

Haydenville Congregational Church

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Genesis 1:1-5

Revelation 22:1-5

"...We join our work to Heaven's gift"

Come Holy Spirit! Come and bless us all.

Fill the hearts of your faithful,

and kindle in us the fire of your love. Amen.

The very first Earth Day was celebrated on April 22, 1970. I was a student at Oberlin College at the time and the whole college made a big deal out of that first Earth Day. I remember the rickety card tables dotting Tappan Square with petitions to sign, and samples of phosphate-free laundry detergent to grab up.

I remember the almost-inedible granola cookies that seemed to have two ingredients: granola and glue. I remember the huge planet earth beach ball we tossed around.

I remember the first Earth Day-it was a big event. My friends and I pledged to be trustworthy stewards of this fragile planet. We swore we would reduce, reuse, and recycle. We had our marching orders, we knew what to do, we were fired up, we were committed.

For two weeks, we all talked about Earth Day and referred to ourselves as "environmental activists" (that was a new term then). We were visible, vocal, and vigilant. We were into it.

But then, just two weeks after Earth Day, on May 4th, 1970, the students at Kent State were shot while protesting the Vietnam War. We shut down Oberlin College, rented a fleet of U-Haul trucks, piled layers of hay in the back, climbed in and went to march on Washington. Earth Day was forgotten-we reverted to being "peace activists," which is how we identified before Earth Day. Earth Day was buried under the weight of our efforts to stop the Vietnam War.

I thought of that bit of history when I began to reflect on Earth Day 2012.

Earth Day is now 42 years old-and it seems it is a big event some years and sort of overlooked other years.

The first Earth Day was a big deal, at least in my life, but the very next year, it was not. I was thinking about that when I took my GREEN BIBLE off my shelf at home.

The Green Bible is unique and fabulous-all the passages that have to do with God's creation or saving this good green earth are printed in green. As you flip through the Green Bible, you can actually SEE the passages that have anything to do with the environment....they jump out at you, all highlighted in green.

What is noticeable right away is that when you open the Green Bible to the first book of the Bible, Genesis, and you look at the first page of the first book of the Bible, that page is entirely green. Genesis Chapter 1, page 1 in the Green Bible is ALL green. The Bible begins with beautiful images of God creating the natural world...there's wind and water, light and darkness, sky and land, sea and vegetation, plants yielding seed, fruit of every kind, trees in a garden, there's the sun, moon and stars, and living creatures, birds and fish, animals on the land of every kind. The first page of the Bible is entirely green and the language captures a world that is lush and verdant, fertile and abundant.

BUT...what is striking about the Green Bible is that the beginning is all green and then the Bible becomes less and less green as the pages go by. All those green parts in Genesis are slowly eclipsed by family conflicts, competing clans, stories of slavery, and tales of wars. Tribes are formed, battle lines drawn, and the land is carved up into us and them. Caring for the earth is buried under the weight of nations rising to power, kings forming kingdoms, resources being exploited, and wealth being amassed in the hands of a few. Palaces are built and temples erected. The land becomes a resource to be plundered for its beautiful woods, radiant gems, sparkling jewels, and rare stone. God's people stop being caretakers and become consumers.

The Green Bible certainly has many green parts throughout but it is clear that after Genesis-where there are entirely green pages-something dramatically changes...until you get to Revelation, the last book of the Bible. Revelation has a lot of highlighted green sections, and it is no wonder. Revelation is an apocalyptic book, it imagines the future. Although it describes strange worlds and dreamlike visions, it also includes language about trees, nature and returning to the garden.

So there we have it...Genesis is pretty green in the Green Bible, and Revelation is also. But a good part of the Bible tells the story of human's preoccupation with power and wealth and those chapters are not very green.

The sections of the Bible that tell the story of human failings and sin are not very green at all. When humanity stumbles and drifts away from God, the Green Bible gets a lot less green.

The lesson is clear: when we lose our moral compass and stray from our spiritual center, we lose our connection to the natural world as well. When we lose our connection to God, we lose our connection to the earth.

Genesis tells the story of the beautiful Garden of Eden and Adam and Eve's connection with God and with the land. But once Adam and Eve leave the garden, they wander away from their role as stewards of the land and they lose their identity as partners with God caring for creation. Some scholars believe humanity has been grieving that loss ever since...on some primal, existential level, we are grieving the loss of our connection to the land and the garden.

J.R. Tolkien said it well...

For certainly there was an Eden on this very unhappy earth.
We all long for it, and we are constantly glimpsing it:
our whole nature at its best and least corrupted, its gentlest and most humane,
is still soaked with the sense of exile.

..soaked with a sense of exile...

What does it mean to be soaked with a sense of exile?

It means we feel lost, displaced and grieving. We long. In exile one longs for that which is lost, for that which is known and loved, for that which is called home.

To solve the environmental crisis we are in today we must find our way not back to the garden but back home to a sense of partnership with God in caring for creation. We must, in the words of Wendell Berry, "join our work to heaven's gift." We must again see this lush earth as a GIFT from God and join in the work

of preserving and protecting creation.

On the Title Page of the Green Bible, they have written out a Wendell Berry poem called Sabbath Poem VII. Listen now to his words...

The clearing rests in song and shade.
It is a creature made
By old light held in soil and leaf,
By human joy and grief,
By human work,
Fidelity of sight and stroke,
By rain, by water on
The parent stone.

We join our work to Heaven's gift,
Our hope to what is left,
That field and woods at last agree
In an economy
Of widest worth.
High Heaven's Kingdom come on earth.
Imagine Paradise.

O Dust, arise!

That "O Dust, arise!" is US. From dust we have come, to dust we shall return, but while alive on this fragile planet let us arise, reclaim our role as partners with God as caretakers of creation. In so doing, we will "join our work to Heaven's gift..."

The evidence of the current environmental crisis is all around us...droughts, record-breaking high temperatures, the flooding of coastal cities, more and more severe and unpredictable weather events resulting from climate change. It is like the earth is groaning and weeping. And in response to this crisis, we are offered an analysis that separates the physical world from the spiritual realm. Don't buy it. The hard science about what is happening now with our environment AND the spiritual guidance needed to solve this crisis are inextricably linked. The Bible shows us over and over again a world that is both material and spiritual.

I believe that the environmental crisis we now face must be seen as a profound religious crisis: the current environmental crisis reflects a massive disruption in our relationship with God.

When our relationship with God is weak or broken, we in turn lose our connection or relationship with the land. The environmental crisis we are now facing is at its root a spiritual crisis. The Book of Genesis shows, in image after image, the exquisite design of God's creation, and it invites us to accept the privilege and the responsibility of caring for the astonishing world that God has made.

We must remember that our experience of God AND our connection to the earth are really in the end about relationships. In his 1972 masterpiece *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Gregory Bateson wrote, "We live in a world that is ONLY made of relationships." I agree and think that idea speaks to the very source of the environmental crisis we face today. As a people we have lost our deep relationship with God, therefore we have lost our deep relationship with the earth. Because of this broken spiritual relationship, which led to a broken relationship with the land, we have been able to foul our very nest.

In Gregory Bateson's book, he focused on what he called, "the pattern that connects." Those words are his guiding principle and enduring legacy...

"the pattern that connects." "It is impossible," Bateson wrote, "to explain any pattern by invoking a single quality...The division of things into parts is simply a convenience."

That is the essence of it for me. There is no division into parts. We are part of God, made in the image of God, living with the spark of God inside us. And we are part of this vast and extraordinary web of life...all life...everywhere...from sharks and sheep to sparrows and sequoias. We carry divine energy within us, we are part of God, and God is part of nature, and we are connected to nature and there is no separation. "We live in a world that is ONLY made of relationships," Bateson wrote, and we must see and honor "the pattern that connects."

"...the division into parts is simply a convenience," he wrote.

My beloved sisters and brothers, we need not live in a world of exile...longing for a relationship with mother earth, wanting to return to the garden, wishing for a way back home. We are called, as Wendell Berry says, to "join our work to Heaven's gift..." and strengthen our relationship with God and renew our relationship with the land.

When we "join our work to Heaven's gift" and renew our relationship, our partnership, with God in protecting creation, these words from Isaiah

Chapter 55 verse 12 will have new meaning...

You shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands,
the trees of the field shall clap their hands,
the trees of the field shall clap their hands,
as you go out in joy!

Amen.

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