

Earth Sunday Sermon April 24, 2022
Witness for the Sacred Earth
Rev. Jordan (Skip) Dickinson

Exodus 3:1-5 Moses the burning bush
Psalm 148 All creation to praise the LORD
John 20: 19-23 The Risen Jesus appears to the disciples

'The cry of the Hebrew people suffering a cruel bondage in Egypt reached the ear of God, and he raised up for them a deliverer. Moses, whose birth, education, and experience in the Arabian wilderness qualified him in an exceptional way for the task.

In the scripture from the Book of Exodus read this morning; Moses had a vision at the sacred mountain of Horeb.

Then the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the bush; he looked yet it was not consumed.

*When the LORD saw that Moses had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then the LORD said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, **for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.**"*

On this Earth Day Sunday, when the earth is being seriously impacted by our domination over habitats on earth and sea as human beings, I would like us to consider **our witness for the Sacred Earth**, the **holy ground (of God)**.

*This year a number of us here at the Dorset Church studied a book by John Philip Newell, *Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul (with the subtitle) Celtic Wisdom for Reawakening to What our Souls Know and Healing the World.* It is a remarkable book about the Celtic spiritual tradition from the past that brings a **vision of the earth** for us **today**.*

Celtic Christianity grew among a rural and agricultural people who honored nature. Western Christianity, as the religion of the Roman Empire, largely viewed the sacred as separate from the ordinary, rather than at the heart of it.

A decision was made at the Synod of Whitby in England in the 7th century to follow the Bishop of Rome rather than the Celtic tradition.

There was a five-hundred-year period of **resistance to this decision** in **Scotland**, as well as in **Wales, Cornwall**, and parts of **Ireland** where Christianity remained essentially Celtic.

In the 12th century when the great Celtic monastic sites were replaced by Benedictine abbeys in a move by the Roman church to enforce uniformity in Britain and Ireland. The remaining Celtic monks had to "Conform or get out."

Many of those who got out were Culdees, a term derived from the Gaelic, meaning "**companions of God.**" They lived a monastic life without taking formal vows, which meant that they remained relatively free from the control of the official church. "For centuries to come it was the itinerant Culdees, wandering teachers, who helped keep alive in the people the threatened vision of their ancient Celtic inheritance and its **sense of the sacredness of the earth** and all people."

Perhaps the greatest of these wandering scholars was a man named **John Scotus Eriugena** who lived in the 9th century. ‘Eriugena’s vision was not so much a theology about God as it was a cosmology of the sacred in all things. He said **God is the “essence of all things.”** He interpreted the Greek word for God, which is **theos**, from which we get “theology,” as coming from the Greek verb, **theo**, which means “**to flow or run.**”

God is the flow of life deep in all things. He taught that there are **two books** through which God is speaking. The **first** is the small book; physically little, this is the book of **Holy Scripture**. The **second** is the big book, **the living text of the universe**, which includes the sun, moon, and stars; the earth, sea, and sky; the creatures of these realms; and the multiplicity of life-forms that grow from the ground. We need to read both books, he says, the sacred text of scripture **and** the sacred text of the universe.

If we read only the book of scripture, we will miss the vastness and wildness of the universe, of **everything vibrating with the sound of God**. If we read only the book of nature and the universe we are in danger of missing “the intimacy of the voice of God, for the book of **scripture calls us to faithfulness in relationship**, including faithfulness to strangers, refugees, widows, and the poorest among us.

When we take seriously that “**God is the essence of all things,**” part of what Eriugena’s wisdom can foster in us **for today** is “**a strong sense of inner authority in a time of immense outward transition and change.**”

“If we are to see **a true awakening to the sacredness of the earth and harness the deepest energies of our being to serve this awareness**, we need a **strong inner authority** in our own souls to challenge the religious, political, and social systems that have recklessly ignored this **sacredness,**” and we are putting the very future of the world in peril.

“Perhaps **the greatest modern prophet of ecological consciousness and action** is **John Muir** who lived from 1838 to 1914. Born in Dunbar, Scotland, he grew up in a strict religious home. “What his own father taught him was the Bible, apparently to the exclusion of everything else. Muir later described him as “my all-Bible father,” who believed that no other book was necessary. By the age of eleven the young Muir had been forced to learn the entire New Testament as well as much of the Old Testament by heart and, as he adds by “sore flesh.” In other words, he was beaten if he incorrectly recited scripture a tragically common method of education in Protestant Calvinist Scotland, which failed to respect the inherent dignity of the child.

On the other hand, “something of the Celtic way of seeing came to Muir through his maternal grandfather – who lived across the street from him in Dunbar when he was growing up. This grandfather nurtured the young boy’s sense of open-eyed wonder at nature and encouraged his boyhood expeditions along the **coastline**. As Muir later wrote:

When I was a boy in Scotland, I was fond of everything that was wild, and all my life I’ve grown fonder and fonder of wild places and wild creatures... And best of all to watch the waves in awful storms thundering on the black headlands and craggy ruins of the old Dunbar castle when the sea and sky, the waves and the clouds were mingled together as one.

When he was eleven years old, the Muir family moved from Scotland to establish a farm in Wisconsin. The ten years that followed were filled with hard work from morning to night, including occasional beatings from his father.

At the age of 22 Muir enrolled at the University of Wisconsin, where he met Ezra Carr, a professor of geology. who introduced him to Darwin's *On the Origin of the Species* that had been published the previous year. Muir now began to comprehend that everything in the universe was seeking new form. **The earth was forever unfolding.**

Later Muir suffered an industrial accident that nearly blinded him. He spent six weeks confined to a darkened room, fearing he would never see again.

When he began to recover his physical sight, he simultaneously began to experience a new inner way of seeing, what his college professor's wife called seeing with the "eye within the eye," or what in Celtic wisdom over the centuries had been called seeing with the eye of the heart. Muir was now aware of a glory deep in all things.

The earth had become for him "a burning bush," as he put it, as in the story of Moses encountering a bush that was on fire without being consumed. At the heart of the fire was the presence of the divine. Similarly, Muir now **began to see a sacredness** shining at the heart of all things. He later described the glory of a sunset on a mountaintop in California this way,

"Yellow gold, the last of the day, not gilding but gilding to flame the tops of trees... **Spiritual fire burning in every tree, in every bush, in every stone. ... Every bush is a burning bush.**"

As Newell writes in *Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul*, "What Muir is describing is essentially the child's way of seeing, an open-eyed wonder at the universe. The trauma of nearly losing his physical sight and then the gift of its restoration reconnected him to the grace of childhood's sight. **He had reawakened to the earth as sacred.**

Like Eriugena in the 9th century, Muir in the 19th and 20th centuries later came to see that there was another sacred text, the universe. "The winds, the waters, the springs, he says, are all "words of God."

This past Friday's Earth Day editorial in *The Rutland Herald* has the title, 'Now or never.' It says, "**Scientists and activists say "now or never" if we want to avert climate disaster.**

Already, in these early months of 2022, the wildfires have started in the West, and we continue to see major weather events across the globe. We are living with extremes."

"By its design, Earth Day is a reminder for hope. The original Earth Day helped establish the Environmental Protection Agency and both the Clean Water Act and the Clean Air Act.

We need even more action today. There is a Clean Heat Standard bill before the Vermont Senate to help reduce our dependence on fossil heating fuels. In an Op-ed in the same *Rutland Herald*. a member of the VT Climate Council writes, "When we look at the numbers, Vermont has the highest per capita green-house gas emissions of any state in New England. I did not know this. At about 15 tons per person, we produce more climate pollution *per person* than China, about 7 tons per person or India about 2 tons per person. Historically VT has

contributed much more, *per person*, to the problem than many of the places around the world that are seeing the worst effects of a **destabilized climate.**”

Many of us are grateful for the work of the Green Team here at our own church and the work so many are doing locally, in our own state and globally! We need to continue to act together! We have a great opportunity to **rediscover the sacred reality of our earth and of all of God’s** creation.

At times we feel overwhelmed by the challenges to make a difference in our world with climate change. Greta Thunberg and so many younger people have been spurring our generation to take the necessary, and costly actions that can bring change.

Bill McKibben sees promise in a coalition of elders who have the investments and resources and younger people coming together – getting “on fire” to break through the status quo of slow changes.

To change ourselves requires a new awareness, a new understanding and appreciation to protect the creation about us for our grandchildren and their children to the seventh generation.

When the risen Jesus appeared to the frightened disciples, he told them not to be afraid; – “Peace be with you.” The disciples recognized the marks of his suffering.

When we see suffering; as hearts are broken open by the suffering and death in Ukraine, or by situations close at hand, we remember that we belong to a people of faith.

As the Father has sent me, so I send you, says Jesus.

Whether we witness against the inhumanity and devastation of war, or join the fight to save the life of many species of ocean, land and air, and human families on our planet, the breath of the Holy Spirit is upon us.

Let us reawaken to the sacred, in the earth and in each other!
With God’s Spirit let us join with all of creation in praising God.

Amen.

PRAYER OF PASTORAL CARE FOR EARTH DAY SUNDAY

On this 50th anniversary of Earth Day

The earth is yours, O God, and everything in it.

You call us to be gardeners of creation - to till the soil

and baptize it with our sweat and toil. To bow upon it

as if our gardening were an act of prayer. To weed it.

To water it as you did. To help keep the earth fruitful.

But of all the life on this earth, we alone have strayed

from your original order. We alone have trespassed

& stepped rough-shod upon the sanctity of creation.

During the pandemic, creation had a small but amazing

rest from us. And the air grew cleaner and the water purer.

And the wildlife reclaimed their natural homes.

O God, of all the species we alone have the gift of choice.
We alone are blest to live by faith not instinct,
by love not barbarism, by creativity not destruction.
All because we were made in Your image, O God.

So, help us learn the lessons of care & balance & cooperation
that earth of Yours requires from us.

Help us chose our leaders according to sacred stewardship.

Help us to make daily and tiny choices in how we travel, what we
buy, how we work, how we enjoy,

understanding that huge interconnectedness to climate
to ecosystems, to the well-being of our planet.

Help us restore Your creation to it's sacred order
so that it may care once again for us,
as you have call us to care for It.

Yes, Lord, care is the key - let us live by care.

As we pray for those most in need on our prayer list today.

