

Acts 5: 27-32
Colossians 1: 11-20
John 20: 19- 31

Witnesses to the Wounds
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47 years ago yesterday, April 22, the first Earth Day celebrations took place in the United States. In two thousand colleges and universities, and ten thousand elementary and high schools, and hundreds of communities across the country, people participated in environmental “teach-ins.” 20 million Americans took part in peaceful demonstrations in favor of environmental reform. For 47 years, there has been growing awareness of the greenhouse effect, of climate change, and of the effect that unfettered industrial growth has had on our lovely planet.

25 years ago, then-Senator Al Gore, wrote that “the more deeply I search for the roots of the global environmental crisis, the more I am convinced that it is an outer manifestation of an inner crisis that is, for lack of a better word, spiritual.”

Why would he say that? And what does Earth Day have to do with the Book of Acts, or the Letter to the Colossians, or the Gospel of John? Is “Protect the Environment,” one of the injunctions over the church’s front door, based on the Bible, or all about self-serving survival, or about political disagreements, or about competing claims of science and business or about some deep spiritual connection to “nature” – whatever “nature” is? I would argue that the biblical witness points us towards an understanding of truth-telling, of the sacredness of creation, and of the wounded body of Christ, present with us in all situations, in all matter. We are witnesses to the wounds of Christ as seen in the world around us, in the wounded planet, in broken communities, even in people displaced by climate change.

The Bible recognizes a clear link between human behavior and the environment. Over the years, people have tried to “spiritualize” much of this message away from the earth itself to the realm of personal morality. But, even centuries before Christ, the prophet Isaiah was calling the people to account in ways that seem oddly contemporary: “The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers, the heavens languish together with the earth. The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth; its inhabitants suffer for their guilt.” (Isaiah 24:4-6)

But we have to admit that even though ecological disasters happened in the past, something new is going on. Our situation is new. Daniel Maguire, a Catholic ethicist (or we might call him an eco-theologian) wrote, “For the first time, our power to destroy outstrips the earth's power to restore.” We are living in a different sort of time than Isaiah, or any of the New Testament writers. We are being required to rethink or rediscover how our deep connection to the earth is real, how our actions have consequences. It requires repentance, *metanoia*, turning around and turning towards this reality that is both old and new. It requires a clear look at the wounds, and yes, perhaps even touching those wounds with our own hands.

In some ways, confronting this new reality of global climate change goes against all of our human experience. Kind of like being confronted with the resurrection, taking climate change on board is a matter of belief, not thought. Belief, or conviction is an interesting process. As the Rev. Peter Sawtell said, "We can't say "Well, I have doubts, but if you can harmonize the mid-level atmospheric temperatures and the ground-level readings, then I'll believe in global warming." It takes some sort of conversion, a powerful change in self-understanding and global connection, to really believe what is happening.

As I said in last week's sermon, sometimes we humans think too small. We think narrowly. Christians have tended to think that we were the only creatures God cared about. When we think that way, then everything else we encounter, like animals, plants, air, water, light, just exist for our survival and pleasure. And we imagine that there are no consequences to thinking this way. Another narrow thought: God only became incarnate once, 2000 years ago. Yes, I believe that there was a unique divine revelation in Jesus. But what if we go way back before the birth in Bethlehem to the birth of creation, more than 13 billion years ago. That is when God started revealing, in our material world, who God is.

Once again I return to our tradition to show that this is not a heretical thought. The medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas wrote, "The immense diversity and pluriformity of this creation more perfectly represents God than any one creature alone or by itself." Imagine that: God is displaying divine beauty all throughout creation. Our environment is one picture of the body of God. And then imagine this: the wounds of God, created by our own selfishness and ignorance, displayed on that same body. We are witnesses to the wounds of God.

Sally McFague, another eco-theologian, wrote a book 25 years ago called the Body of God. She uses this image, or model, of body as a metaphor of the close relationship we have with God. Divine life is embedded in all our surroundings and a source of nourishment and awe. Springing off that idea, we can think of countless lessons from nature about interconnectedness. I think of the aspen tree, an iconic image of golden beauty in the fall out West. Aspen trees live in what are called "clonal colonies," groups of what looks like a grove of many trees - which actually share one root system. It is an icon of beauty, but also a symbol of interdependence and resilience. And recently I watched a video about another kind of interdependence: the imbalance and environmental destruction that took place in Yellowstone National Park after the wolves there had been eradicated by humans. It turns out that the "apex" predators, the wolves, had been checking the growth of the elk herd. When that check was removed, the elk displaced other species, and the plant ecosystem was thrown out of balance, which in turn affected the river systems. When the wolves were re-introduced, 20 years ago, the landscape began to renew itself in ways beyond expectation. It is called a trophic cascade: this effect of the addition or removal on one key species in the food chain. Apparently there are bottom-up cascades as well, and center-out cascades. How much we have to learn from the natural world, the body of God, and health, balance, and well being! How painful are the examples of the ways we have wounded that body with our ecological sins.

What does this sin look like in real life? One could start with our relationship with our fellow human beings. When we refuse to share resources and space with those who need them to survive, we display a selfishness that throws the system out of balance. It is greed that causes environmental injustice, with a powerful few claiming an unfair share of resources at the expense of the poor. One example is Isle De Jean Charles in Louisiana, home of the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw tribe. For over a century, these people have fished, hunted, trapped and farmed among

fruit and nut orchards. But since 1955, more than 90 percent of the island's original land mass has washed away. Channels cut by loggers and oil companies eroded much of the island, and decades of flood control efforts have kept once free-flowing rivers from replenishing the wetlands' sediments. Some of the island was swept away by hurricanes. As the oceans continue to rise, the rest of the island will disappear. The small group of people now on the island will leave their ancestral home and become the First American Climate Refugees, another wound on the body of human connection and care.

We know from the biblical witness that we have a responsibility to the poor and vulnerable. The poorest people and places in America and other nations bear the greatest consequences of climate change and environmental degradation, yet are the least prepared to cope with it or to advocate for help. When we tell the truth and speak up about climate change, we serve as a voice for the voiceless, we begin to tend to the wounds on the body of God.

We also know from the biblical witness that it is by identifying with those who suffer, through empathy and compassion, that we begin to find our purpose and begin to find our own identity. The wounds that our planet bears are our self-inflicted wounds. They may not be apparent in a place as beautiful and temperate as Norwich, Vermont. But soon, perhaps the groaning of the planet will reach even the most complacent ears, and we will realize that we have much in common with the suffering of those distant displaced and poisoned tribes. The earth itself, and all its intertwining systems and trophic cascades will speak to call out to all of us, and we will finally realize the one thing we all share in common: the treasure and wonder of our natural home. Perhaps it is part of our innate selfishness that we have kept the blinders on for so long.

The witness of our Gospel reading has much to offer us in the way of hope. The Infinitely Loving Source we call God generously invites us to see the power of loving sacrifice. The resurrected, but wounded body of Christ appears to frightened and hopeless people, breathing words of peace: breathing, in fact, life into those dispirited souls. As proof of his authenticity, he shows the disciples his wounds, and amazingly, it says, they rejoice! So great is their joy that they are not lost, they are still connected, it is not the end, but the beginning of their community. And, a week later, when the absent Thomas appears, it is not the perfection of Christ's resurrected body, but its wounds inspire that inspire him to cry, "My Lord and my God!" What a profound insight this is into the common ground, the shared roots, of the pain and possibility of human and divine love.

This Gospel passage has sometime been called John's Pentecost: this Gospel conflates Easter and Pentecost to the same day as Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit into his friends. This active, moving peace comes with marching orders: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." We hear this as an echo of the Spirit of God moving over the waters of creation. The disciples are a new creation, a new body created out of the ruins of an old life. In fact, they are now Christ's body, sent to do the work he had begun.

What is the first step, the first task of the new body? Unlike Luke's Pentecost, it is not testifying and preaching in a cacophony of languages. It is a bit quieter, but the scope is even larger. When people ask for assurance that Christ still lives after the events of Good Friday, the only proof that can be given is the Body of Christ, the church, and how it functions in the larger body of God, the world. If people are skeptical about the reality of the Spirit living in this Body, the church, perhaps it is because we are not always clear about reflecting the insights of Thomas' Pentecost moment. So the questioning, the doubt, the skepticism we see may be quite valid. Do we breathe

Peace – active, life-giving Peace – into the world? Do we tell the truth about the wounds on God’s body, and strive to heal them? Do we call people by name, appear in places of fear, touch the wounds of hate? What evidence do we give of transformation?

In his life-changing encounter with the wounds of Christ, Thomas joined with the other disciples. That odd, motley crew of losers became revolutionaries. They defied the authorities and preached around Jerusalem. They proclaimed resurrection and the power of God, even when that led to imprisonment and death. That is evidence of transformation. That was the beginning of a trophic cascade.

The church is one institution among many, and for a lot of people, the church has lost its credibility and authority. But we have a unique role in understanding the place and purpose of human beings in creation. We have a critical role to play in helping people to believe that humans are part of nature, not outside it or over it. The church can be the witness of the intrinsic worth of shared life instead of our society's narrow fixation on economic value. The church has the staying power to address the long-term, instead of the next election or the next quarterly report. And, since we love the nature metaphors, we can be both a clonal colony and a trophic cascade. Choose your icon.

We are witnesses to the wounds. We can witness the nail holes and the bleeding wounds in our crucified earth. We can touch them, mourn over them, and then rejoice that we are given a vocation of healing and hope.

To begin our truth-telling mission, I invite you to join me in the litany printed in the bulletin:

Prayer from the UN Environmental Program from Earth Prayers, 1991

Leader: We have forgotten who we are
We have alienated ourselves from the unfolding cosmos
We have become estranged from the movements of the earth
We have turned our backs on the cycles of life.

People: We have forgotten who we are.

Leader: We have sought our own security
We have exploited simply for our own ends
We have distorted our knowledge
We have abused our power.

People: We have forgotten who we are.

Leader: Now the land is barren
And the waters are poisoned and the air is polluted.

People: We have forgotten who we are.

Leader: Now the forests are dying
And the creatures are disappearing
And humans are despairing.

People: We have forgotten who we are.

Leader: We ask forgiveness

People: We ask for the gift of remembering

Leader: We ask for the strength to change.

People: We have forgotten who we are.