

Sermon – Earth Sunday
Texts: Matthew 6:26-29 and others
Rev. Robyn M. Hartwig
St. Andrew Lutheran Church, Beaverton, Oregon
Sunday, April 26, 2009

Context: By coincidence, this Earth Sunday was the day of our congregation's ingathering of quilts for Lutheran World Relief. Many members had helped make the sixty-two quilts that were draped over the backs of most pews during the worship service. The children's sermon offered immediately before this sermon discussed what quilts do when wrapped around people and involved the children in wrapping a quilt around a beautiful globe positioned near the pulpit which remained present for the rest of the service. The discussion of wetland restoration refers to ongoing volunteer efforts to remove invasive species from that portion of the congregation's property now classified as a wetland. This manuscript is a synthesis of versions of the sermon from the two morning worship services.

Thank you to our “Nifty Notters” who have been hard at work preparing these quilts to send to Lutheran World Relief which will give them to people in need to use as bed covers, room dividers and perhaps even swaddling clothes. It is one of many ways in which Lutherans are bringing relief to people around the world. As we celebrate Earth Sunday today, we might ask ourselves if there are other ways in which we who are Lutheran are being called to *world* relief.

At first, the effort to bring relief to *people* and the need to bring relief to the *earth* might seem like *different* concerns. However, they are not as different as we may think. Let me illustrate that point by asking for a volunteer. [*Before anybody has time to raise a hand, point to the lead pastor and say:*] Pastor Brocker, thank you for volunteering. Will you please stand here? And our council president, Terry Buchholz, has already agreed to come forward, as well.

As you will notice, these two beautiful human beings look somewhat different. However, they have something in common. Of the mass that makes up each of their bodies, both are composed of very nearly 65% Oxygen, 18% carbon, 10% hydrogen, 3% nitrogen, 1.5% calcium, 1.2 % phosphorus, .2% potassium, .2% sulfur, .2% chlorine, .1% sodium, .05% magnesium, .05% each of iron, cobalt, copper, zinc, and iodine, and .01% each of selenium and fluorine.¹ Yet if you could go to the store and purchase all of those elements, take them home and mix them up in those same proportions, you would not be able to recreate anything like either one of these beautiful people. Amazing!

Scientists tell us that all of the energy and the stuff which comprises each of their bodies was present at the dawn of creation some 12 – 16 billion earth years ago. Neither of these people *look* that old, do they? Those atoms have been reused and recycled through the bodies of stars, oceans, land, animals, people, plants, etc., until this very moment when through the miracle of recycling and the gracious gift of our eating and drinking, this stuff came to make up their living bodies today. According to a Smithsonian Institute study, 98% of the atoms and molecules

¹ Raymond Chang. *Chemistry, Ninth Edition*. McGraw-Hill. © 2007, p. 52. ISBN 0-07-110595-6.) The article also states that the following dietary minerals are also necessary for human life: manganese, molybdenum, and nickel, a small amount of chromium and presumably boron. It indicates that our bodies also contain trace amount of some other elements, some of them harmful, including mercury, cadmium and lead. Sited on Wikipedia at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Composition_of_the_human_body

present in their bodies and our bodies today will be replaced within a year by entirely different atoms and molecules.² How is it that we are still able to recognize people we haven't seen for over a year when they are so very *different* than when we last saw them?! All of this gives new meaning to Psalm 139 which says "For you created my inmost being; you *knit* me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made." It also gives added meaning to the Ash Wednesday pronouncement that we should "Remember that we are dust and to dust we shall return." Thank you to our volunteers. You two may now carry your miraculous, dusty, atomic bodies back to your seats.

God has quilted our bodies together using the fabric of more than 18 colors of atoms and the thread of our unique DNA. So today, let us not merely celebrate the natural world that is *out there*, let us also rejoice in the natural world that is *right here* in these pews. It is not only the handiwork of our quilters that looks beautiful. The handiwork of our creator manifest in your bodies is as beautiful as any forest I've ever seen. It is a joy to enter this human forest every week and observe the old growth of our elders watching over and protecting the new life growing up in our nursery.

From the beginning of the Bible, we are told that we are earth creatures, part and parcel of the body of the earth by God's design. Thousands of years ago, people told a story -- later written down in Genesis 2 -- which explains that God formed a human being, '*adam* in Hebrew, from the dust of the earth. The Hebrew word '*adam* literally means "earth creature." Only as the story goes on does this word become so associated with this *particular* earth creature that the word for "earth creature," '*adam* or Adam, becomes his name.

God then gives this earth creature the gift of relationship with another human and the gift of community with other kinds of creatures. The human earth creature has enormous freedom but also certain limits. Unfortunately, the human will not heed those limits, and there are consequences. The beautiful garden is lost. Are the implications any different today?

I don't want to depress anybody here. I have enough of a codependent streak that I really like to make you feel good. Yet if we don't think our faith is big enough to handle the whole truth, what's the point of gathering here every week? Do we dare risk believing that God is big enough to handle the full truth of our lives and of our planet? ... How many of you read or heard the news report recently that said that one-third of the bird species in the United States is at risk of extinction?³ Instead of the natural rate of bird extinction of one species *per century*, leading

² David Kestenbaum. "Atomic Tune-Up: How the Body Rejuvenates Itself." This *National Public Radio* transcript sites the original 1953 study published in the Annual Report for Smithsonian Institution indicating that 98 percent of our atoms are replaced each year. It further indicates that the reason we experience symptoms of aging is not due to the age of the atoms or molecules but because the process of our DNA replicating itself is less precise over time.
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=11893583>

³ Allison Winter. "Report showing threats to birds spurs call for conservation," *New York Times* website, March 20, 2009. This article states, "Nearly a third of 800 U.S. bird species are imperiled or in significant decline because of habitat loss, climate change, invasive species and other threats, according to a comprehensive new federal report. The "State of the Birds" report shows sobering declines for rare birds on the Hawaiian islands and in ocean habitats, grasslands and arid lands. But it shows waterfowl and wetland birds rebounding, an improvement that conservation groups touted as evidence of the success of habitat-protection programs. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar called the report a "clarion call" for more investment in the Fish and Wildlife Service, in conservation programs and in large-scale legislative efforts. The Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Geological Survey, Cornell Lab of Ornithology, state wildlife agencies and nonprofits worked on the report, which analyzes 40 years of data

scientists are predicting that the rate is in the process of accelerating to 10 species *per year* as a direct result of human activities.⁴ If you know of credible, peer reviewed, scientific literature that indicates that human beings are not responsible for most of the species extinctions and most of the changes occurring in our climate, please show it to me, because it is my understanding that the overwhelming majority of the world's top scientists are convinced that it *is* happening and that it is primarily caused *by us*.

I was stunned when a wise elder and mentor recently declared to me that we are living through a holocaust and that we are not only allowing it but that our way of life is causing it. Suddenly, I was confronted by that part of the good news that St. Paul called the law. The law is the most uncomfortable part of the good news because it holds up a mirror to show us how far we have gone from God and how terrible the consequences. Martin Luther experienced what it was like to have the law bring him to his knees. The law reveals our brokenness, our limitations, our sin. It is only when the consequences of our arrogance get so bad that we are finally willing to give up our attempts to control. Our grip finally loosens so we can, as some like to say, let go and let God.

As Luther read the writings of St. Paul he realized there is a gift waiting precisely in that place where we are overwhelmed and desperate. In that moment, finally, the Gospel of God's unearned, undeserved, unconditional love has the capacity not just to adjust our course but to fundamentally reorient our lives towards God. Being confronted with the law is often what enables us to receive the Gospel, God's living presence in Jesus that entered into the dust with us and for us. We are assured that God is still *in* the very dust of our lives. God is still *with us* in the struggle. And God is still *for us* AND *for all* of the creatures of the earth. Remember Genesis 9 after the flood? God said "I make this covenant between me and you and *every living creature* upon the face of the earth." God promised to never again cause a flood to destroy the earth.... Too bad God didn't say, "And I won't let *you* cause a flood to destroy the earth either." Oh if this God only didn't love us so much so as to continually refuse to take away our free will.

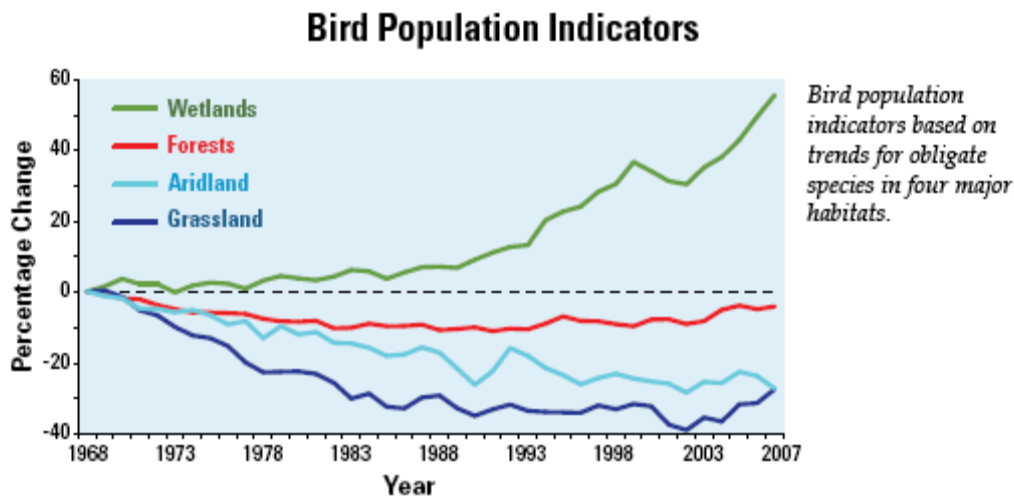
I don't think I am exaggerating when I say that human beings have a choice, the *implications* of which we have never faced before in human history. Yet we gather here to listen to God's Word because we somehow know that the *choice itself* is the *same* choice that human beings have faced for thousands of years: Do we humble ourselves to live responsibly and modestly as God has called us to live, in relational balance with one another, the earth, and the web of creatures who God loves? Or do we believe and act as though we have a better way? Has it gotten bad enough yet that we are willing to let the earth-news of the day reflect the law which brings us to our knees?

from various bird censuses." <http://www.nytimes.com/gwire/2009/03/20/20greenwire-report-showing-threats-to-birds-spurs-call-for-10223.html> The actual report is at www.stateofthebirds.org.

⁴ "Birds Going Extinct Faster Due to Human Activities," *ScienceDaily* (July 5, 2006) The article indicates, "Human activities have caused some 500 bird species worldwide to go extinct over the past five millennia, and 21st-century extinction rates likely will accelerate to approximately 10 additional species per year unless societies take action to reverse the trend, according to a new report. Without the influence of humans, the expected extinction rate for birds would be roughly one species per century, according to Stuart Pimm, professor of conservation ecology at Duke University's Nicholas School of the Environment and Earth Sciences, who is one of the report's principal authors." <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2006/07/060705172308.htm>

When Job was lamenting how bad things had gotten and asking “why,” God put it in context for him by inviting him to look to and learn from creation. It’s as if God was reminding him that he is part of the quilt of the earth. When the disciples were worried about so many things, Jesus invited them to not only look at but *learn from* the lilies of the field and discover again the human place within the fabric of God’s life. When Moses needed direction, God spoke from a bush. We talk about the need to be good stewards, but did it ever occur to us that God might not merely want us to *care for* but to drop down and *learn from* the rest of creation and to *learn from* the God who enters into creation?

I think it *has* occurred to many of you. Some of you have fallen to your knees in the community garden or a garden in your back yard to learn from the earth. I have seen one member of this congregation on knees sorting through the garbage in the fellowship hall in order to rescue anything that is recyclable so that it doesn’t further scar the earth in a landfill. I have seen members with high powered jobs roll up their sleeves to wash soup mugs by hand after Lenten dinners so that disposable bowls are not used. I know that some of you were recently on your knees in the woods around the St. Andrew wetlands removing invasive species in order to learn from the native species the true nature of a wetland. By the way, did you know that wetland birds are bucking the larger trend of declining bird populations? [*Hold up a large copy of the following graph with colors altered for greater visibility.*⁵]



As indicated on this graph, wetland birds are actually making a comeback due to such efforts as these along with advocacy for policy change! This is a significant sign of hope and a reminder that God *can* use us to make a positive difference when we allow God to reorient our lives.

Could it be that the God who chose to turn the world upside down by entering it through a homeless baby named Jesus will turn the world around through such humble actions as these? I look forward to kneeling with you in the dirt or digging with you through the garbage that we might meet God there together.
Amen.

⁵ Miyoko Chu, ed., North American Bird Conservation Initiative, U.S. Committee, 2009. *The State of the Birds, United State of America, 2009*. U.S. Department of the Interior: Washington, D.C., p. 5. <http://www.stateofthebirds.org/overview>