

Laura Robinson
Bethel UCC
April 26, 2020
Genesis 1:26 & Assorted Others

Turn Back to God

Let us pray...

Creator God – you who moved mountains and dreamt up the songbirds – help us to remember our place in your good creation. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all these gathered hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

I've spent a lot of time while in sheltering in place wondering about the kind of impact the slowing of all human traffic, of human activity is having on the rest of the world.

So far, by all signs, the impact is good.

When humans slow down, when we stick close to home, when we practice a significant amount of restraint, the world around us really does respond.

Fish and swans return to the canals of Venice, goats amble through towns in Wales, lions take their naps on what would be normally busy thoroughfares in Kruger National Park. Skies are clearer without the daily additions of factory and traffic pollution – wildflowers in our own backyard grow unimpeded.

When humans slow down, when we practice restraint, the world can rebound.

It's a good thing to know, but it's also going to be a hard lesson to learn.

Because if it's true, then we, as a species, are faced with the truth that our behavior matters. Scientists have told us this forever and I believe scripture has as well.

What we do matters.

God gave us the capacity for great knowledge, God gave us conscious thought, God gave us free will.

And what we do with all of that matters.

Genesis 1:26 is only the first verse in the Bible that begins to frame and narrate what eventually can be used for very destructive relationship between humans and land. Between humans and the rest of God's creation.

Any Hebrew Bible scholar will tell you – the word in Hebrew – translated as dominion in the NRSV – is a strong word. It's not a word that centuries of scholars simply mistranslated.

It does in fact, endow, humans, with a specific role, set apart from the rest of creation.

I find that a little hard to stomach – I want humans to remember that we're simply a part of creation – but I also realize that in this creation poetry – in so much of the Hebrew Bible – there is an important lesson for us to learn.

Humans are responsible for caring for the rest of creation.

We are given SO much simply with the natural gifts of creation – and it is our responsibility to use care, restraint, and wise judgement so that all of creation flourishes.

That's why I like Eugene Peterson's translation so much – because we do have a responsibility to care for creation.

After quite a long time on my bookshelf, during this shelter in place period, I've finally picked up A Sand County Almanac, Aldo Leopold's beautiful book of essay. And I made it not further than 3 pages in before I reached the point that Susan read out loud for us.

There, in 1948, Aldo Leopold names everything which continues to plague us today.

Our relationship to land as commodity – to be used and thrown away once we're down – is literally killing us.

For wild things to be useless until we attach value to them, until money can be made from them, is an instinct we continue to battle as we live into the 6th great mass extinction of species on earth.

Our drive for more comfort, more convenience, more bathtubs as Aldo says, is destroying the planet and will eventually destroy us.

“But wherever the truth may lie, this much is crystal-clear: our bigger-and-better society is now like a hypochondriac, so obsessed with its own economic health as to have lost the capacity to remain healthy.”

Our society is so obsessed with its own economic health as to have lost the capacity to remain healthy.

1948 he wrote those words.

But I'd say they ring frighteningly true in 2020.

Friends, as Christians, as people of faith, as humans, but as Christians particularly – if you consider yourself a Christian – I believe the way forward is through beliefs and actions of repentance.

I spoke about this at our Wednesday Earth Day gathering – I know repent is a scary word.

But it means simply this: to turn away and turn back towards God.

We are at a critical time in the history of humanity – and in the history of this planet.

It is time for us to turn away from the path of consumption and comfort and land as commodity, and to turn towards God.

To remember that our God is a God of relationship. Our God created us, created earth, created everything in order that we might be in relationship with it, that we might be in relationship with Her.

And relationship demands respect.

Living in relationship with the rest of creation demands that we begin to see the planet – every aspect of it – as a community to which we belong.

Because if the planet doesn't survive, if the bumblebees, if the salmon, if the orcas, if the cedar trees don't survive – we won't either.

We have a responsibility – we have a call from God – it's right there in the first chapter – to use our gifts for knowledge, for invention, for creativity, responsibly.

To practice restraint. To practice love. To practice care.

Last year when I was visiting churches during my search and call process, I think you all know I went to Hawai'i. What I maybe haven't shared is that one of the most important moments of my life happened while I was over there.

And it's probably not going to sound like most important moments that we mark – it had nothing to do with me getting job offers, or having an epiphany, or

It had everything to do with getting muddy.

My godmother, involved in all sorts of interesting things, invited me to come along with her and colleagues for a stream restoration project in Oahu's lush Hakipu'u Valley.

The task was simple pulling roots and weeds out of a choked stream bed, which would allow the stream to flow freely – giving life and sustenance to the beds of taro root planted alongside the water.

I don't know how long we were there – couldn't have been more than a few hours. I was soaked and muddy at the end of it.

And unbelievably joyful. We arrived in a valley bed which was beautiful already to my untrained eye, but we couldn't hear any sounds of water – we were just told it was there under all the rampaging vines.

By the time we finished, the stream was flowing free again. The sounds of water making it's way down the hillside – through the taro beds – was audible.

It was miraculous.

Not every restoration project is going to be that quick or fulfilling – there's a reason they take the field-trippers there, I'm sure.

But restoration projects are little miracles – miracles we get to participate in.

The work will be hard and dirty and frustrating – just ask Scott and Susan – but if my little glimpse is anything to go off of, it's also one of the best way to meet God on earth.

To put your shoulder to the work of creation – to lend your opposable thumbs to the needs of the plants around you – to see soil yield the gift of food – to watch animals return to their habitats.

It's an experience like no other.

And it's offered to us all the time.

God – in Her parent of the prodigal child way – is always calling us back into right relationship.

Always calling us to look around and pay attention.

To see the natural gifts this world freely offers – and to respond with a spirit of gratitude, of care, of restraint, and of responsibility.

Aldo Leopold was a prophet – and his call to us – to look up and notice things – is the first step back to God.

Our noticing things helps us to value them.

Not for their monetary value, but for their beauty, their wildness, the amazing grace with which they are simply themselves.

Look up – start small and notice what’s right outside your window. You will meet God there and she’ll invite you back into the community of all created things.

We have a responsibility to do so.

May you look up and notice God in the everyday, ordinary miracle of creation this week.

Amen.

As you go into your week, hold these words from John O’Donohue,

“May you experience each day as a sacred gift woven around the heart of wonder.”

And May God bless you and keep you,

May God face’s shine upon you and be gracious to you,

May God look upon you with kindness, and grant you peace,

Now and always. Amen.