

We'll open today's sermon with a hymn – not a good old Gospel hymn, not a staid and stately standard hymn, not even a contemporary hymn with drums. No, this is the hymn which is encompassed in verses 15-20 of Colossians, chapter 1:

*who is the image of the invisible God
the firstborn of all creation,
for in him were created all things
in heaven and on earth
things visible and invisible*

*all things were created through him and for him
and he himself is before all things
and all things hold together in him
and he himself is the head of the body*¹

This is what one scholar has proposed as the original hymn precursor to today's scripture. Now I doubt you'd say those are catchy lyrics...nor was the tune, if there was one, likely to be one you'd leave the sanctuary humming!

It is, however, a beautiful riff on the phrase "in the beginning", recalling "be-re-shit" in Hebrew, the first words of the book of Genesis.

Here's another lyrical piece of scripture, the first verses of the Gospel according to John. And just like Genesis 1, John 1 begins with these words, "In the beginning."

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Listen to just one more song from scripture, because it's so beautiful. This is from Proverbs, chapter 8, sometimes entitled "Wisdom's Part in Creation":

The LORD created me as the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts of long ago.
Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.
When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.
Before the mountains had been shaped,
before the hills, I was brought forth--
when the Lord had not yet made earth and fields,
or the world's first bits of soil.
When he established the heavens, I was there,
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
when the Lord made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains of the deep,
when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his command,

when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
then I was beside him, like a master worker, [or a little child],
and I was daily the Lord's delight,
rejoicing before him always,
rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the human race.

There is in all these passages a breadth — a cosmic sense . . . God in the beginning, Wisdom in the beginning, the Word in the beginning. “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to Godself all things, whether on earth or in heaven.”

We also hear it in that oft-quoted verse from John (3:16), “For God so loved the world - **in the Greek, the *kosmos*** - that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

. . . *For God so loved the kosmos . . .*

Now the author of Colossians doesn't leave us with a hymn to the primacy of Christ in the *kosmos*, the whole of creation, but rather inserts two phrases into that original hymn that bring us down-to-earth. Not only do all things hold together in Christ, but Christ has entered into earthly, human history. All things are reconciled — how? “by making peace through the blood of his cross.”

And the second way that the author reins us in from the vastness of creation to the immediacy of earth ... he takes the word “body”, which to a Greek of Paul's day would have meant the whole cosmos, and he adds two words . . . “Christ is the head of the body, the church . . . who reconciles . . . by making peace through the blood of his cross.”

Let us consider some other places where scripture refers to God as intimately involved with the earth as well as the heavens, with humans as well as the cosmos. Can anyone here remember the covenant that God makes with Noah when he sets his bow in the clouds?

You see, the covenant in the Noah story is with all creatures, all flesh upon the earth. In these words from Genesis 9, see how many times the reference to all creatures is repeated — count with me:

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with **every living creature** that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall **all flesh** be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and **every living creature** that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and **every living creature of all flesh**; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy **all flesh**. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and **every living creature of all flesh** that is on the earth.” God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and **all flesh that is on the earth.**” (9:8-17)

Well, I counted seven mentions of “all flesh” or “every living creature.” But in addition, I noticed something I hadn't seen before “I have set my bow in the clouds,” God says, “and it shall be a sign of the covenant **between me and the earth.**” Between me and the earth “and never again shall there be a flood **to destroy the earth.**”

Scripture is very clear. God is in love with the earth, with its creatures, and with humanity. God so loved the world . . . that Jesus came, and the divine fullness dwelt in him.² And “through him God was pleased to reconcile to Godself all things, whether on earth or in heaven.”

So what does Colossians have to say about the proper response to God? The God who creates, redeems, and sustains all that is — from the expanse of the cosmos to the tiniest fleck of life on earth? If we look at verse 10, just before today’s passage, we find these words:

“so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God.” . . . ***“so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord”***.

This life, as the writer describes it, worthy of the Lord and fully pleasing to God, is filled with joyful thanksgiving for our salvation, and for our very lives.

So what has all this to do with Earth Day?

It relates to what is possibly the greatest crisis of our time — the environment: climate change, pollution, heightened sensitivity to allergens, resistance to antibiotics, and the extinction of species through the destruction of habitat. Oh, I know there are varying views on the causes for all this. Does global warming result solely from human activity? Probably not. The earth, as all its creatures, has cycles ... warming and cooling. And what does it matter that migrating birds cannot find a respite in their instinctual treks of thousands of miles? Does it matter that, due to a change in seasonal temperatures, the life cycle of some species is no longer in sync with the life cycle of their primary prey? Does it matter that desert areas are increasing in the Sudan and causing even more starvation and hardship than already existed there?

Without our even entering into the argument about the cause, we can see that our Home, the Earth, is experiencing rapid change. We can see that the earth is not as clean as it once was. We can see that the resources of the world are being inequitably distributed. We see shortages and starvation.

In Romans, Paul observed, “For the creation waits with eager longing . . . for the creation was subjected to futility . . . that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay . . . that the whole creation has been groaning in travail . . . “ (8:19-23)

Here’s is a more contemporary lament . . . if one is to measure the human footprint, the use of resources, the production of garbage, of just one American, it can be observed that more than 4 or 5 earths would be required to satisfy the needs of all earth’s inhabitants if they were to live in the style and comfort of that American.³

Now, please understand, I am not pointing a finger at you or you or you. I am pointing it directly at myself. Perhaps you will relate, as I did, to this creation paraphrase of Art Buchwald, from 38 years ago.

“And Man created the plastic bag and the tin and aluminum can and the cellophane wrapper and the paper plate and the disposable bottle, and this was good because Man could then take his automobile and buy his food all in one place and he could save that which was good to eat in the refrigerator and throw away that which had no further use. And pretty soon the earth was covered with plastic bags and aluminum cans and paper plates and disposable bottles, and there was nowhere left to sit down or to walk. And Man shook his head and cried, ‘Look at all this God-awful litter.’”⁴

We’ve probably all looked with disgust at trash washing up on the beach, or at cans and packaging littering what should be a pristine mountain trail, or at plastic bags blown into the trees along the highway as unwelcome decorations. This is not news to us. But it is time for us to wake up and understand the context and the consequences.

And that is why I began today with the hymn to the cosmic Christ. The earth and its inhabitants are precious to this Christ. Therefore, it is not a political statement or an economic option, but a spiritual and ethical imperative that we begin to treat the earth with the respect we once did . . . respect as did the ancients who lived off the land as nomads; or the honoring of the people who lived on this continent before us, who valued and blessed every earth or animal resource they used; or the intimate care that our grandparents exercised, growing up on a farm and raising their own food.

One of the “great ends of the Church” is “the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.” I submit that we have an opportunity to work as co-creators with the creating and creative God, that we have an opportunity to be a beacon of light to our society, that we have an opportunity to bring healing and increased access to resources in our land and in developing countries – all as part of exhibiting the Reign of God to our culture.

When you take the time to drop your soda or water bottle into a recycling bin, you may not feel you’re doing much. When you decrease your use of fossil fuels by walking or biking or making your next car a more efficient one, you probably don’t notice a change in the crude oil market. When you forego red meat for an additional day each week, or when you take half of the inordinately large portion home from the restaurant for tomorrow’s lunch, you may not see the end of factory farming grow nearer.

But we know that the accumulated small steps of each one of us in this community of faith will add up. Perhaps it’s time we take a stand on the environment.

- Maybe just putting a recycling bin in the kitchen downstairs?
- Maybe considering becoming a GreenFaith congregation. GreenFaith gives access to resources & consulting, in order to take steps toward a greener church facility.

Other congregations have stepped up. Trinity, East Brunswick recycles even their used coffee cups and dessert plates at coffee hour . . . you can begin to see an accumulation of effort moving past the environmental value of just one recycled coffee cup. Morning Star Church in Bayville built an entirely energy efficient church and reduced their utility bills to a fraction of what one expects for the size of their building.

Friends, we are the Body of Christ, and Christ is the head of the body, the Word that was present in the beginning, and the firstborn of the New Creation. Through Christ, all things in heaven and on earth were reconciled to God. God created, and God saw that creation was very good. God placed humans here to till the soil and be stewards of the earth and to practice husbandry of all the animals. We are not living our calling if we participate in thoughtless polluting, overconsumption, and the meaningless slaughter or extinction of our fellow creatures. We live in an interdependent web of life, created by God.

Vaclav Havel once resolved to conduct his life “as if” he lived in a free society, and in doing so, he created a tiny space of liberty that, in time, expanded to take in, and then help take down, the whole of the Eastern bloc. Havel later suggested that, in a similar way, people begin to “conduct themselves as if they were to live on this earth forever and be answerable for its condition one day.”⁵ We are, you know. Answerable.

What will you do? Plant a patio garden this spring? Switch from disposable dishes and napkins and water bottles, and substitute reusable ones? Change lightbulbs to compact fluorescents in areas where the lights are not frequently turned on and off? . . . and then learn how to dispose of them properly? Will you fill your recycling bin to the brim, or maybe use one of the services that remove you from excessive catalog mailing lists? When you get that new puppy, will you adopt her from the shelter? Will you become an avid label reader . . . opting when possible for local produce, sweatshop-free clothing, free-range meat products, and reduced plastic packaging? Will you purchase fair-trade coffee here at our church, and maybe indulge in a little fair-trade chocolate too?

If you do even one of these things, and each of us does one new thing, and each committee in the church takes on one project, and if each church in the presbytery adopts one environmentally sound practice, and if we honor

our General Assembly's policies toward fair labor practices . . . then, friends, we can be a sign and model of the Reign of God to the world. If we adopt Kingdom values, and do it joyfully and thankfully, we can influence others. The ripples and networks and connections will multiply.

Leo Buscaglia commented, "I still get wildly enthusiastic about little things... I play with leaves. I skip down the street and run against the wind." Let us each take joy in God's creation, and take responsibility for its care. Then we will be able to feed the hungry and ease dis-ease. We will delight to claim Earth as our home, until that day when we are truly at home in the presence of God.

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Endnotes

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1. Andrew T. Lincoln, *NIV XI*, p.602.
 2. Lincoln, p. 600, quoting from P. Pokorny, *Colossionas: A Commentary*, trans. S. S. Schatzmann (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1991), 84-86.
 3. Omitted, since used this a few weeks ago: . . . one that accompanies this heart-breaking photo: "Ocean-borne trash plagues the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. The stomach of this dead albatross held more than a half pound of plastic." When our colorful cast-off plastic fools a creature into ingesting it, there is no room for food, and the being will starve - as this albatross did. (Photo by David Littschwager & Susan Middleton, in the September/October 2007 issue of a recent environmental publication.)
 4. Art Buchwald, 1970, from the same environmental publication as above.
 5. *NY Times Magazine: The Green Issue: Some Bold Steps to Make Your Carbon Footprint Smaller*; *The Way We Live Now: Why Bother?* by Michael Pollan, a contributing writer for the magazine, is the author, most recently, of *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto*.