

Water Protectors
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Mary Koon
April 18, 2021
Genesis 2:4–9, 15–17

On this Earth Day Sunday, it was difficult to select just one passage of scripture. The Biblical narrative richly describes landscapes that come alive in the reading... deserts and mountains, seas and vineyards, green hills and dusty roads. Forty days of pouring rain, descending doves and even sea monsters.

And so, we begin at the beginning. We are going back to the garden in Genesis, chapter 2. Did you know that Eden means “pleasure and delight?” This story is quite different from the first one in Genesis 1 where God poetically creates with God’s word. It’s folksier, less poetic, and gives far more detail about the creation of human beings.

Genesis 2:4–9, 15–17

⁴These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, ⁵when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; ⁶but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground—⁷then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground,* and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. ⁸And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there God put the man whom God had formed. ⁹Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow

every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

¹⁵The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. AMEN

When I imagine Eden, I think of the bike trail that leads to mud pond in northern New Hampshire. I spent nine happy summers hiking and biking that shady trail, which is lined by streams on either side, resplendent with summer wildflowers in white and yellow and purple. Birds sing and bees buzz. Dappled sunlight lines the path and when you come upon the pond, if you were lucky, you might see a moose sipping water in the early evening or a bear ambling on the other side.

Pure delight and pleasure. I hope and pray that you, too, have an Eden-like place that you enjoy.

In the creation account in Genesis 2, God animates life and creates a garden of sights and sounds, tastes and smells. The human is God's helper meant to till and keep the garden, to continue the work that God began.

In Genesis 1, humanity is formed in the image of God, and set on the earth to "subdue and have dominion" over it.

Initially these sound like two different purposes, subdue/dominate vs. till/keep. I think the translation that has been problematic and we see the consequences on earth until today.

A deep, abiding truth is that in both stories human beings are created by, and in the image of, God. And how do we know what God is like? As Christians, we see God revealed in Jesus, who does not subdue or dominate. As carriers of God's image, we are co-creators with God, healers and restorers, not users and takers.

Earth Day falls during Eastertide, when we celebrate Christ's resurrection and newness of life. It is humanity's highest calling to love God, self, and neighbor, the earth. Biblically, theologically, as we understand ourselves to be interdependent, interconnected with one another, the divine, and the earth and its creatures and there is no option but to care. What affects one, affects us all. The American value of independence and self-serving greed simply cannot hold in the global crisis in which we find ourselves today.

I stand in awe of those of you who have been eco justice advocates for so many years. I celebrate the commitment that so many of you have made individually in your homes and that we have made as a church, composting, solar panels, rain gardens, LEDs, recycling, reducing plastic, making zero-purchasing pledges and more. A commitment to live simply so that others may live.

At a women's retreat a couple of years ago, I sat with two women as passionate as any I know about the environment. The conversation turned to water and how we use it. One gathers water from the shower each morning and uses it to flush the toilet. And both these families use high efficiency appliances that use less water. These ladies are what the indigenous women would call water protectors.

Water is life. It is essential for life on earth.

For Christian community, water is a symbol of our relationship with God; it is the image of promise, renewal and hope. We are baptized in water into the community of the church. The Bible begins in the waters in Eden and ends in Revelation with the River of Life where all nations will live in peace.

We have put water in danger in so many ways, polluting, diverting and depleting resources. The protection of water for use of all creation, particularly for those in marginalized and poor communities is part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

We are using God's creation for our own purposes, extracting resources for greed, rather than living with and caring for it.

Northern Minnesota is the land of 10,000 lakes. One fifth of the world's freshwater is in northern Minnesota. That area is home to the indigenous way of life, and fisheries and tourism supports thousands of jobs. These are threatened by the Line 3 pipeline that is currently under construction.

The Anishinaabe women have a sacred responsibility to protect the water. They are water protectors, and now call upon allies to stand alongside them in protecting the lakes, the wetlands and waterways. They specifically invite allies to joining them in opposing the Line 3 pipeline.

The proposed Line 3 pipeline is similar in size to the Keystone XL pipeline that was stopped by the government.

Oil giant Enbridge's Line 3 is meant to transport tar sands 1000 miles, from Alberta, Canada to Superior, Wis. through Anishinaabe territory, carrying the world's dirtiest crude oil. The ecological impact would be equal to 50 coal-burning plants. (www.stopline3.org)

The corporation claims that this is a replacement line but it is a new line; it will be larger and carry more oil, sustaining and building the world's dependence on fossil fuels. It is being built because the existing Line 3, built in 1961, has over 900 structural integrity anomalies, and is running at a lower capacity. When the new line is complete, the fear is that the old pipeline will simply remain in the ground forever.

The current Line 3 is problematic, and there is no plan from the company to clean it up. The earth and water are threatened – there will be spills – part of this pipeline will go under the Mississippi River, which brings water to thousands of people.

By building on this land, once again, the U.S. government will violate treaty agreements made in the 1855 Ojibwe treaty, as it will endanger primary areas of hunting, fishing, wild rice gathering, religious ceremonies and travel. It threatens the very survival of the Ojibwe people and is an injustice to our indigenous siblings.

Since Minnesota has approved Line 3 now, Enbridge will receive powers of eminent domain, making it possible to take property without landowner consent in the name of a public utility providing public benefit. (Information from www.honorearth.org)

Another effect of this pipeline is its contribution to the sexual harassment and exploitation of women, particularly in area closest to tribal lands. According to the non-profit journal, Truthout, this trend has long-plagued fossil fuel extraction projects and contributes to the existing human rights crisis in which thousands of indigenous women and girls go missing or are killed each year, often after being assaulted and abused. <https://truthout.org/articles/exploiting-more-than-the-land-sex-violence-linked-to-enbridge-line-3-pipeline/>

First Nations, tribal governments, landowners, environmental groups, communities, churches, including many Presbyterian churches across the Great Lakes have been fighting for five years now to stop the new corridor of Line3.

Our Green Team has done an excellent job educating us on this pipeline and we will send some information in the announcements next week.

God makes very clear that we are to care for the earth. Jesus commands us to love one another, particularly those who are marginalized.

Profits, greed, pollution and politics are hurting those most vulnerable. Because we are interdependent, what affects one affects us all. We are all diminished and the future is at stake. While it is not up to any one of us to keep and till alone, we can all do our part, however we feel called.

Our choices matter. Speak out, do what you can. Small decisions make a difference. Not everyone can afford an electric car, and composting is not possible for some of us, but we can commit to buy less plastic, or shop in thrift stores. We can commit to vote.

I had a brief conversation with Nancy Hauser this morning. We talked about how difficult it is to feel connected, despite knowing that it is true. Perhaps this Earth Day can be an invitation to feel more connected to the earth by walking in some grass, hugging a tree, or even opening a window to smell the cool, spring air! And it is hard to feel connected to people during COVID! So, this Earth Day, let's practice looking at grocery store clerks, people on the street, helpers in living facility, teachers at school – those strangers with whom you come in contact – and (in your mind) calling them “brother,” or “sister,” “auntie,” or “Grandpa.”* How might that change things?

In Dostoyevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, the spiritual teacher Father Zosima describes connectedness this way:

“All is like an ocean, all flows and connects; touch it in one place and it echoes at the other end of the world... Love all of God's creation, both the whole of it and every grain of sand. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light. Love animals, love plants, love each thing. If you love each thing you will perceive the mystery of God in things.”

Water is life! We can be water protectors! May it be so.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.

*The practice of naming one another relationally – if only silently – is the idea of Valerie Kaur. In a conversation with Kathy Howell I heard about Ms. Kaur's work in reconciliation and am looking forward to learning more. In a year when so many of us have felt disconnected, her practice offers a do-able reminder that we, indeed, are connected to one another. <https://valariekaur.com/>