

Christ Church Cranbrook
Bloomfield Hills, Michigan
Sermon for November 17, 2013 ~ Earth Sunday
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

As we approach the end of the liturgical year, the emphasis is increasingly upon the triumph of Christ and his reign over all creation. In that spirit, we have designated today as Earth Sunday and next Sunday as Harvest Sunday. On both Sundays we will focus our attention upon providence of God, who created all things and pronounced them good. And, in the biblical account of creation, we recall that God created humanity as the crowning glory of creation and gave us the vocation to be stewards, caretakers, and protectors of all creation. To make it possible for us to fulfill that extraordinary calling, God gave us gifts and abilities that were not given to any other living creature. The privilege of being stewards of God's bounty, to care for "this fragile earth, our island home," is perhaps the primary constellation of attributes that makes us human and distinguishes us from other creatures with whom we share this world.

Christ Church Cranbrook is filled with reminders of our relationship with the natural world. For example: The choir stalls have carvings of seed bearing plants; the corbels in St. Paul's Chapel have carvings of flowering plants that are common in the region; the woodwork along the side aisle has local birds carved into it; in the Baptistry you'll find corbels that depict images of the sea; the Altar Rail bears the words of Jesus, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Apart from me you can do nothing." The heraldic insignia of this parish has three pine cones, seedpods of conifers, flowing waters depicted in red and representative of the fact that this church and community are located on the banks of the Rouge River, and three golden bees, which are symbols of diligence and cooperation as they gather nectar and help with the pollination of plants.

When we forget our relationship with creation and our role as stewards of it, we are less than fully human and the image of God in us is tarnished. Our scriptures are very interesting. Usually in The Episcopal Church, we don't spend a lot of time talking about judgment, punishment, and accountability. The texts that were chosen for this service today remind us that we do have to give an account. God has created us to glorify God and enjoy God's companionship. When we fail to do that, we have to be reminded and called back into faithfulness to God. These scriptures begin with the implication that there's sort of a courtroom drama going on and God is on trial. Job is questioning God as a prosecutor might cross-examine a witness. Then, all of a sudden, where our text picks up today, the tables are turned. We are the ones on the witness stand and it is God who is doing the cross-examination. God says to Job (Job 38:1-18),

"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?
On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone
when the morning stars sang together
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?"

"Job? Why are you trying to do my job? You are Job, a human being, my beloved, but you are NOT God." And neither are we! We are God's image and God's staff who are equipped to watch for signs of God's hand at work in the world around us and, when we recognize God at work, we are to join hands with God to be co-creators in pursuit of God's vision for creation. After all, as the Psalmist reminds us, it is God who has "set the earth upon its foundations" (Psalm 104:5)

St. Paul wrote to Timothy, we are not to set our “hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment” so that we can measure our wealth in terms of good works, generosity, and readiness to share. (I Timothy 6:17-18)

In the Parable of the Last Judgment, Jesus makes it clear that faithful stewardship is providing food and drink and clothing and hospitality and compassion to others as if we were providing for Jesus himself. (Matthew 25:31-46)

When we start acting and thinking like the owners of creation instead of stewards of it, we deprive others of the things they need to sustain their life. Too often, we leave the impression that the wealth with which we are blessed is a divine right that sets us apart from our less fortunate neighbors. Too often, there is a kind of self-righteousness in the ways we hoard while others suffer. Too often, our lack of generosity and compassion suggests an attitude of entitlement that is offensive to others and to God.

Yesterday, we buried a lady named Barbara Erb. Only ten months ago, we buried her husband, Fred. These two people who were married in this church, raised their family in this church, worshiped in this church, and found their spiritual and moral compass in this church, made it their life’s work to establish programs that promote care of creation and a sustainable environment. This is the place and this is the community of believers that sustained the spiritual values, which were the fertile soil into which seeds of generosity were planted in their lives. Their legacy was dependent upon their faith. It was nourished here. It so happened that they were blessed with substantial wealth with which to pursue the vision God set before them. The important and good news for every one of us, regardless of our financial circumstances, is that each of us has a contribution to make from the resources God has entrusted to us. Faithfulness over much and faithfulness over a little both amount to faithfulness in the eyes of God.

So, on this Earth Sunday, as we think about what it means to be faithful stewards of God’s bounty, what new resolutions will you make about how you care for what God has entrusted to you? Will you go to greater trouble to recycle? Will you take greater care with the chemicals you put on your lawn or in your flowerbeds or on your driveway? Will you pay attention when you are running water while you are brushing your teeth? Will you turn off the lights when you leave a room and will you find more energy efficient light bulbs for your home, not just to save money but also to be good stewards of the environment? Will you use your influence to address issues such as the humane treatment of animals, harmful emissions that are being released into the atmosphere, the pollution of rivers and streams that flow into the Great Lakes and the oceans, and the quality of the food that we eat and share with our hungry neighbors? How will you be a more faithful steward as a result of the impact of God’s word on you today?

It is such a wonderful privilege to be a human being. I have really never wanted to be a dog, or a cat, or a parakeet. As wonderful and lovely as they are, it has always been a joy and privilege to be a human being. I never say, “I’m only human.” There’s no such thing as an “only human.” To be human is to be at the top of creation and given the responsibility and the privilege of being stewards of God’s creation. It is to have the intelligence to know right from wrong, to enjoy the ingenuity to create new and useful things, to be able to communicate so we can teach our children and others ways to live in harmony and peace, to act with purpose in partnership with our Creator. Let us celebrate the blessing of our humanity and the uniquely human vocation of stewardship. Let us resolve today to take the next step in exercising faithful stewardship of God’s bounty. And may our hearts be filled to overflowing with gratitude to God, whose hand is open wide to satisfy the needs of every living creature.