

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Mary Koon
Earth Stewards
Earth Day Celebration, April 24, 2022

Genesis 1:26–31a from the Inclusive Language Bible

Then God said, “let us make humankind in our image, to be like us. Let them be stewards of the fish in the sea, the birds of the air, the cattle, the wild animals, and everything that crawls on the ground.” Humankind was created as God’s reflection; in the divine image God created them; female and male, God made them.

God blessed them and said, “Bear fruit, increase your numbers, and fill the earth, and be responsible for it! Watch over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things on the earth!” God then told them, “Look I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the earth, and every tree whose fruit carries its seed inside itself: they will be your food; and to all the animals of the earth and the birds of the air and things that crawl on the ground – everything that has a living soul in it – I give all the green plants for food. So, it was. God looked at all of this creation and proclaimed that this was good, very good.

Psalm24: The earth is the LORD’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; ² for God has founded it on the seas and established it on the rivers.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

When our daughter was a little girl, she placed beautiful things she'd find in nature in an old jewelry box. There were butterfly wings, a dried-up cicada, stones that had bits that shone in the sun, feathers, and broken robin eggs.

One day, in spring, I found her sitting in her room looking at the treasures, crying.

I thought perhaps she'd had a hard day at school, or a fight with her brothers. Why are you crying, Hope?

She answered, "Because I love nature so much."

Seven-year-old Hope was not aware of the climate crisis that we now face but was reacting in a very human way to the beauty that God created, and it moved her to tears.

The famous author Fyodor Dostoevsky writes,

Love all God's creation,

The whole and every grain of sand in it.

Love every leaf, Every ray of God's light.

Love the animals, Love the plants, Love everything

If you love everything, You will perceive The divine
mystery in things.

Once you perceive it, You will begin to comprehend it
better every day.

And you will come at last to love the whole world with an
all-embracing love.

In love, God created the world and called it good, very good. The order of creation in the first chapter of Genesis bears witness to the interdependence that we share with God and creation. Each element of creation depends on the one before it, we live in a web of creation with our creator.

From the beginning, human beings are divinely ordained as stewards. It is our highest and holiest call to cherish and protect the earth, to keep it good, very good. Some Biblical translations use the word, dominion, instead of stewardship, which has led to humanity feeling that the earth was ours to use for our own selfish ends, to control, and exploit for greed and convenience. We know that this is dangerous thinking, disastrous theology, leading to the climate crisis we now face.

The earth is a remarkable gift to our faith. There is a deep abiding love of nature in this congregation, as we see in the abundance of amazing photos you sent in for the prayer today. Most, if not all, of us have had profound spiritual experiences in response to the natural world. The earth evokes a sense of awe and wonder, of gratitude, and connection that inform us about who God is and who we are. It seems that this sense of awe is just who we are as people, designed by God.

The first Earth Day was not conceived of in the pink-orange sunset over a clear, clean lake, or on the top of a mountain with a breath-taking view, but at the site of a wound, the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill, still one of the biggest oil spills in U.S. History. Senator Gaylord Nelson witnessed the oil polluting the

water and sea creatures and set in motion a process that just a year later brought 20 million people to the streets in protest.

Within a short time, political action was taken on climate care – the development of the EPA, and the Clean Water and Clean Air acts were signed. Millions of people are alive today as a result of these environmental protections.

Earth Day is April 22nd, and while the date was chosen so that college students could become active and attend protests, the April date means that Earth Day takes place in Eastertide, when the church celebrates new life, when we tell stories of resurrection and proclaim that God has the power to make all things new. The gospels declare that the salvation of God is for the entire cosmos!

Indeed, we are Easter people living in a Good Friday world.

The climate is changing, and the atmosphere is heating, but as the children’s book says, “it is not hopeless and we are not helpless.” (Douglas, Paul. *A Kid’s Guide to Saving the Planet: It’s not Hopeless and we’re not Helpless*. Minneapolis: Beaming Books, 2022.)

As people of faith, we continue to lead the way in honoring the earth by both recognizing good science while also accepting our spiritual responsibility as care takers of the earth. There must be a spiritual response to the problems of greed, apathy, overconsumption, and excess.

We have the responsibility to make choices that impact our planet, from reducing what and where we purchase clothing, toys, and “stuff”, to being mindful about what we eat, to avoiding plastic grocery bags, to calling your state representative to promote clean energy bills. And, of course, that’s the short list.

You will find a bulletin insert with a bunch of inspiring ideas for how we can care for the planet. These were put together by our Green Team and offered as a pledge card to us all.

The church can be a powerful source of good for this world and a leader in the climate movement. With your support, the Green Team at Oak Grove has taken numerous strides to reduce our carbon footprint and educate the community about all issues relating to climate justice.

Creation Justice Ministries of the PCUSA published their 2022 Earth Day resources and include some good news stories.

The bad news is easy to find, there are numerous reports of how our earth is literally burning, flooding and crying out to us. So today I will share how a couple local churches are making a difference in their communities. The stories were originally published in Sojourners magazine and references by Creation Justice Ministries.

St. Paul AME Zion Church is located in Aurora, N.C. Aurora is a tiny town on the Pamlico River on the east coast of the state and has a population of only 500. In 2011, Hurricane Irene

smashed into the Pamlico sound, raising the river to 10 feet above sea level, swallowing St. Paul's. It happened again in 2018 with Hurricane Florence. The church was able to rebuild with insurance money, but that wasn't the case for many in the town, who struggle with the decision to stay and face more flooding or leave.

In the midst of these challenges, the church lost members. But instead of becoming discouraged or turning inward, the church reached out. They partner with NC Interfaith Power and Light and National Religious Partnership for the Environment to host public roundtables about sea level rise adaptation. This church is willing and ready to talk about climate change informally at their church. Statistics show that while 70% of the people in the US agree the climate is changing, about 2/3rds never talk about it. The same is true in our churches.

Not St. Paul's. The small church still has a number of physical needs that have yet to be met, including a need for funding to implement adaptation measures like elevating the church and neighboring homes on stilts. There are federal funds to meet those needs, but the funding falls far short of what is actually needed. The Afro-American congregants see the same story of their history played out again. While wealthier, whiter communities receive funding to relocate or adapt, Aurora is left behind, and it illustrates just some of the justice issues associated with the environment. Yet courage persists, starting

with conversations in the pews. This coastal community is growing strong one conversation at a time.

St. Luke's Episcopal is located in Annapolis, Md. In 2012, the four acres behind the church, which abuts Back Creek, a tributary of the Chesapeake, were a tangled mess of brush. The church had plans to clear the land and build a large sanctuary and convert the current structure into an education wing, but the new pastor and St. Luke's Green team suggested St. Luke keep its current structure and use the five acres as a "sanctuary without walls." For years, St. Luke's had been involved with climate action, integrating climate literacy into its preaching and education as well as advocating for stronger climate policy at the Maryland State House.

In 2017, the 120-member church received nearly 2 million in grants from the state and private donors to restore the wetlands and buried stream in their back yard, they realized that the project was a physical expression of their commitment to Earthkeeping. The work created a climate sanctuary that absorbed higher tides, filtered polluted stormwater.

(Both stories are from: <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/Earth-Day-2022-Weathering-the-Storm.pdf>)

We are not alone in this holy work. I am delighted to be part of a church community that takes the spiritual responsibility of earth care and preservation so seriously. We simply cannot cherish and protect what we take for granted. We will not restore that

which we feel is ours alone. We cannot protect that which we turn our backs on.

So, I'm going to ask you, if you feel comfortable, to close your eyes for a moment and picture your favorite place in nature. See its colors, listen for the sounds around you, smell the good earth, or water or fresh air. Got it? Now silently, say thank you for God for this bit of Eden that you have known and offer a prayer for its protection and your role in it.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN