

“A Place with God”  
Psalm 148:1-13

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*Integrity of Creation Sunday*  
San Dimas UCC

The photo that is the backdrop of my sermon title was taken from Voyager 1 in 1990 as it was on its way out of the solar system more than 4 billion miles from earth. Earth is seen as an infinitesimal point of light (between the two white tick marks). Quite by accident, the earth was captured in one of the scattered light rays caused by taking the image at an angle so close to the sun. This photo was made famous by the astronomer Carl Sagan. From a distance, this is our place with God.

In 1959, only two years after the United Church of Christ came into being, its General Synod meeting called for “environmental responsibility and conservation of earth’s resources.” This theme continued and found its priority status in 1989 when the church pronounced its commitment to “The Integrity of Creation, Justice, and Peace.” That was 19 years ago. It would be easy to say we think about these things because of the amount of attention given to global warming and the effects that are playing out on our planet that we see through the news so available to us. But as the Christian community, a community of faith, we think about these things because God thinks about these things.

We trace in scripture God’s love and deep concern for all creation. The Psalmist describes the elements of life on earth and gives God praise for their beauty and majesty. Psalm 24 says “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.” In Hebrew scripture the prophets also proclaimed a deep integration of creation and spirituality. In Jeremiah, Isaiah, and throughout the history of our religious ancestors creation was a whole; what happened to one was directly related to the other. Particularly disasters of nature were attributed to the sins of those “in charge” such as kings or Pharaohs.

Sometimes words from scripture have been mistranslated, such as “dominion” as used in the story of creation, to mean domination, and that one word has gone a long way to shape our attitude about our relationship to all creatures and creation. In the Hebrew the word is *radaph* and it means a sense of responsibility coupled with a power inherently given. So because humans have capacity for power, they are commanded to be responsible for God’s creation.

Jesus reminded his listeners of God’s care for the smallest flower and bird. And John proclaimed “God so loved the world, that God gave Jesus” and thus, followers of Jesus are to be forces for salvation of humans by not just humans, *the world!* In Romans we hear Paul declare “the creation waits with eager longing.” Paul speaks of salvation this way: “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only creation but we ourselves...as we wait for redemption.” (Romans 8:19-23)

So if the Bible has this strong theme of creation as “so loved by God” how did we come to the point of creation being an afterthought? By the time that Constantine in the 300’s became a Christian, the Greek philosophy of dualism, the separation of the material and spiritual, influenced a shift in thinking so that this world mattered less and the spiritual afterlife matter most. Although this was resisted by many Christians as a distortion of Judeo-Christian thought, the Catholic monk, Aquinas, in the 1200’s found a way of convincingly integrating Greek philosophy with Christianity. Aquinas introduced into Christianity a pyramid picture of the world with God at the top, then man, then woman, then slaves, then animals, plants, and non living material at the bottom. This pyramid became a paradigm for how human beings would view the world for centuries; and it’s pretty clear who’s important and who’s not--creation is down low on the list of priorities.

But just because it *has been* doesn't mean it *must continue to be*. God is still speaking and perhaps we can hear anew God's words. I confess that when I first came to this sermon, I was coming out of anxiousness believing that the biggest crisis our children and grandchildren will face is changes brought about through global warming. But then I realized that I am here not as a scientist but as one called to proclaim the theological perspective. So after studying, reviewing, and reflecting on the biblical message, as well as people who have studied the biblical message for decades, many of whom are living at Pilgrim Place, I'd like to share a few thoughts from one of them John Cobb. The first point is that everything is in relation to everything else and that because we are in relation we receive value from them. Part of my value comes from my relation to you. You influence who I am. Second, every part of creation has an "intrinsic value" that is ***for itself without regard to how it affects others or is valued by others***. So I should care about God's creation not just so my children and grandchildren can survive but because all God's creation has a value to be cherished for its own sake.

Cobb, in summarizing his coming to a "deep ecology" says this: ***I argued that aiming to defend the natural environment simply for the sake of human beings would not achieve even its own ends. Those who did not care for other creatures would never perceive the real situation with sufficient clarity to recognize the seriousness of what was happening. They would not be motivated at a sufficient depth to take the actions needed. The Christian principle that those who seek to save only their own souls will lose them applies to humanity as a whole. If we aim to save only humanity, humanity will die. We will deal wisely with our problems only if we seek the well-being of the other creatures out of real concern for them.***

So as Christians the message is that we love the world as "God so loved..." as God created and declared, good! And the message integrated results in actions! I am not going to debate global warming not only because of what I know, but also because the most intelligent scientist I know and live with and who I know never lies, takes it for certain. Tom and I are going to England in May to celebrate our 15th wedding anniversary. Our flight will emit 4 tons of carbon (a principal source of global warming) into the atmosphere. We've been calculating how to offset this destruction. It's a little challenging because we're already done the easiest things, such as, we replaced our light bulbs with fluorescents, upgraded our airconditioner/heater to energy savers and bought a Prius.

Then last year we replaced our pool pump, washer, dryer, and put in insulated windows and our electric bill decreased almost by half. Of course, these changes cost something, but since we can do these things, we should do these things and even more than our part to defray global warming. So now we're looking for ways to mitigate our trip to England. British Airways makes it easy to click on a box, pay an amount, and they'll see that you offset your carbon emissions. But we wanted some of the benefit to go to this church. This is what we've come up with so far (Tom's still working on the calculations): First, we want to replace the old A/C window units in my office and the main office and buy an additional one for the bride's room. The usage of the existing units was decreased last year because I stuck these insulating foam boards from Lowes in the windows.

But we still can save energy with new units. Second, Tom's tested the energy use of appliances in our house while they are turned off. I didn't know that approximately 40% of electrical use occurs while electronics are actually turned off. This means one can save a lot if you unplug adapters, electronics, and appliances. Now I don't just detach my phone after charging, I unplug the adapter. Also, we're going to one TV, one DVD, VCR. And we're replacing our water heater with a new energy efficient one, perhaps adaptable to solar power.

Five years ago we couldn't afford to do most of these things (and there's nothing noble about doing what one can and should do). But probably the biggest mitigation of our carbon emission to England is that we decided to combine our trip to England with a visit to see our daughter in Chicago on the way home, thus eliminating a separate plane flight. Everyone can do something such as replace light bulbs or unplug appliances or combine trips in the car or cut out a trip. There's some ideas for you on display in the fellowship hall this morning.

When pondering the state of our planet, one could easily get discouraged so I'd like to end with one more quote from John Cobb: ***In spite of all the destructive forces we let loose against life on his planet, the Spirit of Life is at work in ever new and unforeseeable ways, countering and circumventing the obstacles we put in its path. In spite of my strong tendencies to complacency and despair, I experience the Spirit in myself as calling forth the realistic hope apart from which there is no hope, and I am confident that what I find in myself is occurring in you as well. Belief in the Spirit is belief that I am not alone; that in working for life and love in hope I am working "with" something much greater than myself; that there are possibilities for the future that cannot be simply projected out of the past; that even my mistakes and failures may be woven into a healing pattern of which I cannot now form any conception. (p.125, Sustainability)***

As people of faith may we be renewed in spirit and resolve to cherish this earth, to love this earth, to be God's partners in saving this earth, our place with God!