

God's Wondrous World – Earth Day – April 18th, 2021 (Psalm 8:3-4, 5-9)

*When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars,
which you have set in place. (Psalm 8:3-4)*

One of my favorite nighttime activities at the cottage is to lay on a blanket on the dock and look up at the stars. We often have competitions of who can be the first one to spot a shooting star – and there's lots of them!

Some nights we can even see the milky way.

It is indeed magnificent and majestic – and it puts me in awe of God's wondrous creation.

I think during this time of lockdown and stay at home, we have perhaps become more appreciative of the beauty of creation around us.

We are spending more time in our gardens.

We are getting hope from the budding leaves, and the sprouting blossoms.

And perhaps we are out walking more than we used to do before this pandemic.

Maybe we just notice the birds in the sky and the fish in the water more – judging by the pictures you sent in, I think that might be true.

You could actually say that a positive outcome of COVID – is that it has slowed us down to appreciate the environment more.

You have probably also heard about other positive environmental changes due to COVID.

- Travel restrictions have led to a decrease in fuel consumption.
- Decrease in resource consumption has meant less waste disposal and an improvement in water quality, which in turn has led to improved habitat for all aqua life.
- Reduced industrial activities have led to reduced noise pollution and improved air quality.
- Reduced pressure on tourist destinations has led to ecological restoration

It's all good news!

But the sad part is, that there are just as many negative side effects on the environment too.

We have seen:

- A huge increase in hazardous medical waste
- A haphazard disposal of PPE causing soil and water pollution – I am sure many of you have seen a randomly discarded face mask

- Working from home has caused an increase in municipal waste and more garbage for landfills
- There has been an increasing need to light and heat the home during the day, and to run technology 24/7, which has all put an increase on the demand for fuel.

During COVID we have become very aware of the need to reach out and connect to support each other in community. But what about the need to reach out and support the environment. This is, after all, a world over which we have been given guardianship.

Way back in Genesis 1, God charges humanity with caring for the Earth, the seas, and all the animals that God had spent the previous verses creating.

But do we take this responsibility seriously?

I am reminded of a story about the interconnectedness of all the environment. I think it is a good story to share on Earth Day Sunday.

It's a story about a young seal ...

A very young seal woke up one day. He woke up to find his beach covered in thick, black oil. He looked around for his family and friends, but they were nowhere to be found. Eventually he found a neighbour, an old seal. She was lying on her side, covered in oil, stuck fast to the rock, and she was dying.

"There's been an accident" she told him.

"Some men have crashed a ship full of oil and it's leaked all into the sea. All over the coast of Alaska animals and birds are dying because they have been caught in the black sticky stuff. Your only hope" she said "is to journey in land and try and find some where safe to live" and with that the old seal died.

But the young seal journeyed in land, which wasn't easy because seals are used to swimming in the sea. He travelled up a small river and before long a fish jumped out of the water and spoke to him:

"What sort of animal are you?" asked the fish.

"I'm a seal" said the seal "And I'm looking for somewhere safe to live."

"Well, there's nowhere round here," said the fish. "These waters are full of poison and pesticides washed off the land."

"How did they get on the land?" asked the seal.

"The farmers use them to help grow more food," said the fish. "If you're looking for some where safe to live, perhaps I can come with you?"

So, the seal and the fish journeyed on together. Now the river led into a small stream and further upstream, they saw a dam. When they got close to the dam, they met a beaver.

“Hello” said the seal. “We’re looking for some where safe to live.”

“Well, there ain’t no where round here,” said the beaver. “Men drop plastic bags and candy wrappers, plastic bottles and potato chip packets. They trip me up in the forest and they float downstream until they wash up against my dam. I’m tired of living in a garbage dump. If you’re looking for somewhere safe to live, perhaps I can come with you?”

So, the seal, the fish and the beaver journeyed on together. They travelled up stream until the stream led into a dark, dark forest. And in the dark, dark forest, they met a great big grizzly bear. GRRRRR

“We’re looking for somewhere safe to live” said the seal in a timid voice.

“Nowhere round here,” growled the bear. “This forest used to be my home, now acid rain has stripped the bark from the trees and their dying.”

“w-w-w-what’s acid rain?” asked the seal.

“It’s when the rain mixes with the fumes from men’s cars and factory chimneys” replied the bear.

“If you’re looking for somewhere safe to live, perhaps I can come with you?”

So, the seal, the fish, the beaver, and the bear journeyed on together. They travelled for many days and many nights and everywhere they went they saw examples of human stupidity. Finally, they stopped to rest.

“We’ll never find anywhere safe to live” they all agreed. “If only we could fly over the land, then maybe we might spot somewhere.”

They looked up, and high in the sky, circling slowly they saw a golden eagle. They waved to it and it swooped down in a rather frightening way.

“We’re looking for somewhere safe to live” said the bear, who wasn’t quite so afraid of eagles.

“We thought you might be able to help us.”

And so, the eagle flew off. She climbed higher and higher until she was just a speck in the sky. She flew over cities where the buildings had been turned grey by exhaust fumes. Over power stations and factory chimneys half hidden by clouds of smoke and gas. But try as she might, she could find no-where safe to live. She flew off over the North Pole and watched through the hole in the sky caused by the chemicals, as the ice caps slowly melted; but still, she could find no where safe to live. Exhausted she returned to tell the others what she had seen.

“Our only hope” said the seal, “is for a great flood just like in the beginning, so it will drown all humans and their stupidity.”

And so, all the animals sat down and they prayed for rain. (story written by Rev. Gail)

It’s a sad story – but perhaps its one that needs to be told out loud again and again.

And it’s not a new message. We can find various passages of scripture where God warns the people that they must take the responsibility to care for the land seriously.

The prophet Jeremiah decrees that the earth:

“will become a wasteland, parched and desolate, and that the whole land will be laid waste if no one cares for it.”

(Jeremiah 12:11)

And we can learn a lot from many ancient indigenous teachings, where caring for the environment plays an important role.

Recently in the United Church Broadview magazine, Ojibway elder, Isaac Crosby wrote about the 7 Grandfather teachings for a Spiritual relationship with the earth through gardening.

He reminds us that as we hold the dampened sun-drenched earth in our fingers, it can draw us into communion with the Spirit of the Creator. And he talks about how our relationship with the earth should be one of humility, honesty, respect, courage, love, truth and wisdom.

I think I would add responsibility to that list of teachings.

And, of course, taking care of our earth is the message that we heard loud and clear from the young prophetic voice of Greta Thunberg. In 2019, at just 16 years of age, she addressed the United Nations Climate Summit, challenging world leaders to take immediate action against climate change. Her ‘How Dare You’ speech rang true. She said:

“... you come to young people for hope. How dare you! You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. But I am one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and yet all you talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!”

Her words sound awfully like the words of the prophet Hosea, speaking out against the policies of the ruling authorities. He warns them that if they continue with their actions, then:

“the beasts of the fields, and the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea will all die.”

(Hosea 4:3)

A decade ago, the United Church decided to stand behind initiatives that supported environmental justice. They set up the United Church environmental Fund. The goal of the fund is to work towards leaving the earth in a better state than we found it!

Last year, the Chair of the Foundation's Board, Janet Stockton, arranged for an ongoing monthly gift to the Environmental Fund to honor her mother. She writes:

"My mom was a born environmentalist, and in the 1950's her activism was not always popular. She stood her ground on cloth diapers, refused to use prepared packaged food or paper towels and purchased everything in cloth bags."

Janet remembers how she was sometimes teased for her mothers' unconventional methods, but she treasures the memories and is thankful for the values her mother taught her. She says: *"My mother challenged us, and her grandchildren, to love and respect God's earth, and I hope to continue her passion."*

Perhaps donating to the United Church environmental fund, is something that you might consider? (We will put details of that in next week's newsletter). Or, maybe you would be willing to do a more hands on activity? Taking care of God's Wondrous world is a monumental responsibility. It is one that we are called to do **every** day.

This week, as we celebrate Earth Day, I encourage you to find your own way to live with respect for Creation. And in the months and years ahead, let us all intentionally revere the wonderful world that God has made for us.

And let us remember and honour, our role in preserving our planet for our neighbours, for our children, and for our children's children. Amen.