

“Sacred Earth”

Rev. David Gregory

April 25, 2021

Easter 4



Readings

Psalm 24:1-2 from the New Revised Standard Version

The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it;
for he has founded it on the seas,
and established it on the rivers.

From *The Sacred Universe*
by Thomas Berry

We see quite clearly that what happens to the nonhuman happens to the human.
What happens to the outer world happens to the inner world.
If the outer world is diminished in its grandeur then the emotional, imaginative,
intellectual, and spiritual life of the human is diminished or extinguished.

Without the soaring birds, the great forests, the sounds and coloration of the insects,
the free-flowing streams, the flowering fields, the sight of the clouds by day
and the stars at night, we become impoverished in all that makes us human.

In what we have come to call the “Jesus Prayer,” the disciples were taught to say, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Those of us who have spent time in the Christian household have been taught to use the same phrases in our liturgies and gatherings, and many of us simply recite them without thinking. We may never have tied them to anything broader than the Judeo-Christian tradition in which we were raised. But the concept, “as above, so below,” which appears in Greek philosophy and elsewhere, has become a common way to describe the meaning of

these phrases in our generation. It is the language of manifestation, a way of taking the abstract and pulling it into the realm of the concrete, of taking a lofty ideal and bringing it into some tangible form. This language lives in the DNA of the Community Congregational Church, and over the decades it has inspired countless acts of environmental activism. Those who don't know us very well might label our use of the language as merely political in its motivation, but if you are around us for any length of time, you'll realize that it comes from a deeply spiritual place, even a religious one, as evidenced by recent discussions about the trees on our church property.

We cannot imagine a way of being Christian that does not include a recognition of the oneness of all things, the expression of Divine and Holy Spirit in the smallest bird or blade of grass, or the responsibility we have to care for the Earth as our sacred Mother. This week we celebrated the fifty-first anniversary of Earth Day, in a yearly observance that reminds us of our obligation to love the Earth in the same way that we would care for ourselves. We could call it the Golden Rule of Earth care. And why does it matter? Because our connection with the Earth is so organic, our oneness with creation is so complete that caring for the Earth *is* the same thing as caring for ourselves.

The ancient Hebrews sang of the world as they understood it, created by the one true personal God to whom they owed their existence. They looked at the natural environment and saw it as an explicit revelation of the God they worshiped. It was an earth they did not own, one that remained in the hands of the One who made it, and they saw themselves as an intelligent part of that design. They were promised not a heaven above, but a promised *land* that would testify to their relationship with God, and their acceptance of God's gift of abundance for them, a "land flowing with milk and honey" that would meet all of their needs, as long as they let their land rest every seven years in accordance with the law of Moses. This ancient patriarchal structure, along with its greatly expanded Christian version tries to suppress any revelation of the Divine Feminine in the natural world. In a very lopsided way, it demands the right to manipulate and subdue the earth, and to exploit its resources for the supposed benefit of humans, who now see themselves as the crown of all creation, and therefore the rulers of it.

I believe this same patriarchal system is choking the very life out of the western church, to the point of hastening its demise. We may not live to see it, but I believe something wonderful will be born in its place. Out of this death will come new life, and I think Earth Day is a celebration of this idea, the commemoration of a future memory, one where the balance and health of the Earth is restored, and humanity drops its attack and lives in harmony with it. Call it the New Reformation or the New Resurrection. It is coming.

Thomas Berry, the renowned historian and religious scholar and lifelong student of evolution and ecology is often cited as a sacred prophetic voice in the environmental movement. In an essay entitled "New Story," written over forty years ago, he said that the same humanity which has spent many generations misusing and spoiling the planet is poised to "embrace a new role as a vital part of a larger, interdependent Earth community, consisting of a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects." Thirty years later, just prior to his death in 2009, he published a work entitled *The Sacred Universe*, in which he elaborated on this interdependence:

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I can't imagine a more direct and succinct way of saying it. We are an integral piece of the cosmos. At the sub-atomic level we can see that everything is energy; everything moves; everything vibrates. These vibrations happen at all kinds of frequencies, so that when one looks under a microscope, or at a sunset, or into the eyes of a beloved one, one looks at the same thing.

Interdependence is often overlooked in the American church because it does not reflect our American sense of individualism and independence. Our life goals are often centered in not being dependent on anyone, on calling our own shots and doing our own thing. We don't wish to be that connected, because connection often spells a surrender of our freedom. But the church has forgotten all of the "body" language of the New Testament. In Paul's theology, the church is analogous to the human body, a single organism with many parts, all the parts working individually in concert for the good of the collective whole. This is why when one suffers we all suffer. This is why when one rejoices, we all rejoice. This is why when one says "I can't breathe," none of us can breathe.

Earth Day could be called the Day of Oneness, the day that we recognize our oneness with the water table that is affected by everything we put down our drains. I can look at the plastic in my trash and understand that it may very well outlive humanity, and that a plastic bag blowing down the highway could easily end up in the ocean, joining huge floating islands of plastic, destroying plant and animal life. What happens to that animal life also happens to me. When wetlands are destroyed, part of me goes with them. And when the air is filled with toxic smoke, we all suffer together as one.

Last year on Earth Day we were consumed with concern over a government that did not recognize even the simple science of the natural world. This year it's different, but not that much has changed. We may be rejoining climate accords with the rest of the world and placing ourselves back on the right side of history, but it means our work has just begun. Let's get busy and take good care of our Mother . . . Mother Earth.

