

Protecting Heaven and Earth
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz
Date: April 23, 2017

14:48

“Protecting Heaven and Earth” Pilgrim Church UCC, April 23, 2017, (Psalm 8) Interfaith Power and Light National Preach-In on Climate Change

Today marks Pilgrim’s fourth year participating in the Interfaith Power and Light National Preach-In on Climate Change. Of course yesterday was Earth Day and people throughout the world observed various activities to mark the day including Marches for Science. People are marching for a good cause and with good reason. 2016 was the warmest year on record—the world is warming, global sea levels are rising, and extreme weather events are becoming more frequent and severe.[1] The bottom line these days is that climate change is happening and it’s primarily human-induced. Food and water supplies are even at risk. So it’s important that people of faith are involved in environmental causes because we all live downstream and our religious values can fuel us to protect heaven and earth and all life with whom we share this planet.

It’s worth remembering the origins of Earth Day and what that can teach us about modern movements for change. After all, history can ground us as we move into the future.[2] Earth Day is always April 22 and it marks the birth of the modern environmental movement begun in 1970. Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring* in 1962 which made connections between pollution and public health. We may take those connections for granted, though Rachel Carson raised public awareness about the concern we need to have for living organisms. Specifically she wrote about the effects of the pesticide DDT and how spraying for mosquitoes was killing off birds in alarming numbers and making people sick. Carson wrote, “How could intelligent beings seek to control a few unwanted species by a method that contaminated the entire environment and brought the threat of disease and death even to their own kind?”[3] That intellectual understanding of the environment and human actions that effect it helped usher in this new movement.

For along came Gaylord Nelson a Democratic Senator from Wisconsin who had witnessed a terrible oil spill in Santa Barbara. Nelson was inspired by the student anti-war movement and thought that he could use their energy plus the public awareness already being raised about air and water pollution to force environmental protection onto the political agenda nationally. Senator Nelson announced that there would be a “national teach-in on the environment” and then asked Republican Congressman Pete McCloskey to serve as co-chair with him and Denis Hayes from Harvard to be the national coordinator. Let’s take a time out for just a second to note that Democrats and Republicans worked together for the good of the environment in the beginning of this movement for change. The environmental movement didn’t begin as a partisan issue. Anyway, Hayes recruited 85 people to help promote events for this teach-in and they chose April 22 because it fell between Spring Break and Final Exams.

So on April 22, 1970 there were approximately 20 million Americans who demonstrated for a healthy, sustainable environment. There were protests and rallies throughout the country. Groups that had been fighting individually against oil spills, polluting factories and power plants, toxic dumps, pesticides, the loss of wilderness, and the extinctions of wildlife realized that they would be more powerful if they came together than if they remained apart. That first Earth Day was about political alignment—Republicans and Democrats participated as well as people of various classes, from the city and the country, business leaders and labor leaders. By the end of that year the Environmental Protection Agency was created and the Clean Air, Clean Water, and Endangered Species Acts were passed.

Times have changed. People are nervous about what will happen to the EPA and many of the environmental protections put into place over these past few decades. A revamped version of that 1970s environmental movement is blossoming, and some of those same people who were marching in the 1970s are still marching. We need to remember in possible moments of despair that there wasn't always an Environmental Protection Agency—it was the work of the people saying loud and clear what they cared about that led to government action. The same can be said of the Clean Air, Clean Water, and Endangered Species Acts. Working together across the political spectrum ensured that stuff got done. Maybe that's hard to imagine given our current political climate though as people of faith we can't stay on the sidelines of this one just because it's hard.

Our Christian faith has a lot to say about how we are to protect heaven and earth. Remember that the word “dominion” gets used in the Creation Story in Genesis and in Psalm 8 when speaking about the relationship we human beings are to have with creation. We hear the Psalmist proclaim, “You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.”[4] Dominion has several definitions. It doesn't have to mean domination as tragically has been how human beings have behaved of late in regards to our earth. In actuality, we're talking about being responsible for the earth itself here. Why? Because human beings reflect God's nature, we resemble God, we possess the likeness of God. Suffice it to say that “dominion” can actually point to stewardship.

To be a steward means to manage people's property, finances, or other affairs. When we are God's stewards, we're taking care of God's creation. We're responsible for the earth God gives out of love for all creatures. Since we humans are feeling and thinking beings, then maybe we have a unique responsibility to care for the earth and for the creatures with whom we share the earth. We are called to be good caretakers. Called to be co-creators with God and to help God mend the world.

Moreover, there's this beautiful concept in Hasidic Judaism that I've shared before with you called tikkun olam—that human beings participate in the drama of mending the world. We can't passively sit on the sidelines and expect others to fix the problems that we see, not when we are called to be active co-creators with God. Some would say that God is Light and Love. In the act of Creation, God actually diminished God's own self. God spread Light and Love out into the world, gifting each one of us the Divine Spark. You know, being made in the very image and likeness of God. Picture Michelangelo's “The Creation of Adam” where God reaches out from heaven to give the spark of life to Adam on earth. Now God's probably not a white bearded dude in the sky, but you get the idea. God needs us. We need God. There's a relationship here.

So when we help God mend this world of ours, we spread some of that Light and Love and give these gifts back to God! Greg Mobley (my former Old Testament professor) describes tikkun olam by writing: “Before time, the blinding Infinite Light exploded into a billion sparks . . . this creation of the many left the One diminished. It is the sacred duty of every person to let his or her little light shine, shine, shine, one good deed at a time, and thus restore the full brilliance of the Light of Lights.”[5]

That's the thing about our place in the universe as contemplated by the Psalmist or even the dilemma of climate change—they are such huge concepts that it's hard to consider our place in the story and what we can possibly do to make a difference. That's why tikkun olam can be really moving. When we let our little lights shine one good deed at a time, we're restoring the

brilliance of God. We're living into the idea that we are created in God's very image and we have been entrusted with this earth to be responsible for.

Now Barbara and Jim kindly set up our information table for this year's National Preach-In on Climate Change out in the sun room and you'll notice that there are postcards we can send to our senators encouraging faithful stewardship of the environment. There's also helpful information about the Lexington Interfaith Garden. The eighth season of the garden began on April 4th and the volunteers that day according to their website: "emptied compost bins, cleaned tools, pumped air into the wagon wheels, shoveled compost and cleaned up the barn." [6] There's also asparagus already on the way believe it or not. For those of you looking to act locally Barbara can walk you through volunteering at the Interfaith Garden as Pilgrim Church is one of the participating congregations. When you volunteer, you'll work alongside people from other Houses of Worship in town. Getting to meet new friends from other faith communities as you do good in the world is an added bonus for working in the Garden. Being out in nature in general helps us fight the good fight for the environment. For Rachel Carson wisely reflected that, "Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature—the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after winter." [7]

In the end, sending the postcards and volunteering for future Pilgrim dates in the Interfaith Garden are just two ways to do something about climate change this morning. Though there are so many ways you may come up with to help address climate change that feel right. No matter the political climate, we are called to be God's stewards of this great, big, beautiful earth! Never forget that Jesus taught us in our Christian tradition to love God with our hearts, souls, minds, and strengths and to love our neighbors as ourselves. If we truly and completely love God—doesn't it make sense that we can love this world that God entrusted to our care? May it be so with us. Amen.

[1] Interfaith Power and Light Fast Facts About Global Warming, www.interfaithpowerandlight.org

[2] The History of Earth Day, <http://www.earthday.org/about/the-history-of-earth-day/>

[3] Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*.

[4] Psalm 8:6-8, NRSV.

[5] Greg Mobley, *The Return of the Chaos Monster—and other Backstories of the Bible*, 82.

[6] Lexington Interfaith Garden, "Our Eighth Season Begins," April 17, 2017, <http://interfaithgarden.org/>

[7] Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*.