

The Fifth Sunday After Easter
May 2, 2021
A Sermon Written for Earth Stewardship Sunday
“The Eleventh Commandment: Thou Shalt Not Hoard”
Based on Psalm 8:1,3-9
By Rev. Ruth Ragovin
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Murray, KY



Fraktur by Lynn Sommer, based on Job 12:7-8

Psalm 8:1,3-9 (Nan Merrill's translation of the Psalms)

*“O God, my Beloved,
How powerful is your Name
In all the earth! ...*

*When I look up at the heavens,
At the work of God's creation,
At the infinite variety of Your Plan;
What is woman that you rejoice in her,
And man that you delight in him?
You have made us in your image,
You fill us with your Love;
You have made us co-creators of the earth!
Guardians of the planet!
To care for all your creatures,
To tend the land, the sea,
And the air we breathe;
All that You have made,
You have placed in our hands.
O God, my Beloved,
How powerful is your Name
in all the earth!*

In 1985, I took my first university teaching assignment at the University of Lethbridge in the province of Alberta, Canada. There I taught three sections of world religions to 150 students, many of whom were Blackfoot Indians. Over the months I was there, genuine trust, respect, and good rapport emerged between us so that I frequently was invited to their homes, pow wows, and even a sweat lodge. I remember a day in the first stirrings of spring, when I drove out of town and into the mountains with my student friends Andy and Elaine Crowshoe, who wanted to show me where they lived. The Blackfoot First Nations Peoples tend to be tall. Andy was over six-feet, muscular, with braids down to his waist to show his pride in his heritage. His wife Elaine, very pregnant at that time, was excitedly awaiting the birth of their first child, whom they had decided to give a traditional Blackfoot name. The scenery was unbelievably magnificent: green fields beginning to peak through winter's freeze in the foothills of the majestic Rocky Mountains with their snow-capped peaks, the clearest, bluest sky you could imagine.

So often when I ask people where God shows up in their lives, the reply is that it is out in nature where they feel closest to our Creator. Nature is our “sacred place,” what the Celtic Christians call a “thin place,” where the walls between this world and the next are more porous and we are more easily able to be in communion with God. That is how I felt at that moment. I could sense the presence of God through the beauty of nature there in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains in southern Alberta. I was filled with joy, awe, reverence, and wonder at the magnificence of what God has created for us to live in. The words from Psalm 65 came to mind: ***“By your strength you established the mountains; ... they shout and sing together for joy.”***

I wanted to shout and sing for joy! I feasted my eyes upon this sight all morning as Andy and Elaine talked about their lives and their religious beliefs. I remember that they described to me the belief of the First Nations people that they always try to think seven generations ahead when any important decision is made. This “Seventh Generation Principle” (*The Great Law of Haudenosaunee Confederacy*) originates in the ancient Iroquois ethical principle that all our decisions and actions should lead to a sustainable world seven generations in the future. And these decisions pertain not only to resources but also to relationships, knowing that trauma and pain can be passed down to future generations.

How different this is from the way we look at things! We might show a little concern about how our lifestyle or our national debt might affect our children or our grandchildren. But to think seven generations ahead! After a long, animated discussion in the car we drove down into the reservation where Andy, Elaine, and many of my Blackfoot students lived. As we drove through the mostly unpaved, dust filled streets I saw dilapidated trailer after trailer, trash scattered around, unemployed people sitting on doorsteps with children playing with plastic Walmart toys nearby. The elementary school, too, was made up of pre-fab rooms with old, broken, rusty playground equipment. There was not a library or restaurant in sight; merely a liquor store that also sold inexpensive cigarettes and a gas station where people drove in from town to take advantage of the tax-free status. My mood changed from joy to a sorrow so pronounced that I could feel it like a dull pain in the pit of my stomach.

Andy and Elaine showed me the immaculately clean trailer where they lived and, with great pride, took me to the corner where they had created a little nursery where they would welcome their newborn child into the world. I did my best to try to remain cheerful. Shortly thereafter I began my drive back into town to get ready to teach my evening class. On the way home, I had to pull over to the side of the road because the tears streaming down my face were interfering with my ability to see out of the car window. These tears soon turned into deep sobbing from the deepest core of my being which I couldn’t stop. In a very limited way I felt that I could identify with God’s sadness after having lovingly created a world for God’s entire creation to live in—in which as the Psalmist

says—all our needs would be provided for. Yet we had shirked our responsibilities as stewards of God’s world and had turned the earth into a dumping ground for our own pleasures. As I stood by the side of the road and looked back at the reservation, I wept over what the Canadians had done to their First Nations peoples when we took them away from their lives of free expanse in the Rockies and forced them onto reservations. In the United States we not only stole their land but removed children from their homes and put them in boarding schools so that intergenerational linguistic ties would be broken as grandchildren no longer could speak to their grandparents. More recently we have further encroached upon reservations by putting down oil lines, breaking treaties, and desecrating the land held as a sacred trust by the Native American peoples. I thought not only of my Creator God weeping over God’s creation but also of Jesus, who wept unashamedly over the city of Jerusalem with all of its corruption. Jesus wept over our misuse of the lives that God has given as a precious gift to each and every one of us.

The Psalmist has written: *“The Earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it”* (Ps. 24). The Bible tells us that God made the world, thinks the world is not only good, but very good (*Tov Meod*) and loves it. The Creator has never surrendered title to it or given us its deed. God has never released us from our obligations to take care of it. God is the Creator of the world. We are God’s creation. God is also the sustainer of the world. Psalm 65 explains:

*“You [God] visit the earth and water it,
you greatly enrich it;
you provide the people with grain ...
You crown the year with your bounty;
your wagon tracks overflow with richness.”*

Created *imago Dei*, in the image of God, we are called to be co-creators and co-sustainers with God. We are commanded to sustain and maintain that which God has created for us. Sometimes we forget that the world is not ours, but the Lord’s. This earth is a gift that belongs not to us but rather to all generations to come. We are called to sustainable living. The United Nations gives the following definition of “**sustainability**” as “**meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.**” I add an eleventh commandment to the Ten Commandments we explored last year: “**Thou Shalt not Hoard.**” We are not to take more than we need. God made this point so very clear when he gave the Hebrews manna in the desert. They were only to take as much as they needed to get through that one day. If they took more, God would punish them. Jesus also emphasized this. Luke 12:15 (NRSV) says “**Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.**” In his teachings, Jesus emphasized the importance of ensuring that the bounty of the Earth are shared with the most vulnerable among us: the hungry, the thirsty, the sick,

and all those in need (Matt. 25: 34-46). This includes making sure that the treasures of God's planet earth are available for future generations. We are called not only to repent of but to become climate literate as we learn more about and act in ways that sustain and heal the earth. As Christians we are called to take climate change seriously, knowing that the one thing that God explicitly commanded us was to take care of the world we live in.

It should be telling that the front cover of the most recent edition of *Time* magazine is devoted to climate change. It has a picture of a burning earth with the caption "*Climate is Everything: How the Pandemic Can Lead Us to a Better, Greener World.*" In it the sustainability expert Rachel Kyte says that our world is at a "moment of maximum hope; it's also a moment of high risk." (*Time* April 26/May 3, 2021, p. 65) Risk because the clock is ticking down rapidly on how longer we can keep the earth's climate stabilized; hope because we have the opportunity to implement positive changes as nations, communities, churches, and individuals come to more fully understand that climate affects every system and aspect of our shared lives.

There is indeed a relationship between the Covid-19 pandemic and those elements of climate change that are human based. Thomas Friedman, who long has been interested in the intersection of technology, the forces of globalization, and climate change published an op /ed article in the *New York Times* on March 16, 2021 entitled "*One Year Later, We Still Have No Plan to Prevent the Next Pandemic and yes, there could soon be another pandemic.*" In it, Friedman discusses a recent scholarly conference he attended that focused on the close relationship between the health of wildlife, the health of ecosystems, and our own health. Dr. Steve Osofsky, a wildlife veterinarian and one of the conferences organizers said that we "*invite these viruses into humanity's living room: We eat the body parts of wild animals; we capture and mix wild species together in markets for sale; and we destroy what's left of wild nature at a dizzying pace — think deforestation — all greatly enhancing our encounter rates with new pathogens.*" What these three things have in common, Osofsky said, is one "*surprisingly simple underlying cause: our broken relationship with wild nature, often based on a hubris that we are somehow separate from the rest of life on earth.*" Friedman was very pointed and clear in his summary: "*It's so simple: Forests, freshwater systems, oceans, grasslands and the biodiversity within them literally give us the clean air, clean water, climate-stabilizing buffers and healthy food we need to thrive, as well as natural protection from viruses. If we protect those natural systems, they will protect us. This truth needs to guide everything we do going forward to prevent another zoonotic-driven pandemic.*"

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/16/opinion/covid-pandemic.html>

Friedman outlines three steps that need to be taken to prevent another pandemic: (1) banning wet markets that sell wild creatures that may be carrying pathogens; (2) wiping out wildlife-related supply chains that support wet markets; and (3) preventing unnecessary deforestation.

In relation to this third issue Friedman says that what *“Brazil does with its rainforest and what we do with our urban sprawl and what China does with its rapid urbanization into wilderness areas is everybody’s business. All three countries are removing natural buffers and expanding the interface, the touch points, between wildlife and people where pandemics emerge. That has to stop.”*

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/16/opinion/covid-pandemic.html>

Our thinking as Christians about sustainability must include a deep concern for our world’s complex ecosystems which sustain life through clean air, water, and food. We must always ask ourselves whether we are exploiting the world’s ecosystems faster than they can replenish themselves. Droughts are becoming more extreme. Water is becoming ever more precious as some of the world’s great rivers no longer reach the sea. There are serious water shortages in South Korea, California, Australia, Brazil, and South Africa. Farmers need ever greater increasing amounts of water to feed the increasing global population. Freshwater fish populations are in precipitous decline. Did you know that as many as “24 million people—more than three times the number fleeing armed conflict—are displaced each year by ecological disasters such as floods, droughts, hurricanes, heat waves and rising sea levels”? (*Time* April 26/May 3, 2021, p. 74). It is predicted that over the next 45 years 1 in 12 residents living in the Southern and Midwestern states will be forced because of climate change to move to the Northeast and Northwest. (*Time* April 26/May 3, 2021, p. 74). Climate migration already is occurring as people are leaving coastal areas in Florida.

It is becoming ever more obvious that we simply do not have the luxury of leaving the problems of climate change up to our government leaders since, as they come and go, national and global policies change. We are called as individuals to apply what in the world of business are called “spillovers” or “externalities,” which are the consequences of our own actions in the world. Are we hoarding more of the earth’s resources than we are entitled to? Are we engaging in any behaviors that are harming the world that God has gifted us to live in and take care of? What are some of the things we can do as a church, as a community, and as individuals? It can feel so overwhelming at times. So perhaps we might start with some simple things like turning off the faucet while brushing your teeth; turning the thermostat up three degrees in the summer and down three degrees in the winter; turning off lights when you leave a room; using cloth handkerchiefs, shopping bags, and napkins; purchasing energy efficient lightbulbs and appliances; signing up for the town’s new recycling service; following our grandparents’ advice of ‘use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without.’ Pick one practice this month; add a second one next month; add a third one the next month and so forth. Do what you can to be a better steward of God’s beautiful creation. Like the Native Americans, do not just think about your present generation, or even your children, or grandchildren’s generations. Think seven generations ahead!

Our life is a precious gift to us; the earth is the arena in which are called to carry out our responsibilities, which belongs not to us, but to God. I wonder whether those who come after us, hundreds of years from now (if the world still exists at that point!), will feel a sense of gratitude toward us for having made the earth a place where they will live joyfully in a toxic-free environment, breathing the fresh air we have been privileged to breath, drinking plentiful, fresh water, with enough food to go around to all those beautiful creatures, those children of God, whom God intends to live healthily and happily upon God's earth? Or will those in the future stand at a roadside, looking down upon the earth and, with God their Creator, Jesus their Redeemer, and God's Spirit as the sustainer, weep?

Closing Prayer: I would like to conclude with a prayer by one whom I love and admire so very much, who has been a great teacher to me—the twelfth-century St. Francis of Assisi—who wrote the following prayer praising and thanking God for creation.

*Most High, all-powerful, all-good Lord,
All praise is Yours, all glory, all honour, and all blessings.
Praised be You my Lord with all Your creatures,
Especially Sir Brother Sun,
Who is the day through whom You give us light.
And he is most beautiful and radiant with great splendour,
Of You Most High, he bears the likeness.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,
In the heavens you have made them bright, precious and fair.*

*Praised be You, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air,
And fair and stormy, all weather's moods,
By which You cherish all that You have made.
Praised be You my Lord through Sister Water,
So useful, humble, precious and pure.
Praised be You my Lord through Brother Fire,
Through whom you light the night and he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong.
Praised be You my Lord through our Sister,
Mother Earth
Who sustains and governs us,
Producing varied fruits with coloured flowers and herbs.*

Amen.