

Christ Church in Harwich Port
Sermon for November 10, 2013, Creation Care Sunday

“God of the sparrow, God of the whale, God of the swirling stars, How does the creature say ‘awe’; how does the creature say ‘Praise?’ (Hymn, “God of the Sparrow, God of the Whale,” in several newer hymnals including the *New Century Hymnal* of the Congregational Church and the *United Methodist Hymnal*, 1989.

God says to Job, “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Our bishops asked each of us to choose a Sunday for “Creation Care” this fall and we have chosen today, when we are near the time when we remember to give thanks as Thanksgiving occurs this month as well. We have chosen scripture and music to celebrate our oceans and seas and our harvest for which we give thanks. I am so thankful for our beaches, a constant source of peace for me, and yet, in light of that, I am aware of the plight of our brothers and sisters in the Philippines who have faced an incredible tragedy in the typhoon ravaging their country.

We have seen both the majesty and blessings of creation and the tragedy of natural destruction in hurricanes, earthquakes, floods and tsunamis and typhoons, especially in the last several years. Just in the last five years we have watched the world during the earthquakes in Haiti, the tsunami and earthquake in Japan, the earthquake in New Zealand, and in Virginia, Hurricane Sandy in New Jersey, remembering Hurricane Katrina as well, and now the super typhoon in the Philippines. We have seen glacier and ice floes melting in the arctic and God’s creatures suffering as a result. We have seen destruction of habitats and now endangered wildlife, not to mention the honey bees.

And so we have a balance, I suppose, of the beauty and majesty of God’s creation and the destruction of the elements of the world, pollution and climate change notwithstanding, and habitat destruction as well. So what do we say as we have a Sunday of Creation Care?

Several ideas come to mind for me. The first is what I will call mindfulness of God’s creation. The second is a reverence for the earth and its creatures, and the third is stewardship of the gifts we have been given.

I've been reading more of Thomas Merton this week as I prepared a lecture for a program at the Church of the Holy Spirit on Thomas Merton's Asian thoughts and East Asian brush painting. I've been reading for the Bible study class as well as we have studied the wisdom traditions of various faiths. Buddhism, for instance is a reflective religion in which we learn to practice "mindfulness," or seriously paying attention to the life and details around us. This combination of Merton's longing for more solitude and more mindfulness, in a Buddhist way, and thinking about caring for God's creation, got me to thinking about how each of us could be more "mindful."

I am reminded as well of Rachel Carson. In 1937, she wrote a brochure for the US Bureau of Fisheries called "The world of waters." Her supervisor thought it too lyric for the brochure and suggested she submit it to the *Atlantic Monthly*, where it was published with the title "undersea." *Undersea* subsequently became the basis of Carson's first book, *Under the Sea-Wind* (1941), which remained her favorite piece of writing, even after *Silent Spring*.

"Undersea" introduces two of Carson's signature themes, the ancient and enduring ecology that dominates ocean life, and the material immortality that encompasses even the smallest organism. From these four remarkable pages in the *Atlantic*, Carson later admitted, "everything else followed."

Let me share a line or two from that article.

WHO HAS KNOWN THE OCEAN? Neither you nor I, with our earth-bound senses, know the foam and surge of the tide that beats over the crab hiding under the seaweed of his tide-pool home; or the lilt of the long, slow swells of mid-ocean, where shoals of wandering fish prey and are preyed upon, and the dolphin breaks the waves to breathe the upper atmosphere. . . The ocean is a place of paradoxes. It is the home of the great white shark, two-thousand-pound killer of the seas, and of the hundred-foot blue whale, the largest animal that ever lived. It is also the home of living things so small that your two hands might scoop up as many of them as there are stars in the Milky Way.

Carson was working to make us mindful of climate change even in the 1930's and, I believe to make us mindful of our responsibility in the world to care for God's creation. What Carson found to be true has helped us to know more about our oceans. The *living ocean* drives planetary chemistry, governs climate and weather,

and otherwise provides the cornerstone of the life-support system for all creatures on our planet, from deep-sea starfish to desert sagebrush. *That's* why the ocean matters. If the sea is sick, we'll feel it. If it dies, we die. Our future and the state of the oceans are one.

So we are called to be mindful of the blessing of the ocean, and we are called to have a reverence for the oceans and all their creatures, to care about how plastic bags and trash and plastic six-pack holders can fit around developing creatures like sea turtles and ruin their shells and their lives. We are called to have respect for all of God's creatures and God's creation.

Early in our history in the ancient Near Eastern and biblical worlds, the sea was singled out and personified as the primary symbol of chaos and death. In order to create an inhabitable world, God had to subdue the primeval ocean that existed before creation (Genesis 1:2). That's the reason the author of Job 38 describes God closing the sea behind doors, imposing a limit for it, and stopping its proud waves (verses 8-11). It's the reason the author of Psalm 104 describes God rebuking the waters, which flee in fear, and then setting a boundary for them so that they don't flood the earth (verses 6-9).

We struggle with the power of destruction that the waters of the earth have caused, and at the same time we love our oceans. On this creation care Sunday, we are called to care for the oceans and the creatures in them. We are reminded of the peacefulness and strength we derive from our oceans, not to mention our delicious seafood. One of my favorite quotes from Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* is this one

“Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature -- the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after winter.”

And this one from *A Sense of Wonder*:

“It is a wholesome and necessary thing for us to turn again to the earth and in the contemplation of her beauties to know the sense of wonder and humility.

And so, along with mindfulness and reverence, we are called to be stewards of the earth and its resources. Stewardship begins and ends with the understanding of God's ownership of all:

"I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End." (Revelation 22:13)

"The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it." (Psalm 24:1)

"To the Lord your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it." (Deuteronomy 10:14)

I'm sure each of us can think of ways we can be good stewards of the earth—driving less to reduce our carbon footprint, recycling more and buying things with less packaging, using our own coffee mugs when we get coffee out, buying fair trade products that help farmers in other parts of the world, picking up trash on the beach, using our cloth bags at the grocery store. We can work to preserve natural habitats and preserve more land. We know we have been taught to be good stewards of the earth, but sometimes we just don't know how to start. Caring for creation is a huge responsibility, and involves much more than simply turning off extra lights or buying energy efficient appliances. The good news is that there are many ways we can become better stewards of creation. By being mindful of our attitudes and making several small changes, we can form better habits. Over time, these new habits will form the basis of a more ecologically-friendly lifestyle. In short, where we start is not the issue; what is essential is that we **do** start.

Recognizing that we need to be a better steward is an important first step. While many of the decisions we make along the way will be small, they all reflect our attitudes, and, over time, shape our lives.

I am reminded of a time when I went to New Mexico to Ghost Ranch, a time when we focused on the gift of the creation and the land. Every morning of our spiritual pilgrimage there, we had worship outdoors and in our worship, said prayers in each of the four directions, being mindful of the symbols and animals in this type of native people worship. In addition to the four directions, the sky and the earth

were places of worship as well. We were reminded of what Chief Seattle said of the earth:

Teach your children what we have taught our children - that the Earth is our Mother. Whatever befalls the Earth befalls the sons and daughters of the Earth. If men spit upon the ground, they spit upon themselves. This we know. The Earth does not belong to us, we belong to the Earth. This we know. All things are connected like the blood that unites one family. All things are connected. Whatever befalls the Earth befalls the sons and daughters of the Earth. We did not weave the web of life; we are merely a strand in it. Whatever we do to the Web, We do to ourselves.

On this Creation Care Sunday, I give thanks for Mother Earth and her seas and oceans and the fruit of her harvest. I give thanks for the fall, for pumpkins and squash, cranberries and turnips, apples and pears. I give thanks for our local farmers and farm stands and the opportunity to shop there. I give thanks for the Harwich Farmers' Market and the opportunity to purchase produce locally and organically. I give thanks for the honey bees and local honey as well. I give thanks for farmer Jeff and all he does at Not Enough Acres Farm.

Each spiritual tradition has spoken about climate change and our role in it. The Dali Lama has signed the Buddhist pledge which ends with these words:

We have a brief window of opportunity to take action, to preserve humanity from imminent disaster and to assist the survival of the many diverse and beautiful forms of life on Earth. Future generations, and the other species that share the biosphere with us, have no voice to ask for our compassion, wisdom, and leadership. We must listen to their silence. We must be their voice, too, and act on their behalf.

As an oceanographer prior to her ordination to the priesthood, our Presiding Bishop, Katherine, said this At a U.S. Senate environment committee meeting in 2007,

“No life form can be studied in isolation from its surroundings or from other organisms. All living things are deeply interconnected, and all life depends on the life of others.”

As care for God's creation, each of us is called to do everything possible to help the earth and its peoples and creatures. On this creation care Sunday, each of us can take some small step forward to help with caring for God's creation.

The Diocese of Massachusetts encourages the observation of a Creation Care Season, from St. Francis Day, Oct. 4 through the end of November. Let us be mindful of each small thing we can do to care for creation. Let us give thanks for all we have and are and let us be good stewards of our earth, its seas, our harvest, and all we have.

Let us pray:

God of the sparrow, God of the whale, God of the swirling stars, how does the creature say Awe, how does the creature say praise? Almighty God, in giving us dominion over things on earth, you made us fellow workers in your creation: Give us wisdom and reverence so to use the resources of nature, that no one may suffer from our abuse of them, and that generations yet to come may continue to praise you for your bounty; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen (hymn plus a prayer from *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1979, p. 837).

Humpback whale, near Provincetown, photo by Judith Davis, 2010.

