

## “Mind Your Steps”

Rev. David Gregory

April 24, 2022

Earth Day

Easter 2



*Bayfield Swallows*  
Niki Bowers

### Readings

“A Jewish Prayer” (based on the Psalms)

from *Earth Prayers: 365 Prayers, Poems, and Invocations from Around the World*

How wonderful, O Lord, are the works of your hands!  
The heavens declare Your glory,  
the arch of sky displays your handiwork.

In Your love You have given us the power  
to behold the beauty of Your world  
robed in all its splendor.

The sun and the stars, the valleys and hills,  
the rivers and lakes all disclose Your presence.

The roaring breakers of the sea tell of Your awesome might,  
the beasts of the field and the birds of the air  
bespeak Your wondrous will.

In Your goodness You have made us able to hear  
the music of the world. The voices of loved ones  
reveal to us that You are in our midst.  
A divine voice sings through all creation.

### “The Well Rising”

a poem by William Stafford in *Ask Me: 100 Essential Poems*

The well rising, without sound,  
the spring on a hillside,  
the plowshare brimming through deep ground  
everywhere in the field.

The swallow heart from wing beat to wing beat  
counseling decision, decision:  
thunderous examples. I place my feet  
with care in such a world.

The sharp swallows in their swerve  
flaring and hesitating  
hunting for the final curve  
coming closer and closer—

When you look at the ocean, what do you see? As you gaze at the moon or the stars at night, what do you perceive? If you look at the green hillsides refreshed by the recent rains, the array of wildflowers decorating the landscape, what do they inspire in you? This is the season of resurrection, when we experience earth's awakening all around us. And that awakening is so easy to notice right now, surrounded by the sounds of birds in celebration of new life, pathways scented with jasmine and eucalyptus, green hillsides covered in a blaze of wildflowers, skies that are clear and blue.

We don't want to barrel our way into the summer season without noticing the miracle of metamorphosis unfolding all around us. Having made our way past the big bang celebration of Easter Day, it's time to slow things down and savor the creative moments that are flowing their way to us. How fitting that this second Sunday of Easter so closely coincides with Earth Day, an observance that began fifty-two years ago in an incubator of bipartisan cooperation and, I might add, in the midst of a Republican administration. From a rather humble beginning, it has exploded into a global movement of people and organizations who can hear the alarm bells ringing, and who are constantly calling us toward the kinds of change that can help us heal some of the damage we have done, bring us back into right relationship with our environment. It's an endeavor that is good and right, and for spiritual communities like ours, it is an opportunity to express our faith in a way that is congruent with our recognition that Divine Spirit resides within all people and all things.

Yesterday I was walking up the driveway from the garage where I park my car and could not help but notice a rather good-sized snake coiled up on the warm concrete beside a retaining wall. It's not something I see often on the property where I live, and it gave me a bit of a start. But once the initial shock wore off, and once I'd established a comfortable sense of distance, I said to the snake, "Oh, hello. Nice to see you today!" as I scurried up the four flights of stairs to my apartment which suddenly felt quite safe to me up there in the sky. No offense to any snakes, but I like birds better. I digress.

With the hubbub of Easter past us, I decided this week to immerse myself in this idea of Earth Day, which eventually led me to [earthday.org](http://earthday.org), a wonderfully resourced website for a day like this. Though I was twelve years old on the first Earth Day, and though I do remember hearing about it on the evening news, I decided to refresh my memory about its history, purpose and meaning. I was going to summarize a short piece of what's on the website, but instead I am going to read for you some of what I found there.

In the decades leading up to the first Earth Day, Americans were consuming vast amounts of leaded gas through massive and inefficient automobiles. Industry belched out smoke and sludge with little fear of the consequences from either the law or bad press. Air pollution was commonly accepted as the smell of prosperity. Until this point, mainstream America remained largely oblivious to environmental concerns and how a polluted environment threatens human health. However, the stage was set for change with the publication of Rachel Carson's New York Times bestseller *Silent Spring* in 1962. The book represented a watershed moment, selling more than 500,000 copies in 24 countries as it raised public awareness and concern for living organisms, the environment and the inextricable links between pollution and public health.

Senator Gaylord Nelson, the junior senator from Wisconsin, had long been concerned about the deteriorating environment in the United States. Then in January 1969, he and many others witnessed the ravages of a massive oil spill in Santa Barbara, California. Inspired by the student anti-war movement, Senator Nelson wanted to infuse the energy of student anti-war protests with an emerging public consciousness about air and water pollution. Senator Nelson announced the idea for a teach-in on college campuses to the national media, and persuaded Pete McCloskey, a conservation-minded Republican Congressman, to serve as his co-chair. They recruited Denis Hayes, a young activist, to organize the campus teach-ins, and they chose April 22, a weekday falling between Spring Break and Final Exams, to maximize the greatest student participation.

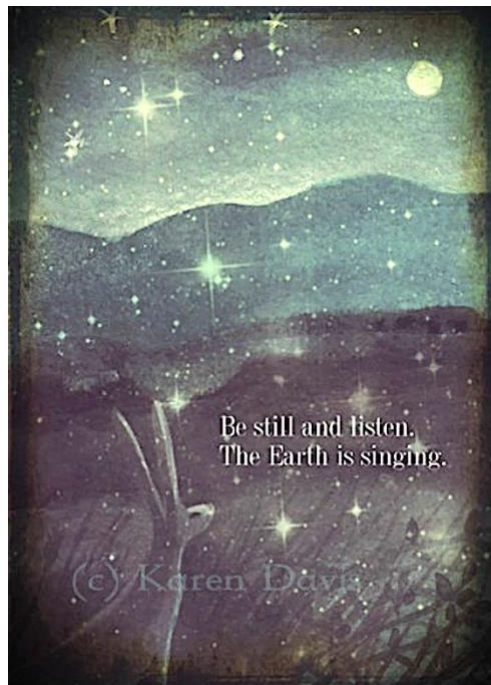
Recognizing its potential to inspire all Americans, Hayes built a national staff of 85 to promote events across the land, and the effort soon broadened to include a wide range of organizations, faith groups, and others. They changed the name to Earth Day, which immediately sparked national media attention, and caught on across the country. Earth Day inspired 20 million Americans — at the time, 10% of the total population of the United States — to take to the streets, parks and auditoriums to demonstrate against the impacts of 150 years of industrial development which had left a growing legacy of serious human health impacts. Thousands of colleges and universities organized protests against the deterioration of the environment, and there were massive coast-to-coast rallies in cities, towns, and communities. Groups that had been fighting individually against oil spills, polluting factories and power plants, raw sewage, toxic dumps, pesticides, freeways, the loss of wilderness and the extinction of wildlife united on Earth Day around these shared common values.

Earth Day 1970 achieved a rare political alignment, enlisting support from Republicans and Democrats, rich and poor, urban dwellers and farmers, business and labor leaders. By the end of 1970, the first Earth Day led to the creation of the United States Environmental Protection Agency and the passage of other first of their kind environmental laws, including the National Environmental Education Act, the Occupational Safety and Health Act, and the Clean Air Act. Two years later Congress passed the Clean Water Act. A year after that, Congress passed the Endangered Species Act, and soon after the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act. These laws have protected millions of men, women and children from disease and death and have protected hundreds of species from extinction.

Last week we spoke about the rhythms of the liturgical calendar, how they inspire us to tell our stories again and again, to maintain the cycles of all that makes us human, of all that connects us to the history of expressing what seems inexpressible. Earth Day, I believe, is central to a newer liturgical calendar, one that speaks of a new resurrection, not of a Jesus who ascended into a far-away heaven, but a resurrection of Mother Earth herself.

The ancient Hebrew poets and prophets looked at the earth and saw the power and wisdom of Yahweh, a Creator who had fashioned them as well as the world they inhabited. Whatever they understood that to mean theologically, they certainly saw themselves as part of a larger whole. They understood that the universe did not revolve around them as individuals, but as a collective relationship of God, earth, and humanity.

As we take this moment on the Second Sunday of Easter to bask in the reflected light of new life around us, the light of flowers, of birds, and of snakes, we who live in the post-modern world see an earth that is no less wondrous, but definitely more fragile than the one seen by our ancient Jewish counterparts. We now know that the ecosystem is made up of interdependent elements that have long been exploited in order to make life more "convenient" for some, to make more money for some, and to exploit earth's resources for these short-sighted goals. On this Earth Day, we remember with the ancients that we are part of a larger whole. We express our interdependence with one another and with the earth, and we renew our commitment to honoring that relationship. The Earth is our Wise Mother. Let us gather and listen to Her.



Painting by Karen Davis