture*, Jordan translates Paul's letter to the Corinthians saying "it is God who through Christ bridged the gap between the Creator and us, and has given us the job of also bridging the gap. God was in Christ hugging the world." (2 Corinthians 5: 19 – 20) If God through Christ hugged the world so we too are called to be Christ's ambassadors that hug all of creation!

"How can I make a difference?" we ask. As Christians, we can begin by rethinking our theology of creation and begin to be more intentionally about living into an interrelationship with creation. We can become involved in God's politics and find out what are the local environmental issues here on the North Shore and become pro active in supporting legislation or local decisions that protect the environment. Perhaps there is someone who would like to represent Environmental Justice on our Outreach Committee. Who among us has a passion for God's creation and could help us, as a congregation, learn more about our role as "priests of a cosmic sacrament"? What are some other possibilities that come to mind on this Earth Day? Other suggestions for protecting and loving our environment? (ie drive smart and drive less; carpool; use public transportation; garden organically; recycle)

Let me close with these words from *Earth Prayers*.

Wherever you are is home.
And the earth is paradise.
Wherever you set your feet is holy land.
You don't live off it like a parasite.
You live in it and it in you or we won't survive.
And that is true worship of God.

Amen and Amen.

