

'Called by Earth and Sky': A Reflection in Words and Music

April 25, 2010 –Earth Day

Runnymede United Church

Sing MV# 135, v. 1

After Easter's celebration and Hallelujahs, comes Earth Day. A minister I know comments on the timing. Forty years ago, those who led the first observance of Earth Day probably didn't consult the Christian calendar. If they had, they might have chosen to mark Earth Day during Lent.

Lent calls us to reflection, repentance. Lent is a time to acknowledge limits, confess failure, consider fasting from excess, feasting on simplicity and caring. A season that begins with a smudged ashen cross on our foreheads reminds us that we are dust and to dust shall we return. We are Earth and to Earth shall we return.

Earth Day calls us to consider living a life not unlike that of Lent. It is a day to reflect on the impact of our lives, our choices, our economic practices, on God's creation. It invites us to reflect on our own call to live differently in relationship to God's creation, human and non-human....

St. Basil the Great, whose Basilian followers have long been active throughout the world, including Toronto, wrote, in the 3rd Century, the 'Prayer for Compassion' we read in our time of Confession. The critique which arises from it is usually considered 20th Century: from creation theologians, like the United Church's own David Hallman, who raised questions about the impact of the words 'dominion over' in many English translations of Genesis.

Arguing that misinterpretation has led to human abuse of the natural world, they called for re-interpreting that word as 'stewardship' – care for creation, or as lordship, as practised by Jesus: emptying of the demands of self, to serve and care for others, including the world. Basil's 'Prayer of Compassion' takes that argument back to the beginnings of Christianity.

Basil and today's eco-theologians point to God's calls not to exercise dominion over our earth, but to serve and care, not just for other humans, but for all of God's created order: 'our sacred, living trust'. As our

Moderator, Mardi Tindal, wrote after the failure of Copenhagen: ‘This is a transformative moment in the planet’s history... It will take all of us... I can see your imagination springing forth even now, making this safe, healthy new world come to life.’

Sing MV# 135, vs. 2

In the second chapter of Genesis we read that people were put in the garden to “till and keep” or to “work and take care of it.” The Hebrew word often translated as “till” is *abad*, a word meaning “serve.” Is it correct to suggest that, generally, we humans don’t think of “serve,” when we describe our role in relationship to God’s Earth? Isn’t it safe to say that more of us think of “dominion,” as it appears in the first chapter of Genesis. St. Basil’s is the more famous verse.

But the precious gift that is the ‘air we breathe’ suggests we need to rethink that interpretation.

Let’s briefly consider ‘dominion’. Monarchs and governments have dominion. Calvin DeWitt points out in his book *EarthWise*, that a good Hebrew king exercised dominion with “mercy, justice and compassion”, on behalf of the people.

Furthermore, as Christians, we proclaim Christ as “King of Kings and Lord of Lords”, as we sang at Easter. Christ has dominion. But Jesus always turns our assumptions on their heads – including what it means to be a king! 2nd Corinthians puts it this way: ‘If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away: see, everything has become new.’ Jesus said, “I came not to be served but to serve ...’

Saint Basil said it over 17 centuries ago and theologians today stress: Our role here on God’s good earth is to be servants of God’s creation.

Species, expressions of God’s abundance and creativity are going extinct at a rate not seen since the dinosaurs, disappearing at rates far beyond the ‘natural’ extinction rate. Human activity, particularly habitat destruction, is the cause.

After Copenhagen, Mardi Tindal wrote: “I believe we must look at issues through the lens of morality and faith. Science describes what is. Faith describes how things can and should be. On this issue, science is not

enough. We need more. And that is why ecological issues are also fundamentally moral, ethical, and theological concerns - and, therefore, why faith leaders must grapple with them. Why we all must grapple with them.”

It starts to become clear why Earth Day belongs in the season of Lent, marked by repentance and humility....

But maybe something's missing here...

Sing MV# 135, v. 3

3. 'Seeds of our wakening, rooted and strong: Creation's faithful song'!

Earth Day can be a day of profound celebration. Think of the world's beauty: a newborn babe in its mother's arms; a crocus springing from frozen ground; a basket of fresh greens; a walk in High Park as cherry trees blossom; a cardinal's sudden flight; kids committed to caring for their neighbourhood.

The psalmist wrote: 'Praise God from the earth... and ocean depths.' All of this beauty and goodness is a gift from God and God's creation. The great ecologist E.O. Wilson believes we are all lovers of that creation; we are hardwired, he says, to love life. He calls this "biophilia": love of life. Life comes at Easter. So perhaps we are Easter people, praising and caring for God's creation.

Mardi Tindal, again: "In our homes and offices, in our places of worship, in our families and community organizations, as individuals and acting together, let us choose hope and action over despair and paralysis. Every day I receive new messages from people who are making dramatic changes in their lives. The answers are already here. Together, let us act by our beliefs."

We have reached a crucial juncture in earth's history. The choices we make today will affect the viability of life for countless people and other species. We do well to fear this death; but we are also reminded, particularly in this Easter season, that death does not have the last word. As bright leaves bud from lifeless-looking branches, and birds sing, court and prepare to create new life, the cycle of life continues. May we learn to love, and serve, and protect all of God's good creation. May we open our

hearts, minds, lives to finding our true place within this community called earth.

Perhaps the really good news of Earth Day is that it offers the opportunity to heal our disconnection from that which we love so deeply. The distortions of who and what we are can begin to heal; we can reunite with our God-given love of life; we will truly be reconciled to God, understanding what it means to have the world in our hands. May our Hallelujahs give us strength and courage to continue to care for God's earth.

Maybe Easter is, after all, an appropriate season for us to mark and celebrate Earth Day. Hallelujah! Amen.

MV# 135, v. 4

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