

“In the Beginning”

**Genesis 1:1ff; Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14, 2:18-32;
Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21**

Part I of VI in the sermon series, “God’s Good Earth”

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, First Congregational, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, July 31, 2022, Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, dedicated to Rupert “Twink” Starr as he steps into his 100th year of life, to all the members with July birthdays and anniversaries, to The Rt. Rev. Jeffery Rowthorn and Anne Rowthorn in gratitude for their love for The Church and their love for all Creation and always to the glory of God!

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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In *God’s Good Earth: Praise and Prayers for Creation*, Jeffery and Anne Rowthorn open with these words: “At the very beginning of the biblical story, one thing is made clear: there is an inseparable connection between humans made by God in God’s image and the earth which God has created” (Anne and Jeffery Rowthorn, *God’s Good Earth*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 2018, p. xvii).

And because we, as humans, have all come into being in the same way, we have an inseparable connection as the human species.

Although we speak different languages, belong to different variations of skin colors, nations, cultures, traditions and beliefs, we are all bound together as one just as we are bound to our common home – God’s good earth. We are created to be in communion with each other. We are created to be in communion with the earth and all creatures great and small (drawn from *ibid*, p. xvii).

It seems so simple. It seems so clear. It seems so obvious. This relationship between each one of us and all of us to one another and all of us to all creation should be a relationship that lifts up to see the best and celebrate the best in the other and where there is brokenness to love the other into wholeness and in turn care for every living thing.

Over 500 years ago, in the 16th Century, St. John of the Cross got this. He wrote: *“All the creatures – not the higher creatures alone, but also the lower, according to that which each of them has received in itself from God – each one raises its voice in testimony to that which God is – each one after its manner exalts God, since each one has God in itself.”*

Each one raises its voice in testimony to God. Each one exalts God because Each one has God in itself. How true!

So how did we get from *“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth...”* (Genesis 1:1) and **in that beginning** from God who saw that everything God had created was “good” and then gloriously celebrated all this goodness – to the place we are today?

How did we get from glory to gory? How did we get from “good” to turning on each other and creation? How did we get from beautiful to blaming? From special to shaming? God who created us “good” didn’t do this. We can’t blame God. We got here by turning life in

harmony with one another and the earth to life in camps with pitched tents and pitched forks against each other and living in fear and disunity with God, self, humanity and creation. Instead of the moral arch of the universe bending towards justice it seems like it is bent toward mutual destruction of all that God has made that is good.

Sometimes the journey from “the beginning” to now cries out in clear and dramatic ways – wars, famines and pandemics; floods and fires; tsunamis, tornados and hurricanes. But sometimes there is a whisper, a slight change in the wind, a missing creature who was here once and is gone now.

Ten days ago, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature placed the migratory Monarch Butterfly on its Red List of threatened species and classified it as “Endangered.” Habitat losses, climate change, pesticides and invasive species brought this about.

There was no headline news six years ago when a winter storm in central Mexico in March 2016 killed 31-40% of the monarchs in some overweathering colonies in Central Mexico. Overall, the population has declined up to 72% in the past decade alone. The Monarch, which has been part of our garden’s lives and our summers past, face a critically uncertain future.

More than 320 species have died out over the past millennium – a rate of one species gone every two years. The endangered list estimates that 32% of the world’s populations – across all species and ecosystems – are dwindling. Species are now becoming extinct at least 1000 faster than they would without human contact – while the human species is expanding exponentially. Populations of wild animals have declined by more than two-thirds since 1970, while the human population has more than doubled.

Just to remind you – on God’s good earth - the top eleven creatures on the endangered list are all animals we know and find in children’s books and in many zoos. From 11 to 1 they are: Polar Bears, Sea Turtles, Asian Elephants, Tigers, Rhinos, Whales, Chimpanzees, Vaquitas, Leopards, Sharks and the number most threatened species are Penguins.

Going back to the beginning, we need to remember that all creatures – great and small – make a contribution to our entire eco-sphere and our life together. To lose one flower, one grain of wheat, one tree, one butterfly, one bird – one by one, all one after another – creates a tremor that leads to tremendous pressure on the entire eco-system of God’s good earth.

Orthodox leader and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople writes:

Responding to the environmental crisis is a matter of truthfulness to God, to humanity and the created order. It is not too far-fetched to speak of environmental damage as being a contemporary heresy or a natural terrorism. We have repeatedly condemned this behavior as nothing less than sinful. For humans to cause species to become extinct and to destroy the biological diversity of God’s creation; for humans to degrade the integrity of the Earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the Earth of its natural forests, or by destroying its wetlands, for humans to injure other humans with disease by contaminating the Earth’s waters, its land and its air and its life – with poisonous substances – all these are sins before God, humanity and the world (Ibid, p. xx).

In the midst of all this, I believe (along with Patriarch Bartholomew), that the church can be a special agent, a positive agent of change. I believe there is always hope. I saw on a billboard recently, “HOPE

cannot be canceled.” I truly believe that HOPE can never be cancelled.

I have witnessed Christians and churches finding simple ways to serve both the earth and the poor. For many years our gentle and clear Sacred Earth Committee within First Church has been advocating for and caring for the earth – all around us and beyond our cathedral of hope. Kris Brandt has planted a beautiful garden in memory of her mother which is a favorite spot for urban bees and rabbits. Now our gardening group at church has stepped up to care for the earth around us. Thank you – all!

While the government has sought to squash and limit the voice and actions of the Endangered Species Act, through **advocacy action**, Christians have come together through the Religious Campaign for Forest Conservation, Target Earth, and the Evangelical Environmental Network take on earth saving issues – opposing toxic dumps near the homes of the poor or near land and rivers that impact the poor – and more.

Through **protection**, the Quakers movement in Costa Rica and the Eden Conservancy Project on a global scale have saved thousands of acres of rain forest as they have purchased and set aside rainforests in Belize and beyond. In their words, they have set up biological corridors for endangered species that have saved hundreds of thousands of endangered creatures.

And coming down to each one of us, we can evaluate ourselves and our **personal consumption and personal action** choices day by day – so that each of us can care for one another and God’s good earth more fully. That’s how we can be part of turning this around. Today,

and every day, we as people of faith can pray and act. We can become more informed and more responsive.

I remember a sermon I preached years ago on environmental action. I mentioned putting a brick in our toilet tanks to cut down on water flow and water use. I got a call that Sunday afternoon from the one of the children and she asked if I had a brick for her. She had gone home and couldn't find one. So, I took a brick over. She put it in her toilet tank. She called back a little later. She asked for two more bricks because she had two more toilets. I went back with three more – just in cases she missed one... Oops, I don't think I told Susan. "Sweetheart, those missing bricks we have been missing were put to good use."

There are simple things we can all do. Reduce, Reuse and Recycle are all ways to be and to work and live in this world. Cut down on consumption, reuse rather than throw things away. Recycle everything possible. Volunteer for clean-ups in your community or organize one (or more) yourself. Educate yourself and others.

Conserve water. Think about this one all the time. The earth is 75% Water but only 33% of it is fresh water and only 1.2% of that can be used for drinking water since most of the fresh water is locked up in glaciers, found in ice caps, permafrost or buried deep under the earth. Saving water is essential to saving the earth.

Choose sustainable products over throwaway products. Shop wisely with less plastic and reusable shopping bags. Use long lasting light bulbs – which reduces greenhouse gas emissions. Plant a tree and save the others! Trees provide food and oxygen. We need more trees not less. Don't send more chemicals into our waterways and into the

soil and earth. Choose non-toxic chemicals in your home, yard and office. Bike more and drive less.

While all of these are clear and practical ideas to care for God's good earth, we all know it will take policy changes and massive dedication to alternative energy sources and more. While in Europe and the Middle East this summer, we saw wind turbines in the desert and built-in waters off the coasts, solar fields throughout Bavaria and in Jordan. Nothing says use solar power like the barren deserts which make up most of Jordan.

In Costa Rica, years ago, Susan and I saw how growing coffee beans in their natural rain forest-like can happen effectively and well. First, I saw land stripped and habitats destroyed to grow coffee in mass producing means. Then I walked miles and miles on a coffee plantation with coffee growing in the natural habitat. One practice destroyed the earth and gave us coffee beans. One practice sustained the habitats of species and gave us coffee beans. Destroy the earth and drink coffee? Or sustain the earth and drink coffee? Is this really a choice? Organically, growing coffee makes a difference for earth and those who work it. And you can buy this coffee here at First Church. How simple is that?!

It will take our investments and ingenuity to turn things around here. And we have some of the greatest minds and committed spirits to this effort right here at First Church. I mentioned the beautiful Sacred Earth Committee. In addition, we have Greg Buzzell, Sam Spofforth, Catherine Hope Cunningham, Dawn George and so many others in our congregation who are warriors, protectors, care givers for the earth through the work they do as they have dedicated

their lives to saving God's good earth through real and sustainable measures. They live and breathe HOPE every day! Thank you!

Presented over 500 years ago with the question, "what would you do if Jesus were coming back to earth tomorrow?" German theologian and great Protestant reformer, Martin Luther answered, "I would plant a tree." There is something wonderfully pure and hopeful about that response. He understood that tending and caring for God's good earth was a high act of spiritual worship, an act of faith, an act of love.

To hurt the earth is to hurt the poor and hurt those we say we love most of all. Conversely, every time we save a section of the rainforest, clean-up a creek and river near us, recycle another bottle, put solar power on our house, say no to frivolous purchases, and put a brick in our toilet tank – we are saving God's creation and caring for God's good earth.

"In the beginning... God created...." We are far from the beginning now. But we don't want to be close to the end. God is counting on us now and for years to come to be creative in our care for God's good earth. And when we do, God will most certainly echo God's words in Genesis, "this is Good." Amen.

