

Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church

3rd Sunday of Easter, April 26, 2020 - Earth Day
Genesis 9:8-19, Romans 8:18-25

“The Earth is Waiting” by Rev. Sue Trigger

Genesis 9:8-19 (CEB)

Lauren Smith, Confirmand

8 God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 9 “I am now setting up my covenant with you, with your descendants, 10 and with every living being with you—with the birds, with the large animals, and with all the animals of the earth, leaving the ark with you. 11 I will set up my covenant with you so that never again will all life be cut off by floodwaters. There will never again be a flood to destroy the earth.”

12 God said, “This is the symbol of the covenant that I am drawing up between me and you and every living thing with you, on behalf of every future generation. 13 I have placed my bow in the clouds; it will be the symbol of the covenant between me and the earth. 14 When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow appears in the clouds, 15 I will remember the covenant between me and you and every living being among all the creatures. Floodwaters will never again destroy all creatures. 16 The bow will be in the clouds, and upon seeing it I will remember the enduring covenant between God and every living being of all the earth’s creatures.” 17 God said to Noah, “This is the symbol of the covenant that I have set up between me and all creatures on earth.”

18 Noah’s sons Shem, Ham, and Japheth came out of the ark. Now Ham was Canaan’s father. 19 These were Noah’s three sons, and from them the whole earth was populated.

Romans 8:18-25 (CEB)

I believe that the present suffering is nothing compared to the coming glory that is going to be revealed to us. The whole creation waits breathless with anticipation for the revelation of God’s sons and daughters. 20 Creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice—it was the choice of the one who subjected it—but in the hope that the creation itself will be set free from slavery to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of God’s children. We know that the whole creation is groaning together and suffering labor pains up until now. And it’s not only the creation. We ourselves who have the Spirit as the first crop of the harvest also groan inside as we wait to be adopted and for our bodies to be set free. We were saved in hope. If we see what we hope for, that isn’t hope. Who hopes for what they already see? But if we hope for what we don’t see, we wait for it with patience.

It’s been a unique Earth Day celebration this year. Community events have not been held, church groups have not been able to plant trees or clean up a stretch of highway, and yet, this year, it is as if all of creation is celebrating earth day. By now you’ve probably seen a news story about how creation has been changing since the world has slowed down. The first changes to the environment during this pandemic were visible from space. As highways cleared and factories closed, the air quality dramatically improved. Los Angeles has some of the cleanest air of any major city right now. That’s hard to imagine. Nations are seeing as much as a 40 percent decline in

carbon dioxide and nitrogen dioxide in the air. Even assuming a bounce back once the lockdown is lifted, the planet is expected to see its first fall in global emissions since 2009. ⁱ

That's some good news in the midst of all of the bad news the pandemic has brought. Seeing a significant impact in such a short time opens the door for a lot of contemplation and conversation as the world returns to "normal." Just weeks before the shutdown, I had heard someone on TV saying that it's not possible to have a dramatic effect on climate change. The coronavirus replied with a different perspective. There's an old Spanish proverb that says, "God always forgives, man sometimes forgives, nature never forgives." Nature has been speaking loudly for years, but we've never slowed the world down enough to hear the message. Now that we've heard that we can make a difference, the question will be how? How will the people of the earth be good stewards of God's creation?

This is one of those places where religion, science and politics meet, one of those places that causes many of us to cringe. Some will say that the church has no place in this discussion. Some will say that we need to let science lead the way. Others will say it's a political issue. I have a lot of questions rolling around in my head, so I want to invite you to explore a few of them with me today.

First, what does it mean to be God's steward of the earth? Last Sunday I enjoyed an online SMASH meeting with some of our children. This year we have been looking at the stained glass windows of the church –air, earth, fire, water, and covenant. We have been looking at covenants God has made with humanity using each of these elements. Last week we talked about earth. We remembered God's covenant with Adam and Eve, Noah, and Abraham. We've learned that the word covenant means promises made as an agreement. I will do my part, and you will do yours. In each of the Biblical covenants, God makes promises to care for the people, but also expects something in return.

Earth Sunday is the perfect time to remember *our part* of the covenant to care for creation. God has blessed us with this beautiful world, we bless God when we are good stewards of it. I am wondering how our understanding of stewardship will look after the pandemic. Now we have seen with our own eyes what can happen. We have seen how quickly the environment responds to the reduction of pollution. The air is cleaner, water is clearer and bluer, and seismologists have said that the earth is not vibrating as strongly with less transportation running. We're in a place where the voice of science has been proven. Now we *know* they have been accurate about the effect of emissions on the climate. That raises my next two questions. Will we listen now? Will we *choose* to be better stewards of the earth?

I remember a conversation with a gentleman who believed that the church didn't have a place in the conversation about the environment because God is in control and won't allow us to destroy his creation. He believed that scientists didn't know what they were talking about. God would take care of it. He felt that religion

and science were incompatible and religion was the voice to heed. While I appreciate his trust in God, I believe he had forgotten that there are two parties involved in God's covenant. And as a Presbyterian, I think he was too quick to dismiss the voice of science. I'll explain why.

Many of you who are watching will remember that Presbyterianism was founded by the reformer John Calvin. He is recognized as one of the most significant theologians in history.ⁱⁱ Calvin clearly believed that science and reason were universal gifts to humankind. He saw these gifts given to Christians and non-Christians alike. Listen to what he wrote: "What shall we say of the mathematical sciences? Shall we deem them to be the dreams of madmen? Nay, we cannot read the writings of the ancients on these subjects without the highest admiration; an admiration which their excellence will not allow us to withhold... But if the Lord has been pleased to assist us by the work and ministry of the ungodly in physics, dialectics, mathematics, and other similar sciences, let us avail ourselves of it, lest, by neglecting the gifts of God spontaneously offered to us, we be justly punished for our sloth."ⁱⁱⁱ Let us avail ourselves of science, lest by neglecting these gifts of God, we be justly punished for our sloth.

From our Presbyterian perspective, religion and science need not be kept separate. In fact, science is a gift from God given to us for the common good. So if religion and science are compatible and both religion and science agree that we need to care for the earth, that only leaves one more category to deal with – politics. Global politicians hold the cards on how nations respond to the new insight we've gained into the carbon footprint of humanity. This raises my next question. Should religious communities get involved in the political arena?

Let's go back to John Calvin. In addition to being a religious reformer, he was a highly regarded political philosopher. Calvin believed, as Scripture attests, that all things belong to God; therefore, God is at work in the political arena just as God is at work in the Church and in our lives. Calvin believed in shared authority. (that is why Presbyterians are governed as we are.) In his view, political leaders and economic authorities need to be accountable to the concerns of regular citizens. The writer, Daniel Jose Comacho, described Calvin's teaching saying, "Any president, no matter how powerful and ruthless, is not above God. And if such a ruler asks the public to go against the core teachings of the Gospel which include the love of neighbor and this entire world, then there must be holy resistance. Calvin laid some of this groundwork and it's up to us to take a bold step." ^{iv}

And that takes me back to my earlier question, knowing what we know now, how will we be good stewards of the earth? Mitch and I have enjoyed online meetings with a group of pastors and Presbytery leaders since the shutdown. This last week our time together focused on Earth Day and the changes we are seeing as a result of the shutdown. One pastor noted that throughout history the church has functioned in different ways. He noted that sometimes the church has needed to be the moral conscience of the nation; other times we have led the way in caring for the needy. He suggested that this pandemic is helping us see that right now the world needs us to be the moral conscience.

I think I can confidently say that none of us would like to experience a pandemic again. While there has been some good for the climate, the impact of the virus has been brutal. We can never celebrate the gains for the environment without naming the tragic loss of life and the economic impact of the coronavirus on the planet. My next question, how do we prevent a virus from becoming a pandemic again? The answer takes us back to our conversation about the environment. Science is showing us that the existence of the coronavirus is linked to climate change.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that three out of every four new infectious diseases in people have come from animals. We've seen examples in our lifetimes, Ebola, SARS, H1N1 and yes, COVID-19. Changes in the climate increases the likelihood of these diseases because as the Earth warms and seasons shift, some species move from their habitats while others breed earlier in the year. Another part of this phenomenon is habitat destruction. As humans encroach and destroy habitats, like the Amazon Rainforest, they come in close contact with wildlife and all the diseases they carry. Scientists have said that new diseases are likely to emerge as medicines become less effective, but unchecked climate change is an even greater threat. If we take action, all species will be safer and healthier.^v And that takes me right back to my first question. How will we be good stewards of God's creation?

There is nothing in our faith that says we can't accept the work of science. There is nothing in our faith that says we can't hold public officials accountable for caring for our world. In fact, Calvin would tell us that to not do so would neglect the gifts of God. We have been blessed with some really good news. We *can* make important changes that can impact the world. Now we have to figure out the next steps. I wonder how our lives will be changed after this pandemic experience? Today, as we celebrate the blessing of creation that God has given us, I wonder how will we be good stewards of God's creation?

ⁱ Watts, Johnathan, **Nature is Bouncing Back During Coronavirus But for How Long?**, Mother Jones, <https://www.motherjones.com/coronavirus-updates/2020/04/nature-is-bouncing-back-during-the-coronavirus-crisis-but-for-how-long/>, April 11, 2020.

ⁱⁱ Brad Kramer and Mario A. Russo, **According to John Calvin, Ignoring Science is an Act of Sloth** <https://biologos.org/articles/according-to-john-calvin-ignoring-science-is-an-act-of-sloth>, October 20, 2015

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid*

^{iv} Camacho, Daniel José, **John Calvin: Source for political resistance?**, <https://www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/practicing-liberation/johncalvinresistance>, June 19, 2017.

^v Liptak, Sam, **Planting A Forest Could Help Prevent The Next Pandemic**, <https://www.earthday.org/planting-a-forest-could-help-prevent-the-next-pandemic/>, April 19, 2020.