

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter (Creation Sunday)
 Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas

April 25, 2010
 Grace Church, Amherst, MA

Acts 9:36-43
 Psalm 23

Revelation 7:9-17
 John 10:22-30

Good shepherd, good earth

What a spectacular week this has been in New England! The oaks are in bloom, the maples have leafed out, the first warblers have returned, and the lilacs have begun to flower, which means that soon the first hummingbirds will arrive. Whether we've had the privilege of spending hours with our hands in the garden, or have only had a chance to look up once or twice to feel the breeze on our face or to glimpse the soft green colors of the Holyoke Range, all of us have been blessed this week by the gentleness of spring. On days like these we feel what St. Thomas Aquinas calls the "allure" of the natural world, and what biologist E.O. Wilson calls "biophilia" -- that instinctive love that human beings feel for the creatures and living systems that surround us and of which we are a part.

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. On the Fourth Sunday of Easter our Gospel reading is always taken from chapter ten of John's Gospel, where Jesus speaks of himself as the Good Shepherd. Today is also Creation Sunday, the Sunday closest to Earth Day, whose fortieth anniversary we celebrated last Thursday. So it is a good morning to reflect on our call to care for Creation, a good morning to see if we can listen more deeply to the Good Shepherd's voice.

Back on that first Earth Day in 1970, some twenty million Americans rose up to proclaim their love for the natural world. They took part in rallies, protests, and teach-ins, and demanded that our government take action to restore the environment. And it worked. Soon afterwards, Congress passed the Clean Water Act, strengthened the Clean Air Act, and created the Environmental Protection Agency.

Forty years later, a new passion for the earth is sweeping -- and needs to sweep -- this country as Americans begin to understand the reality of climate change. I have just started reading Bill McKibben's new book, *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet*, and McKibben makes it clear that global warming is not just a future threat. It is, he writes, "*no longer a threat at all*. It's our reality. We've changed the planet, changed it in large and fundamental ways... Our old familiar globe is suddenly melting, drying, acidifying, flooding, and burning in ways that no human has ever seen."¹ "We've undermined the basic physical stability of this planet," he

¹ Bill McKibben, *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, Times Book, 2010, p. xiii and book jacket. Italics in original.

says. “The atmosphere holds about five percent more water vapor than it did forty years ago...[which] explains all those deluges and downpours. The ocean is 30 percent more acidic, as it absorbs all that carbon from the atmosphere. NASA [reported last week] that we’ve come through the warmest January, February, March on record, [and] that 2010 is going to be the warmest year that we’ve ever seen.”²

And there is no going back. Human beings have irrevocably altered the earth into which you and I were born. As Bill McKibben puts it, “The world hasn't ended, but the world as we know it has...”³ Our task now is not to stop global warming, because that is impossible. Our task is to “keep it from getting any worse than it has to get,”⁴ and to find ways to live more “lightly, carefully, and gracefully”⁵ in this new world.

Last weekend a small group from Grace Church -- Lucy Robinson, DeAnne Riddle, Chris Riddle, and I -- took a train down to Washington, D.C., and I want to thank you for your prayers last Sunday. On Monday we met with staff-members of Senator Brown and Senator Kerry, and with staff-members of Representatives John Olver and Richard Neal. We urged them to pass the strongest possible climate legislation. We fervently hope that in the weeks ahead, the Senate will decide to get this country’s emissions down, and to do it fast -- and to help the rest of the world to do the same thing.

Our little group wanted to underscore the science of climate change, for, as McKibben explains, global warming is basically not a debate between China and the U.S., or between Democrats and Republicans. Basically “it’s a debate between human beings and physics and chemistry.”⁶ Physics and chemistry are not going to back down.

But climate change is not just a scientific issue -- it is a spiritual and ethical issue, as well. Hence our group gave each legislator a sheaf of statements from the leaders of a range of religious groups -- Episcopal and Evangelical, Roman Catholic and Jewish, Greek Orthodox and Southern Baptist -- that agree on the moral imperative to stabilize the climate and to protect the poor, who are the people least responsible for global warming and yet most vulnerable to its effects. Science and religion are united, we told our legislators. They speak to this issue with a single voice.

² Bill McKibben interview, Democracy Now!, April 15, 2010
< <http://www.democracynow.org/2010/4/15/mckibben> >

³ McKibben, *Eaarth*, p. 2.

⁴ McKibben interview, op. cit.

⁵ McKibben, *Eaarth*, p. 151.

⁶ McKibben, interview, op. cit.

I took the train home on Tuesday and I found myself unaccountably happy. Partly it was sheer relief -- we had finished a stretch of hard work. But it was more than: it was the joy of having done what love called us to do. If God created us for biophilia -- if deep in our guts, our bones, our genes, is a God-given affection for the rest of the created world, then rising up to protect that world is an act of love, an act of faithfulness to God. The face of the Good Shepherd, the face of the Risen Christ, shines out in every leaf and blossom, in every chickadee and butterfly, in every worm and wren. The actions we take to protect God's Creation and to bind up in some small way the fabric of life that seems so swiftly to be unraveling -- these actions are an act of reverence to the Creator.

The love of the Good Shepherd is also a balm to my anxious and guilty heart. It seems to me that when it comes to the very first task that God gave human beings -- the responsibility to care for the earth, to be good stewards of its bio-diversity and bounty -- right now we are doing a pretty poor job of it. The fossil fuels that we have burned cannot be unburned. The carbon emissions that we have poured into the sky cannot be un-poured. What we have done, we have done; we have changed the earth forever. And my response, and perhaps yours, too, is one of deep sorrow, guilt, anger, and regret.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa, the Nobel Peace Prize-winner who has witnessed at close hand what he calls "the cruelties, hurts, and hatreds"⁷ of the world, and who spoke this week in Springfield, writes about guilt and failure in his latest book, *Made for Goodness*:

"The pain cannot be unmade," he writes,
"The life cannot be un-lived,
The time will not run backward,
You cannot un-choose your choice."
 And yet, Bishop Tutu goes on, *"...the pain can be healed,*
Your choices can be redeemed,
Your life can be blessed,
*And love can bring you home."*⁸

We come home whenever we listen again to the Good Shepherd, whose voice is always speaking in our heart. We come home whenever we face the fact, as Isaiah says, that: "all we like sheep have gone astray" [Isaiah 53:6]. We come home when we turn again to the divine love that always dwells within us and in whose image we are made, the divine love that longs to guide us "to springs of the water of life, and ... [to] wipe away every tear from [our] eyes" [Revelation 7: 17].

⁷ Ibid, p. 4.

⁸ Ibid., p. 137.

In an unsettled and unsettling time, prayer is the staff on which we lean when we need the guidance and loving care of the Good Shepherd. Bishop Tutu calls prayer “the staff that supported me during the darkest periods of our history,”⁹ and his words echo the 23rd Psalm, “Your rod and your staff, they comfort me” [Psalm 23:4]. Jesus assures us in today’s Gospel, “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me” [John 10: 27]. So we trust that in prayer we can listen deeply to the inner voice of divine love, and attune ourselves again to its call.

We also trust that God’s love can move through us -- through our words and hands, our thoughts and decisions. We trust that the Good Shepherd will guide us to take actions that can heal and set free. In every moment, we can make a choice for love. In every moment, we can make a choice to reach beyond narrow self-interest, and to encounter and embrace those most in need of care. We may not perceive ourselves as having the miraculous power of St. Peter, who apparently raised the disciple Tabitha from the dead [Acts 9:9:36-43]. But we dare to claim that the power of God can flow through us, and accomplish infinitely more than we can ask or imagine [Ephesians 3:20] -- although we may know nothing about it.

I invite you, after the service, to sign postcards to our Senators, asking them to pass a strong climate bill during this session. I invite you also to think of one way you can listen more deeply to the land and to learn from it. Maybe you want to start up a compost pile or to check out a farmer’s market; maybe you want to send a little money to a local land trust, or to invite the neighbor you’ve never met before to come over for a cup of tea. We need to build up our local communities, to live in ways that are closer to the earth, more life enhancing, more about sharing than about consuming, more about self-restraint than about self-aggrandizement, more about generosity than about fearful survivalism, so that we can take care of each other when the hard times come.

There is joy that comes in living like this, a joy that has nothing to do with proving anything or deserving anything, but which springs up simply from being true to the basic goodness that God has planted in us. The Good Shepherd is calling us by name. Will we listen to his voice?

⁹ Ibid., p. 77.