

“Three Thoughts on a Summer Sunday”
June 25, 2023

Genesis 1:20-31
Romans 8:18-25

The classic Protestant sermon has three points.

Mine usually don't, because I'm not a classical preacher.

But you are in luck, because today's sermon does have three points. And to make it easy, I also offer some alliteration.

I have a cause, a cartoon, and a concern.

My cause is a cause to rejoice and give thanks—for the summer days have indeed come again. I rejoice in the longer days. I give thanks for opportunities to be outdoors—opportunities such as our picnic this afternoon.

I hadn't decided what to preach this morning, but I had already chosen the opening hymn for our worship when Marie sent me an email about the duet she and Andrew were planning to sing—Beethoven's setting of “The Praise of God in Nature,” a poem by the German theologian, poet, and hymn writer, Christian Gellert. This poem was published in 1757 and set to music by Beethoven in 1803.

Now, one of the great things about being the minister here is that members and friends of this congregation are constantly opening up new worlds to me that I had never known before. I didn't know about this poem or Beethoven's delightful setting.

But it seemed to fit well with Samuel Longfellow's poem about summer that was our opening hymn.

And so, I found a cause and discovered the sermon hidden in that cause.

The music today invites all of us to find our place in the natural world and to join with all creation in the praise of God.

The great twentieth century theologian, Karl Barth, put it this way: “When we accept again our destiny in Jesus Christ...we are only like late-comers slipping shamefacedly into creation's choir in heaven and earth, which has never ceased its praise.”

All species reveal the glory of the Creator.

With gratitude we honor the bonds we share with each other and with every living creature on earth.

In faith, we join with all the world around us and give thanks to God who brings new life and takes away judgment.

In a sense, this rejoicing and giving thanks comes easily for Congregationalists. One of the distinguishing features of Congregational hymnals is the number of hymns on the subject of changing seasons. When we sing, we take note of the cycles of the moon and the earth as we move around the sun.

Such hymns are an echo of our past, rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures that praise God for appointing “the moon to mark the seasons.” Our faith has long recognized that the world changes and we change as well. Each new season brings new opportunities and new challenges and our hymns suggest that we can understand something of the Holy One through the natural world as it changes through the year.

We’re not naïve about this. Even if we’re not natives, we’ve lived in Iowa long enough to know that when the summer days come again, they bring with them the destructive power of tornadoes, storms, and derechos.

The changing seasons in all their beauty remind us that the life of faith is lived with an ongoing awareness of both the challenges of the natural world and the providential care of God. This means that we must be alert. There is a kind of vigilance that is needed so that we recognize both the danger and the care that surround us.

So, today I have cause to rejoice and give thanks and I invite you to join with me in rejoicing and giving thank today, and in the days, weeks, and months ahead.

I also have a cartoon—which is not a “point” exactly. But it does get to my point.

This past week the latest issue of *The Christian Century* arrived at the church and it contained a cartoon of a mother and daughter on the beach. The girl holds a conch shell as she looks up at her mother and says: “If you hold it up to your ear, you can hear the earth crying out for mercy.”

I laughed uncomfortably. *We* laugh uncomfortably.

What’s the saying? It’s funny because it’s true.

Two thousand years ago, Paul wrote: “the entire creation sighs with pain”—even more so today. We listen in various ways and hear creation’s lament that the earth is threatened, that God’s creatures are disappearing at a rate we can scarcely comprehend. From humble insects to majestic mammals, from microscopic plankton to towering trees, creatures from across God’s dominion are becoming extinct.

The good news is that at the same time, creation shows its resiliency.

This earth will continue whether we are here or not. Extinction allows new species to arise. In time the forests can renew themselves. In time the air and water and land can return to a pristine pre-industrial state.

What we need to keep in mind, however, is that the resilience of creation should not be confused with the resilience of human beings.

But will human beings *be* at all?

The authors of Genesis lead us into a deep, religious affirmation that the earth has been given to humankind by the One who created all things. And it was given to us so that we might care for it. This beautiful and broken world is our home. Our decisions and our actions determine the kind of dwelling place we have.

As Creation comes to its fulfillment, the creator God speaks to those creatures made of dust and spirit: “Fill the earth and subdue it . . . and have dominion over every living thing.”

Over time, we’ve found ourselves in a lot of trouble because of that word, “dominion.” We’ve taken it as a license to trample down, plunder, and kill. We’ve heard it as an invitation to abuse and pollute in the present with no regard for the future.

Rightly understood, however, the Hebrew word that we translate as “have dominion” leads us to sharing in the exercise of power. It is a word that speaks of the *creative* ability to act. Rightly understood, “dominion” invites us to act toward the earth in ways that give care, even nurture, rather than exploit.¹ “Subduing” the earth refers to the difficult task of cultivation, to the further development of the created order.

Read through the account of creation in Genesis: you will discover that God is not the only one who has or exercises creative ability. As those created in the image of God, human beings are to relate to the nonhuman as God relates to them—with love, with care, in a way that fosters life.

In the biblical account of creation birds, fish, and all manner of “creeping things” are blessed by God and told to be fruitful and multiply; human beings are charged with the stewardship, the wise care, of plants and animals and earth. Human beings are placed over the rest of creation for its well-being, profit, and enhancement.

As those given the tasks of *subduing* and *having dominion* over the earth, we are called to be stewards of the earth—to care for what is entrusted to us with wisdom.

Our purposes in life are many. But a primary one seems to be a stewardship of creation so that the earth need not cry out for mercy.

Our actions to protect this planet are important—we know that and that’s one reason we’ve found our way into the United Church of Christ. But our actions can become grimly earnest and our energy can be depleted.

So, like that girl with the shell on the beach, we need to listen.

Right now, simply listen. Listen to the birds of the air; to the frogs at night. Listen to the Iowa River. Listen to the wind in the trees. Now, even now we might hear not simply the cry for mercy but still the good news of God’s “Yes” to all creation.

Let hearing be a joy to our ears.

Take delight in creation once more—or for the first time.

After we have listened, after we have looked and touched and smelled and tasted—that is, after we have again opened ourselves to the wonder of God’s creation, perhaps we will be ready to once again take on our God-given role of stewards of creation, caretakers of the earth, our home.

The cartoon speaks of our need to listen as the earth cries out—even as we have cause to rejoice and give thanks.

Which brings me to my concern.

It’s easy in this congregation to speak of the need to care for the earth, to be good stewards of God’s creation that has been entrusted to us. When I preach about the care of creation or about climate change, in many ways my task is easy. I know I’m preaching to the choir.

It’s easy here in Iowa City. But it’s not necessarily easy in Iowa.

Maybe you saw the news last Thursday that chief meteorologist Chris Gloninger, the chief meteorologist at a Des Moines TV station is leaving because of a PTSD diagnosis from what he said was a death threat related to his reporting on climate change. I read about this in the *Des Moines Register*, but I first saw it reported in *The Washington Post*.

It’s national news—and not really the kind of national news a Hawkeye might hope for.

About a year ago Gloninger started receiving emails complaining about his “liberal conspiracy theory on the weather” and claiming that he was giving “Iowa a bad name.”

O! Iowa. O! Iowa.

I understand why Gloninger would choose to leave this state. His safety and the well-being of his family make it necessary.

My concern is that he is only one of a growing number of thoughtful people of good will who are saying goodbye, who have seen the radical rightward shift of this state and have decided to get while the getting is good.

Neighborhoods, then cities, then states are becoming self-selected and homogenous—red or blue, liberal or conservative, with little middle ground. The common good is lost to winner-take-all politics.

How to we help thoughtful people of good will to move to this state and stay in this state and work in this state for the well-being of all?

Oh—I don’t have a solution to this. But I sense that part of the answer will be found in the generous liberalism of this congregation—an attitude that is willing to hear other out while at the same time holding fast to our values and continuing the effort to make those

values real in the world. It means that we will not back down in caring for creation and we will support others in their efforts as well. Our stewardship of the earth will require our best skills in the current political world.

Pauls' ancient words encourage us still: We hope for what we do not see. We wait for it with patience.

Let us rejoice and give thanks for the beauty of the earth.

Let us listen carefully to the praise and lament of creation.

And let us, even in the face of opposition, continue in our calling to be stewards of the earth.

¹ NIB, *Genesis*, pg. 346.