

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Bart Roush
April 23, 2023 – Earth Day Worship

We take time this Sunday to celebrate God’s Creation and to acknowledge our part in caring for the Earth. Psalm 24 tells us, “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it.” What, then, does the environment have to do with our faith? The Psalmist would reply, “what is there that does NOT have to do with our faith?” Christianity is to be inclusive of all things, as the hymn says, “all things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small, all things wise and wonderful: The Lord God made them all.” God brought this world into being. God is the source of all life. The world and all living beings are related to God. The earth is the Lord’s.

While land and places encompass all things, and should include all peoples as co-inhabitants, places have often been seen as possessions, and inhabitants as objects of conquest. Our relationship with our land and its inhabitants is affected by, and has shaped, our understanding of race and ethnicity.

Popes in the 1400’s issued a series of teachings known collectively as the Doctrine of Discovery, which attempted to justify European’s capture and colonization of lands and waters, as well as subjecting peoples to involuntary conversion to Christianity, enslavement, forced migration, and murder. The Doctrine of Discovery laid the groundwork for massive upheaval of peoples and places worldwide, as well as racial and economic inequities that persist today. Some Christian communities are repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery in an effort to repent for the Church’s propagation of this sin. In doing so, we can reorient our

communities to connect more deeply to the land and its history, as well as transform our collective understandings of ownership.

To begin our worship, beginning this Sunday, and for most Sundays from here forward, we will use opening words to center ourselves in God's creation, our place in it, the history of the original stewards of this land, and our commitment to action and right relationship with God and the original peoples of this land.

Genesis 1:1–5, 26–31

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness God called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day...

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in God's image, in the image of God they were created; male and female God created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the air,

and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

There is a story, perhaps you have heard it.

“Once there was a tree and she loved a little boy. And every day the boy would come, and he would gather her leaves and make them into crowns and play king of the forest. He would climb up her trunk and swing from her branches and eat apples. And when he was tired, he would sleep in her shade. And the boy loved the tree very much. And the tree was happy.

But time went by. And the boy grew older. The tree was often alone. Then one day, the boy came to the tree, and the tree said, ‘Come Boy, come and climb up my trunk and swing from my branches and eat apples and play in my shade and be happy.’ ‘I am too big to climb and play,’ said the boy. ‘I want to buy things and have fun. I want some money. Can you give me money?’ ‘I’m sorry,’ said the tree, ‘but I have no money. I have only leaves and apples. Take my apples, Boy, and sell them in the city. Then you will have money and then you will be happy.’ And the boy climbed up the tree and gathered her apples and carried them away. And the tree was happy.”

Maybe some of you know the story, *The Giving Tree*, by Shel Silverstein, and how the boy stayed away for a long time and the tree was sad. And then the boy/man came back and cut the tree's branches to make a house, and her trunk to make a boat, until finally, there was almost nothing left of the tree. The story ends with an image of a very sad old man sitting on a tree stump with the words: “And the tree was happy.”

Initially, when I first heard this story, I loved it. But then, I heard some critique of the story, not from the boy's perspective, but the tree's perspective. And it made me realize that perhaps the tree wasn't happy. The story illustrates, over and over again, these momentary gains for the boy, but in the end, the destruction of the tree itself.

The last several years have shown that the climate crisis is no longer a future worry, it is affecting our communities right now. Record-breaking storms, extreme weather, and the slow violence of sea level rise are tearing at the physical and social fabric of our society. So-called "natural" disasters in the United States have increased in frequency and intensity in the last two decades. In 2021, there were at least 18 weather disaster events in the United States with losses exceeding \$1 billion each, 11 events more than the average since 1990. At the same time, our political leaders and structures have failed to prevent climate change and prepare for its worst effects. It has become clear that climate change is not merely a problem for the church to prepare for in ten or twenty years; it is time for the church to prepare right now. Around us, God's people and planet are facing the impacts of the climate crisis.

The Bible begins with a vision of creation. But there are two different views of creation in Genesis. The first, from the first chapter of Genesis which I read, begins with God's creating the world: light, oceans, land, vegetation, sun, moon, living creatures, and finally, human beings. The story concludes by God telling humans to "fill the earth and subdue it;" and to have dominion over all creation.

But the second chapter of Genesis offers a different story, the story of the Garden of Eden. God creates the first human being, puts that human in the garden, and charges the human with the responsibility "to till and to tend it." (Gen 2:15) Two different paradigms: fill the earth and dominate it, or till and tend the garden. One is a story of using the earth

for our own needs, being apart from, separate from the earth. The other is a story of being a part of the earth and being its guardian.ⁱ

Perhaps for too long the first story and an interpretation of humanity's domination over creation for its own use has been the dominant narrative. On top of that, society has become less connected to the natural world and its rhythms and cycles. Many don't see themselves as part of nature and therefore not impacted directly by the abuse of creation. Or perhaps we act like the boy in the story, and only see the natural resources for their value in what comfort it can give to us without regard for how damaging that perspective and approach may be for nature.

But thankfully, faithful people are beginning to take more of the approach from the second story, a more integrated approach to creation, an approach of stewardship of the earth and tending creation.

May we understand the story of creation not with a spirit of superiority, of distance, of domination, or of exploitation. Instead let us remind us of the Creative spirit of God and divine love for all creation. In the vision of stewardship of the earth and care of creation, let us work for the care, wellbeing, and freedom of God's creatures. Let us continue to work to restore right relationship with God's creatures and creation. Let the story of creation call us to love as God loves. Let us give thanks for all God's creatures and devote ourselves to better care of, and relationship with, the creation.

Psalm 104: God the Creator and Provider

¹ Bless the LORD, O my soul. O LORD my God, you are very great.
You are clothed with honor and majesty,
² wrapped in light as with a garment. You stretch out the heavens
like a tent;

³ you set the beams of your chambers on the waters; you make the clouds your chariot; you ride on the wings of the wind;

⁴ you make the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers.

⁵ You set the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never be shaken.

⁶ You cover it with the deep as with a garment; the waters stood above the mountains.

⁷ At your rebuke they flee; at the sound of your thunder they take to flight.

⁸ They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the valleys, to the place that you appointed for them.

⁹ You set a boundary that they may not pass, so that they might not again cover the earth.

¹⁰ You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills,

¹¹ giving drink to every wild animal; the wild asses quench their thirst.

¹² By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches.

¹³ From your lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.

¹⁴ You cause the grass to grow for the cattle and plants for people to cultivate, to bring forth food from the earth

¹⁵ and wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine and bread to strengthen the human heart.

¹⁶ The trees of the field are watered abundantly, the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.

¹⁷ In them the birds build their nests; the stork has its home in the fir trees.

¹⁸ The high mountains are for the wild goats; the rocks are a refuge for the coney.

¹⁹ You have made the moon to mark the seasons; the sun knows its time for setting.

²⁰ You make darkness, and it is night, when all the animals of the forest come creeping out.

²¹ The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God.

²² When the sun rises, they withdraw and lie down in their dens.

²³ People go out to their work and to their labor until the evening.

²⁴ O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.

²⁵ There is the sea, great and wide; creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great.

²⁶ There go the ships and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.

²⁷ These all look to you to give them their food in due season;

²⁸ when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.

²⁹ When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust.

³⁰ When you send forth your spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground.

³¹ May the glory of the LORD endure forever; may the LORD rejoice in what is created —

³² who looks on the earth and it trembles, who touches the mountains and they smoke.

³³ I will sing to the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being.

³⁴ May my meditation be pleasing to God, for I rejoice in the LORD.

³⁵ Bless the LORD, O my soul. Praise the LORD!

Furry, feathered, finned, four-legged, and winged, the diversity of God's creatures inspires wonder and awe. From Noah's Ark, to barn animals surrounding baby Jesus, to Isaiah's vision of the lion dwelling with the lamb, God's creatures play an important role in the Bible. In the psalms, creatures give praise to God, having their own relationship with God separate from humanity. Thus, knowing and loving God's creatures helps us better know our Creator.

Psalms 104 is a song full of praise for creation. For plants, all kinds of animals, for mountains and ocean. It speaks not just of creation, but all that is provided for all God's creatures. God as creator and provider.

The Psalm speaks to the interconnectedness of all creation. To ecosystems, God's elegant and fragile web of life that thrives on diversity. Ecosystems are elegant, interconnected feedback loops where nothing is wasted. Each creature has intrinsic worth and serves a purpose in an ecosystem. Today, most of us spend the majority of our time indoors. It is easy to forget that we are part of an ecosystem and that we depend on it. Remembering the needs, and the value, of an ecosystem is not easy when we feel disconnected from the natural world.

One of the most fascinating stories that illustrated the interconnectedness of creation for me was when I learned about what happened when wolves were reintroduced to Yellowstone in the mid-1990's.ⁱⁱ I would like to show this video (<https://bit.ly/3oAsJjY>) to you all, it's about four minutes long, and it shows that the world is far more interconnected and co-dependent than we can imagine. It shows that only when all of life thrives can humanity thrive. There is no separation. It is narrated by George Monbiot, a British writer known for his environmental activism.

ⁱ This is difference is highlighted by Rabbi Laura Geller at <https://interfaithpowerandlight.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/01/sermon-rosh-hashanah.pdf>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W88Sact1kws>