

April 25, 2010; Earth Day Observance
Psalm 23; John 10:22-30
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
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40th Earth Day: Leaving a Mark

Last weekend I spent time being led through green pastures in chase of a little white ball, which sometimes was clearly visible and other times required some searching. I came upon still waters; except for the time that my ball created ripples as it plopped into the water. Mostly my soul was refreshed and restored – not by my score but by the chance to be outside and with people I enjoy.

I don't have a lot of experience with golf and I am an erratic player, but I love being outside and walking, so it was fun. And I was with people who don't take it too seriously. My brothers and their families get together twice a year for a golf weekend, so I joined them this time.

The image of green pastures, still waters, and a restored soul, woven together, is central to the 23rd Psalm. Although we utilize this passage most often at the time of death, in funerals and memorial services, it is really a song of trust for all life's journey. It speaks of the promise of God's presence and care throughout life's ups and downs.

Today in recognition of this last week's 40th Earth Day observance I want to note that this poignant psalm is grounded in the reality that we are earth creatures. Life as we know it is fully interwoven with the realities of planet earth. A restored soul and righteous living are bound together with green pastures and still waters. Our well being is interwoven with Earth's well being.

On Earth Day we stop to take time to reflect on the big picture, to look at the earth itself. It's not that some people weren't concerned prior to 1970 about what impact our species was having on the planet. In fact over the centuries native people have often said to industrialized people, "What are you doing?" But to the general population in this country the earth seemed so big; it was hard for the imagination to grasp the global implications of what was happening locally.

Ironically, the image that helped to change the paradigm – that awakened people's consciousness to the fragility of the planet itself came through a highly technological and complex experiment – Apollo 8 in 1968. Three men – Frank Borman, Jim Lovell, and Bill Anders – were on their way to the moon, but what they really discovered was the earth. On Christmas Eve (for us a symbolically significant day) in 1968, they were orbiting the moon. For the first three orbits they were so busy– like sheep they were keeping their heads down and focused on their work - that they missed the image outside the window.

On the fourth orbit, one of them turned around, looked out the window, and cried, "Oh, my God! Look at that picture over there. Isn't that something?" They scrambled for a camera and

took the pictures called “Earthrise.” It is that image - showing the “blue and white fertile orb of the Earth rising over the gray, desolate landscape of the lifeless Moon” - that shifted profoundly the way humans look at Mother Earth itself. It put right in front of us the awesomeness of creation, while reminding us of our culpability and responsibility in the ways we leave our mark and our marks on earth itself. Just as Dorothy learned in visiting the land of OZ, the astronauts learned while visiting the moon, there is no place like home.

These pictures of earth from the perspective of space became the iconic images of the environmental movement. (info from www.independent.co.uk, Steve Connor, Science Editor)

So what is the mark we are leaving on the earth? What are we doing with the green pastures, the still waters, and our own souls? In the news reports and special shows this last week about the 40th Earth Day, we have heard a multitude of statistics about rain forest depletion, chemical dumping, carbon footprints (which Ted Wickwire will talk more about after church), shifts in methods of food production and consumption, and many other issues. The statistics are informative, yet they are also sometimes overwhelming. So for a moment I want to tell you about one person, and how environmental issues have impacted her. She has given me permission to share some of her story with you.

Many of you know Claudia McCorkle who is a member of our congregation. For those of you who don't know Claudia, she recently was a member of the Church Council as the Chair of the Christian Education Committee. She also has been very involved with the Boy Scouts here at First Parish over the years. She and Maynard have two children. Henry, who is in college, is spending a year abroad in England. Will is a member of the Westminster Choir and is a student at Mt. Ararat High School.

Two weeks ago Claudia began chemotherapy. This is the second cancer she has experienced in the last two years. It appears that they are separate cancers. However, as Claudia puts it both of them have been in filtering systems in her body. She startled me when she talked about it being related to the bad water she drank as a kid. When I asked her more about that she said that indeed as a child she lived in a neighborhood where they later learned the local company had been dumping chemicals into the ground. All the families in the neighborhood were using wells, drawing from the same groundwater that the chemicals were being dumped into. Over the years, Claudia is not the only member of her family of origin who has since experienced cancer in a body filtering system.

Is there a direct correlation? It might not stand up in a court of law, but the medical community knows. Several medical people, upon seeing her diagnosis, have asked her, “Where did you grow up?” The mark left by the company in Claudia's neighborhood has scarred Claudia's and other peoples' bodies, along with other life forms in the area. It has scarred the earth itself. Did the company know? Maybe they didn't at the beginning. Maybe it was a situation of unintended consequences. Maybe some people had an inkling, but felt the jobs were more important than future concerns. Maybe some knew and just went ahead anyway.

One of the ways to reduce future health care costs is to take better care of the earth, and therefore what goes into our bodies. Clean water and clean food are increasingly in danger of becoming

luxuries for the rich, instead of basic resources for everyone. This is a serious local issue for neighborhoods like Claudia's. It is also global issue and will be exacerbated by regional climate changes as a result of global warming.

It's easy to point fingers, but none of us is innocent. We confess that we have all scarred the earth, through what we have done and what we have left undone. Often we haven't considered the long-term consequences of our actions. I remember being told as a child that it was OK to put garbage into the ocean because it was so big it didn't matter. Now we know it matters a great deal.

There are many challenges, all of which require our involvement. At the same time, it is significant what we can do when we put our minds to it to improve the environment, in terms of shifting to recycling, working to clean up the water and air, changing food habits (we're fortunate to have our local farmer's markets), and the rapid growth in green technologies in recent years. Thank you to our Earth Care Team who keeps us aware of these various problems and potential solutions.

Yet, we know it is difficult to disentangle ourselves from a way of life that draws so deeply on the world's resources. We know that as people living in the first world, we draw disproportionately on the world's resources. We know we are deeply embedded in a consumer society and a consumer mindset, which has as its basis the perception that bigger and more is better. Since 1970 the world's population has almost doubled. In the U.S. family size has decreased, while at the same time the square feet in an average new home in the U.S. has more than doubled. As finite people living on a finite planet there is a limit to that kind of growth.

And what a contrast to the wisdom of Psalm 23! *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.* Ironically, part of the problem is we spend a lot of time wanting – I want this; I want that - wanting for things we really don't need.

Studies have shown that even as we gain those things, we don't become happier.

Yet, the Psalmist is not talking about that kind of wanting. The psalmist is calling us to focus on the core, basic needs of life – food, water, shelter/protection, and the state of our souls – and give thanks for the gifts of God and the presence of God. And, that table at the end of the psalm is set for everyone.

This is the 40th Earth Day observance. In biblical terms 40 is a significant marker: 40 days and nights it rained in the time of Noah; Moses and the Israelites spent 40 years in the wilderness; Jesus was tempted for 40 days. In a vernacular translation we could say that 40 means “a heck of a long and challenging time.”

These last 40 years have been challenging, but things have changed. As one person I heard this week said, “Unlike 40 years ago, now every boardroom in America is talking about environmental concerns.” We know the next 40 years will be challenging as well. What mark of faith, what marks of living will we leave for the generations that come after us? Will we make decisions now that are not exclusively about economic growth but are also focused on our

environmental legacy? Will we be good stewards of this awesome gift of creation? Will future generations speak well of the mark we have left?

With a twist on the slogan, “Think globally, act locally,” I suggest we also think generationally, act now.