

“The Holy Land, The Holy Planet”

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Psalm 24; Matthew 6:25-34

April 27, 2008; Youth Sunday

About a month or two ago, the youth, along with our Youth Leader, Tara Giddens, decided to emphasize concern for the earth in their Youth Sunday worship today. Earth Day was earlier this week, and so such things are upon all of our hearts and minds. Yet good stewardship of the limited resources of our planet Earth is almost constantly upon the minds of our youth and young adults. They have many years of life ahead of them, God willing, and they will bear the consequences of our present decisions about the use of our planet for many years after the rest of us have shuffled off this mortal coil, to use an old phrase.

So I shared some Stewardship of Creation resources with them that can be adapted for worship, and they delved into some of the resources and concerns that they have, too. They chose the hymns, the prayers, the liturgies, and the Scriptures for our time of worship today. They decided that none of them wanted to try to preach, so here I am before you today, not exactly a youth, but happy to help and support our deep-thinking and righteous-seeking youth as they lead us in remembering, “The earth is the LORD’S and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it;....”

Knowing this was part of our Scripture for today, these words have rung in the back of my mind as I’ve watched so many commercials on TV recently. I’ve heard these words as I’ve read so many of the articles that are emphasizing how to “go green” right now. These words, “The earth is the LORD’S and all that is in it” have reminded me that creation is a holy gift, a sacred trust, and so God in heaven is involved in concerns for the treatment of this planet.

So I’ve surprised myself to feel a tiny bit disgusted with what seems to be the commercialization of Earth Day. It seems parallel to my bit of disgust of the commercialization of Christmas. Yes, I’m surprised to feel that way! I didn’t see that sense of offense coming. I think you know what I mean by the commercialization of Christmas. During those weeks before Christmas, every store and retailer barrages us with quasi-Christmas symbols and renditions of “Jingle Bells” blaring at us just to ramp up the buying and spending of their products. Something is blatantly missing from that TV version of Christmas. There is no hint of the hushed holiness of a crowd of people gathered in church to worship on Christmas Eve, singing “Silent Night” in candlelight, filled with awe over the wonder of God becoming flesh in order to walk alongside of us. There is no sense of joy that raggedy shepherds smelling of sheep dung were the first to bow by the side of a feed trough holding a holy baby, later to be joined by foreign rich aristocrats searching the earth to find God’s truth dwelling among us.

In a similar way, something seems to be missing from the TV version of Earth Day. It's amazing how "green" everyone has decided to become in the last few days. Have you noticed it? Suddenly every retailer is trying to convince us that they are doing great things for the health of our planet, and they all have products to sell us that will open new opportunities to us to save the planet. Now don't get me wrong. Many of the suggestions and energy-saving devices are wonderful ideas, so we can't just throw the baby out with the bathwater when it seems that the whole "greening phenomenon" has become the latest fad and the hottest marketing ploy.

But one has to wonder just how seriously concerned retailers are about the earth's resources. On one hand, they encourage shoppers to buy reusable shopping bags instead of requesting the long-standing "paper or plastic" bags offered with purchases. That's a good thing. But look at the products on the shelves! They are packaged in tons of paper, plastic, and styrofoam! If the concern for lessening one-time use of papers and plastics ran very deep, we'd be seeing fewer of those plastic clam-wrap packages that are so hard to open, and so forth.

The missing piece from all the "greening" hype is this: "The earth is the LORD'S and all that is in it...."

This planet upon which we walk, this terra firma, is not something to be taken for granted. It is not to be hoarded or used as if there is literally "no tomorrow." We are renters of this property, if you will. It is not ours to own. It is God's planet, and it is rich with gifts and beauty to provide a full and abundant life for those who pass their lives upon it.

I've worked as a volunteer on two different archaeological digs, as most of you know. One gets a fascinating world view walking through ancient sites, where people have felt important in the past, or where people have pronounced legal judgment upon others, or where people have cooked their food and pondered the mysteries of life. It doesn't take long to get a sense of how fleeting and transitory all of our human efforts are. One can be scraping away at an old mosaic floor, once part of a holy inner sanctum of a church, a place behind the icon screen where only priests could go. At one time it represented an actual piece of heaven's real estate here on earth, and it was barricaded by sacred and gilded artwork and doors, as if to keep the ordinary riff raff off of God's holy lawn, if you will. It probably had that air of otherworldliness for centuries. But now, it is just a mosaic floor surrounded by tumbled walls and blowing dust. College students leap and bound freely across its once privileged space, laughing at rude college student jokes, smoking cigarettes, and jabbering about their plans for an afternoon break, to go shopping, or swimming, or just hang out. Clinical photographs are taken, charts are drafted to scale, the whole place is scientifically distilled. So much for the air of holiness in this former place of reverence!

Our human efforts, our goals, our foundations, our “permanent” establishments are temporary at best. Oh we plat the landscape and divide it into acres, sections, townships, and so forth. We say, if you go within these walls, you can’t go behind this door or that door, but you can sit in this chair and wait for someone behind that door to let you pass to another set of walls within these walls. We draw lines on maps, and that means if you live on this side of the line, you have a flag that looks this way, and they have a flag that looks that way. You pay taxes for this stuff, and they pay taxes for that stuff. But in a thousand years, what will it mean?

All those lines and boundaries seem so fixed for eternity, but they are far more fluid than permanent. In the end, we don’t really own anything on this earth. We attempt to order it for the well-being of people, but we never own it at all. It is not ours. It never was, and it never will be. It belongs to God, and we are just temporary tenants upon this planet.

So if the earth and everything in it belongs to God, and it was never really our own creation or possession, this changes a lot of things for us! We speak of a portion of the Middle East as the Holy Land, seeing that most of the faith shaping events of our religion happened on that territory. It is seen as such a limited quantity of “holy land,” that many are prepared to fight to the death to own it! God in heaven must be rolling God’s eyes over it all, that is, when God is not crying with grief over the unholiness of the “Holy” Land.

There is no one “Holy Land,” in God’s eyes. There is a Holy Planet, and a Holy Creation. And if everything in it belongs to God, that means every one in it belongs to God. It is all beautiful, holy, and beloved. It is all to be cherished.

This Holy Planet is given into our hands so that we might have food, and drink, and clothing, and shelter. It is given with all of its variety and all of its differences to give us a life lived joyfully in the light and love of God. It is not to be seized, or hoarded, or drained of all its goodness by a few at the expense of the many. Jesus makes that pretty clear when he says, “Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.” There is plenty for all, as long as someone doesn’t start to say, “I need what you have! I’m doing this my way!”

So how can we reflect that this planet is a Holy Planet? How can we value this earth so that we care for God’s property instead of grabbing whatever we can get while the getting is good? Some years ago, some Christians gathered together and considered these matters. They wrote something called “The Shakertown Pledge.” It is a good beginning. Here it is.

Recognizing that the earth and the fullness thereof is a gift from our gracious God, and that we are called to cherish, and nurture and provide loving stewardship for the

earth's resources, and recognizing that life itself is a gift, and a call to responsibility, joy and celebration:

We declare ourselves to be world citizens.

We commit ourselves to lead ecologically sound lives.

We commit ourselves to lead lives of creative simplicity, and to share our personal wealth with the world's poor.

We commit ourselves to join with others in reshaping institutions so as to bring about a more just global society.

We will seek to avoid the creation of products which will cause harm to others.

We affirm the gift of our body, and commit ourselves to its proper nourishment and physical well-being.

We commit ourselves to examine continually our relations with others, and to attempt to relate honestly, morally and lovingly to those around us.

We commit ourselves to personal renewal through prayer, meditation and study.

We promise responsible participation in a community of faith. (Quoted in Celebrating One World: A Worship Resource Book on Social Justice, ed. Linda Jones, Annabel Shilson-Thomas, and Bernadette Farrell; London: Harper-Collins, 1998).

Let us thank God for this Holy Planet in the way that we care for the Holy Planet and for all that is within it. And let us thank God for the youth who care to remind us that "The earth is the LORD'S and all that is in it, the world and those in it..." Amen.