Earth Day Teaching

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Texts:  
 Genesis I: 20-26  
 Psalm 89  
 Mathew 28: 16-20

Tomorrow is the 54th Earth Day celebration, created in 1970, which ushered in the modern environmental movement. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, thousands of people would descend on the day upon Washington DC to call for changes that can save our planet. Today, we are living in a world which has drastically changed during my lifetime.

2023 was the warmest year on record, surpassing 2016, which was the previous record holder. Last year, temperatures rose 1.18 Celsius/2.12° Fahrenheit. The ten warmest years have all occurred in the past decade 2014 – 2023. I have seen the effects in the Arctic with my own eyes and my greater call, beyond what I contribute at Eighth Day, is to educate people about the warming Arctic I have experienced in ten trips since 2010. I will share with you some photos taken on my most recent trip during this teaching.

I read The Washington Post daily, and in the past week they have had articles about the H5N1 Avian flu and widespread coral bleaching, which has occurred in oceans around the globe. The “bird flu” has spread from wild bird populations to domestic birds. But more recently, H5N1 has spread from birds to mammals such as seals, bears, foxes, otters, sea lions in Peru and farmed minks in Spain. Millions of animals had to be destroyed. As humans continue to pollute and abuse the only planet we have, these types of events will continue to occur. According to the Journal of the American Medical Association, H5N1 could “spillover” to humans. So far, only a couple of cases have happened to people who work closely with animals.

Coral bleaching events have occurred in the Pacific and Indian Oceans as well as in the Atlantic Ocean, which is closest to us here in MD/DC/and Va. The article in The Post stated “54% of all reef areas on the planet have experienced bleaching level heat-stress in the past 365 days and increasing 1% each week.” Oceans help cool our planet and also absorb CO2 from the atmosphere. The balance of marine wildlife in the oceans has been disrupted in some areas from overfishing, plastic pollution, and acidification, causing reductions in ocean biodiversity. I am particularly interested in ocean health because polar bears are marine mammals.

As our world population continues to grow, now over eight million people, we are living ever closer to wildlife as we destroy wild animal’s natural habitats worldwide. I personally believe the Covid-19 pandemic was caused by close contact with wild animals in what are called wet markets in China. Some wild animals there are kept in cages and slaughtered in the street, in close contact with humans. The human suffering and death during the Covid-19 pandemic changed our world forever.

In Genesis I

God said “let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the vault of the sky. So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living thing with which the water teems and that moves about in it.” And God said, “Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: the livestock, the creatures that move along the ground, and wild animals.” Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

What is our responsibility as citizens of the world? How do we care for Planet Earth as God commanded? What should we be doing to change the trajectory of global warming, loss of biodiversity, and increasing natural disasters which are changing our world at an ever-faster rate? I recently found a term that describes what I believe is our responsibility. We should become “collaborative stewards” of our world. I learned this term in an email from an organization I support, Native Organizers Alliance Action Fund, which collaborates with other faith organizations, environmental groups, wildlife conservation organizations, and our neighbors, family, and friends. The task is huge and will require all of us to participate if we are to change the current trajectory our world is on.

Forty years ago in January, I first visited the Eighth Day church. I met Kent Beduhn at social work school at Catholic University. Kent and his first wife, Betsy, who is also Julia and Evan’s mom, invited me to church on Super Bowl Sunday, 1984. I showed up in a brown paisley top and skirt, stockings, and heels, which is a typical outfit I wore when I attended the Methodist church in the small town in Indiana where I grew up. That day, everyone at Eighth Day was dressed more casually, in jeans and tee shirts. People hugged each other during Passing of the Peace, which was also new to me. I didn’t attend regularly right away, but as I got to know people and began attending classes at 2025 Massachusetts Ave, the headquarters of Church of the Saviour. I was drawn into the community. Donna and Julian Nichols, Susan Koziol, Mary Cosby, John and Harriette Mohr, Marcia Harrington, Allen and Phyllis Holt, Kate Lasso, and of course, my dear friend Carol Fitch were all instrumental in helping me feel welcome. I explored several mission groups: Retreat, Banyan Tree, and my current mission group, New Creation Mission Group, a group of artists, singers, and creators. Today, I can’t imagine my life without Eighth Day and the New Creation Mission Group. I am the Pastoral Care Coordinator on the Eighth Day Leadership team, a role I take very seriously. I am the “CEO” of Eighth Day, a term I coined to represent my role as the Chief Encouragement Officer. I pray for our community, and I call people and send cards. I would not be the woman I am today without the love and encouragement I have received from people at Eighth Day. I am deeply grateful to all of you who, in many different ways, loved me into being more of who God created me to be.

In Psalm 89 it says,

You have blessed us with oceans, rivers, and lakes, to sustain our life on Earth. Yes, You entrusted the waters into our keeping, and in our stewardship we failed. Forgive us, O Merciful One. The heavens are Yours, the earth also belongs to You. Yet we befoul the air and rape the earth. Forgive us, O Merciful One. Through You is our purpose made known. O Beloved, your steadfast Love remains, sure and faithful, Your promises endure forever.

(Psalms for Praying: An Invitation to Wholeness, Nan C. Merrill)

We are all stewards of the Earth. Each of us has a part to play in bringing about healing of the planet. I believe this responsibility will grow more difficult with each passing year. The “tipping point” may have already occurred. But that doesn’t mean we give up, throw up our hands, and say it is too late. Often discussions about climate change give us the idea that it is “too late” and there is nothing we can do. I don’t believe that is true. We must hold onto hope and act individually and collectively to make a difference in the world. I think the changes we will see in the future will be very difficult to comprehend. The wealthier countries will be able to cope with rising oceans, increased storms, and hotter weather. People in the poorer countries will suffer most from floods, hurricanes, typhoons, lack of water and food. I believe we all will have to make difficult decisions to change our behavior if we want to save our planet.

I have witnessed climate change in the Arctic since I first visited Churchill, Manitoba, Canada in 2010. It was cold that year but there was very little snow on the ground. That trip changed the trajectory of my life. I quite literally fell in love with polar bears. They are very intelligent, playful, curious bears. Watching them on the tundra, taking pictures, I was mesmerized. My next trip was to Svalbard, Norway, in 2015.

* Kaktovik, AK, in 2016,
* Franz Josef Land, Russia in 2018,
* Nunavut, Canada and
* Greenland in 2019.
* I founded Polar Bear Pals ™ in 2016, and I retired from social work in 2022.

Now I devote my time to photographing polar bears and telling people about the Arctic. When I returned to Svalbard, Norway, in June, 2022, there was no “fast ice” (ice attached to land) anywhere, unlike the cold, icy world I experienced on my first trip to Svalbard, in June, 2015. The Arctic is warming at least four times the rate of the rest of the planet. I just returned from my 10th Arctic trip. I was in Svalbard, Norway in late March and early April. It was very cold, and I even got frostbite on my right index finger. I want to share some of my photos from my trip. (The photos are visible on the Zoom recording.)

What can we do to reduce climate change?

* Drive less,
* write letters to your Congressional and Senate representatives,
* *vote*,
* volunteer.
* If you are able, financially support organizations that are working to save the environment and protect wildlife and their habitats.
* One of the most important steps is to work for a transition away from the use of fossil fuels toward renewable energy.
* Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle. Reduce food waste, and reduce meat and dairy in your diet. Industrial farming and raising animals for food as well as shifting food to animal feed all harm the environment.
* Conserve water.
* Stop using pesticides in your yard and on your plants.
* Plant native plants in your yard.

Whenever possible, get out in nature. My trips to the Arctic are very restorative for me. Being in the cold, snowy expanse of nature puts me in touch with my soul, that part of God that is in each of us. For me, watching and photographing polar bears is a spiritual experience, although I must confess my last two trips were sometimes uncomfortable. Despite the warming of the Arctic, standing outside in -45° was difficult. Getting frostbite was also alarming.

I also want to highlight the power of prayer. I truly believe I would not be here today without God’s protection, especially during my childhood. I somehow knew God was with me as a child and I know it now. When I am confused, when I pray an answer will come to me. Some people don’t believe prayer has any effect, but in my life I have experienced the efficacy of prayer. The answer may not be what I asked for, but it is always inspired and inspiring. I only have to pray and then listen for divine guidance.

In Mathew 28:16-20, after the Crucifixion, Jesus appears to the Disciples. In Walking the Good Road -First Nations version,

So now I am sending you into all nations to teach them how to walk the road with me. You will represent me as you perform the purification ceremony with them, initiating them into the life of beauty and harmony…. Never forget, I will always be with you, your invisible guide, walking beside you, until the new world has fully come.

With Jesus as our guide and strength, we can accomplish a great deal. Those of us here today may not finish the work entailed in the Calls we have been given. But those who come behind us will carry on our work into the future. Just as Carol Fitch encouraged and beckoned me to follow my call to wildlife, I am urging you to find your call, supported by the community, and pursue it with all your energy, spirit, hope, and treasure. We will help each other as we Walk the Good Road together.

Each of us is Called by God to meet a need in the world. We are given support to follow our calls in Community. Saving our planet will probably be the most difficult task any of us has ever faced. But we must face the challenge with love, prayer, and community. Jesus said, “I am with you always”. Such devotion and support will surely raise up our efforts. In Psalm 25 it says “May we, together with the angels and the company of heaven, help unfold Your plan for planet Earth.