

“Earth Day Celebration”

Sermon by Dan Harrison, pastor of Church of the Covenant, Lynchburg, VA 4/19/20

Job 12:7-10; Mark 12:13-17

If you take each one of us and strip back the layers of our exterior, our outward physique, expressions, words, gestures, visible scars and idiosyncrasies, and let's say we move from the physical aches and pains of life and begin to hit deeper into our emotional center, our individual psyche, our bastille of personal ego, the home of our memories, our traumas and fears, our secrets and shames, our wants and motivations, and then we move even deeper beyond those sensitive areas, deeper yet still, now into the seed from which we sprung to life, our core—our very essence, deep in our gut, where our being flowed out from the Creator's hands, where our presence emerged from the Earth itself: This is the home from which we come and long to return. Then what do we see? We move from human façade, to true self. This is what our inward journey has been all about. We seek to fall back into our true-self, converged with God's. Here is the harmony we all long for, the reunification of self with our Divine initiator, our radiant being in unity with God's radiance. Honest begetting honesty. This search for wholeness is our life's journey, our life's work, a daily inching towards the goal of self-realization and harmonious settling, completion—upasana. From the ancients to the moderns this has been our course. Though the journey has taken on many forms and religious names over thousands of years, it is still the same course towards wholeness, a path difficult to remove ourselves from. So let us instead succumb to it, fall into its undertow and be carried out to its sea of truth. And at the bottom of the sea you will discover this Scripture: We were made in the image of God.

You and I are reflections of our Creator. We know the scripture, “render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's.” In this context, Jesus asked whose face was on the coin, and they responded “Caesar's.” “Then give it back to Caesar,” he said, “but give to God that which bears the Creator's image.” That is, US. You and me. We bear God's image. This was revealed to us from the beginning, right? “In his image he created them. Male and female he created them...” Interestingly both sexes are mentioned there as both being in God's image, a single essence embodying both sexes.

Hence our journey back to the essence of who we are is our reunification with God's essence—where we are made complete again. Jesus clued the world into this unique journey when he criticized the institution of religion as existing outside this sacred path, admonishing the religious rulers and encouraging the people to instead worship God outside the context of religion, to seek God through the spirit itself (not the religious places or buildings): “Worship God in spirit and in truth for God is spirit.” And because of the current pandemic we face in this world, you and I are forced to reconsider its deeper meaning. Buildings and structures do not define who we are or how much we love God. They in some ways demean God's significance rather than bolster it. Our devotion to the path of reconciliation and growth into being resides outside of the institutions and religions of the world. Our inward journey is then housed within the spirit itself; it is a soul journey. The Hebrew and Aramaic word for spirit or soul, or even breath is “ruach.” The Arabic is nearly the same: “ruch.” And it is synonymous with life.

Now we know that the book of Job is one of the oldest texts in our sacred Scriptures. It seems to predate even the Hebrews and descends from ancient retellings of a core traditional story of Good versus Evil. Within this legendary tale is a critical piece of wisdom. Do not forsake the Earth around you, for creation itself tells the stories of our origins and our future. Our Earth holds in its hands our very

existence. As you've read, in the twelfth chapter of Job it says, "As the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds in the sky, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish inform you." Do you see? The ancient wisdom simply says, "Listen to the Earth! It knows." Then it says, "in the Creator's hand is the "ruach" of all creatures, including humans." We are ALL connected. We aren't simply the "keepers" of the Earth. We and the Earth are one in the same: We are creation together. Our spirits are one. So, our inward journey courses itself through the inevitable reconciliation of ourselves with all of creation. It is unavoidable, and each of us knows it.

We feel the pain of the Earth around us. We weep for wrongs done to her. We want to be in harmony with all of creation, all of nature. Deep down we want to love all and embrace all and liberate Creation to be itself, a co-product of the universe along with all of us rather than something to be dominated, subdued, consumed, and daily preyed upon. In our soul journeys we discover that our "predatory instinct" is no instinct at all. It is a socialized mechanism of disillusioned self-preservation. But we need not war against our Mother Earth any longer. As I've already shared, the word for "human" in Hebrew stems from the same word as earth, as soil: *Adamah*—Adam. We are one in the same. Even our creation story tells as much, for we "were formed from the dust" of the Earth. We are all made of atoms.

So give yourself back to it. It is where we all return to. As I shared on Ash Wednesday: "From Adamah you came and to Adamah you shall return for you are Adam." But don't wait till death to return yourself to harmony to the Earth around you. We have recently chosen a new logo for our church, Church of the Covenant. It is a tree. Jesus said, "the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that grows into a mustard tree. A tree whose branches provide a place for the birds to come and perch." We are a refuge. We must be the tree together. The tree gives the earth its oxygen; it sustains humanity. We could not survive without them. The tree is necessary for life. As a community, we are not a building or a coffeehouse or even a forest—but we are a tree. As Christ is the "tree of life" we too must be an extension of his life-giving presence and shelter in this world for all—indiscriminately, and for me this includes a special place for all of God's creation (not just humans). Let us be a sanctuary of peace and harmony for both humans and all life. Let us be a humble, peaceful representation of God's kingdom on earth. Let us render to God what is God's, which in this way is really all of us journeying back to our essence, connecting to our Creator.

So as the 50th anniversary of worldwide Earth Day is celebrated in isolation this coming Wednesday, let us while isolated from humans not be isolated from the rest of God's creation. Let us find a deeper sense of God in all that is around us. Let us listen to the Earth and its creatures and its plant life. Let us not be deaf nor mute. Let our eyes and ears open to the truth of harmony and resist the oppression we have put on our mother Earth. Let us loosen the shackles as we sit in the grass, blow on the dandelions, and breathe in God's breath. Jane Goodall says that the lives of humans and all of nature's beings are "interconnected." I would go even further and say, they are inter-woven with God's essence and must work together in order to journey together deeper into God's presence. You will not get to God by shooting your way there or placing dynamite at the entrance. You will get to God by disarming yourself and transcending beyond the impulses of self-preservation. As Rev. Michael Dowd, an eco-theologian, astutely concludes— true evil is thinking only of the present, and not the future. So, let us grow our tree together. Let us extend our love of all creation beyond our four walls. Let us walk outside together, and extend our branches together. Grow into the image of God and be the reflection you were intended to become. Shalom