

## ***Asked and Answered***

A Sermon for Morning Worship for an Earth Day Celebration

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC

April 28, 2019

Text: Job 12:7-10

The care of Creation has been a part of my life for all of my life. My mother grew up on a farm giving her a life-long respect and love for the natural world. She taught me that earth worms aren't icky. They are a good thing – their presence in the garden proof that the soil is healthy and full of nutrients. She rarely killed a spider or a bee, explaining to me that each of them had a special role to play in God's world. Even dandelions – the bane of my dad's lawn cultivation efforts – were nothing but joy to her. It was she who taught me how to blow on the billowy head sending the seeds flying off on journeys who knows where, taking the gift of life with them. She also had an unusual style in talking with her plants, both indoors and out. In her “gardening by intimidation” approach, she would point her finger at a spindly plant giving it a tongue lashing to make clear that it better get with it or risk being ripped up by its roots so she could replant something that *would* grow. Funny as it sounds, I rarely knew her unconventional plant admonishments to fail. She had the most spectacular tomato plants of anyone else in the neighborhood!

When my parents moved to Maine for a brief time after my dad retired, my mother was most excited about it because of its

connection to Rachel Carson. “Who’s Rachel Carson,” I asked her one day when she was talking about how exciting it would be to live near the nature preserves in Maine that inspired Carson’s writing. She looked at me with such disappointment, I can still remember that stare. “I thought we sent you to college,” she snapped in response, promptly sighing and turning away. My mother was composting before anyone else knew what it was, making a pile of stuff in the side yard, conveniently close to the tomato patch. She railed against the overuse of Kleenex and paper towels, pushing her children – unsuccessfully – to use linen hankies and rags. My mother was indeed ahead of her time when it came to all things environmental and I have only recently come to understand how really radical she was.

As I think about my mother and her “earth friendly” way of life, it amazes me that I have no memory of the first Earth Day which took place on April 22, 1970. Right smack in the middle of my high school years, I vaguely remember the news coverage of the massive rallies across the country that day. I doubt there were any in my hometown of Pittsburgh, then known as the “steel city.” My dad worked in the steel industry as did one of my older brothers. Slag piles were part of the countryside in certain areas and it wasn’t until years later when I moved away that I understood what a uniquely Pittsburgh thing they were. I thought every town had a slag pile. I thought every town had days when

the air smelled like sulfur. Happily that is no longer the case in my hometown, but I remember when for sure.

Suffice to say I have always been aware of the environmental issues that have been a part of our lives for all of our lives, if we're honest. I'm betting you can say the same. I'm also confident that you are aware as much as I am that environmental fears regarding pollution and climate change have reached new and terrifying levels we would never have dreamed possible just a few years ago. Climate change always seemed like something that was years, decades, even centuries away from us, but no more. Deadly storms in some areas and droughts in others have brought home the reality of real, immediate changes in our lives powerfully in recent years. Dealing with the reality of damp springs and hot, dry summers has had to be an integral part of the Pollinator Garden conversations right here at church on a regular basis. We've prayed and supported other churches in the community as they travel to repair catastrophic hurricane damage right here in the US. Dear friends, we must find the courage to admit that climate change is real and dangerous and we bear the responsibility for letting it get this bad.

Now hold on a minute. Did I just say *we* bear the responsibility for it? Us? Yes, that's exactly what I said. It might not seem that way but it's true. No, we weren't sitting at the table in corporate board rooms around the world where the decisions

were made that polluting the air and the water were worth it if it made money. “The smell of progress” is what corporate greed calls air pollution, did you know that? Tell that to a child suffering from asthma because of the coal plant or the oil refinery across the street. One person’s progress and profitability are almost always someone else’s loss and misery. Don’t get me wrong – progress and profitability are not bad in and of themselves. What is bad is when the well-being of the earth – and all the living things which inhabit the earth, including plants and animals and *us* – is seen as an acceptable price to pay so that a few have more money in their pockets.

But you’re probably wondering, just where is all this in the Bible? Why should I be thinking about all this as a church-going Christian? What does it have to do with me anyhow? I try to be an environmentally aware person. I recycle and reuse as much as I can. I may not have a composting system yet, but I’m thinking about it. I don’t use dangerous weed killers, unless I absolutely have to. I try to be aware of my water and electricity usage because I know it’s important to make our natural resources last. I get it. I really do! The environment matters! I know that! What more can I do?

Enter our friend, Job. His words to his friends we heard this morning form one of the most beautiful summaries of how it is God needs us to respond to Creation. Interestingly, this is not one

of the usual scripture texts one associates with Earth Day. Usually we think of ones like this one from Genesis: “Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” This one is often cited by those seeking to justify their destruction of the land and its inhabitants as a God-given right, tracing all the destruction back to one word – “dominion.” All too often this one word has been seen as giving humans the right to “dominate” nature for their own ends when in reality, the teachings throughout the rest of scripture including the Psalms and the Gospels make clear that God put humans “in charge” of Creation not to destroy it but to preserve it for all future generations.

This brings me right back to Job’s words in the text we read today. First, we need to understand what the book of Job is – a part of the wisdom literature of Israel. It is a poetic drama, a sort of epic tale intended to pose questions about the reality of God and evil co-existing in the world. The entire book of Job is an example of the ancient debate over the issue of how can a just God allow evil to exist. Put more simply, why do bad things happen to good people? The book of Job is a long story about what happens when a good and faithful man loses everything just so God can

prove a point – that the man will not deny God no matter what. In fact, Job does not, in the end, deny God but he does argue with God. He accuses God of being unjust and unfair. God responds as you would expect God too – haranguing Job with divine logic but never really answering Job’s accusations about the capriciousness of God and God’s justice.

In the brief portion of the book we read today, Job is answering his friends who have been telling him it must be his fault his life has taken such a bad turn. He must have committed some sin without realizing it, they insist. No, Job explains over several chapters. The specific text we read in chapter 12 is striking for its simplicity and directness as we think about God and God’s expectations of us when it comes to caring for Creation. “Ask the animals and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you.” The answers to our questions are all around us, Job says. God is the great Creator of all that lives and breathes upon the earth. If we want to know how God expects us to take care of this beautiful earth entrusted to us, we must listen to what the creatures are telling us. The answers are everywhere around us if we but look and listen.

Is pollution real and harmfully altering the lives of all creatures on this earth? Ask the white whales and the honey bees, the monarch butterflies and the piping plovers – endangered by

pollution and overdevelopment of open space. Ask the sea birds falling dead from the sky, their bellies stuffed full of plastic garbage they ate as it floated in the ocean. Ask the coffee plants dying in the mountains of Honduras because of the relentless drought. Ask the farm workers dying of cancer because of the use of dangerous, deadly pesticides overused in the name of increased production. Dear friends, ask these questions we must, but asking does no good if we are not prepared to listen to the answers and respond to these catastrophic issues as God would have us respond. This is key! We must respond not as humans might want to respond, but *as God would have us respond*.

Job remind us of one more thing as well and it's probably the most important thing. He tells us, "In God's hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being." But what does this mean as we think of the enormity of the environmental crisis we live in the midst of every day? Again, Job offers us clarity in that Job never gets God to answer his question about God's responsibility for rampant injustice. Instead, it seems that God, through God's lack of response to Job, is making clear that humans made the problems they struggle with and therefore humans must fix them. Job reminds us that injustice does not ever come from God. Sin and evil, crime and destruction of people, or property, or the very Creation itself does not ever, ever come from God. It's quite literally our fault; it's up to us to fix it.

The good news is that we are finally figuring all this out, especially when it comes to Creation. The better news is exactly what Job reminds us of – we are all in God’s hands. God is ready to support our efforts whatever they are as we work together to heal ourselves, our society and our very planet. God has blessed us with incredibly smart, gifted people who can figure out where we go from here. God has also blessed us with an internal strength and determination that allows us to believe with all of who we are that all things are possible with God. We know that if we do our part, patiently and consistently, hopefully and prayerfully, we can make things better. Dear friends, we should celebrate as our Earth Day remembrance this year in our church that finally, we are asking the questions we need to ask when it comes to caring for Creation. We are learning what it is we need to do and, praise God, people are doing it. Tiny steps, more often than not, but we are making progress. Now we must continue to listen for the answers God offers and be prepared to do our best to live them into reality. It won’t be easy. It won’t be quick. But it is possible and we can begin by putting into practice the simple truth that no one can do everything, but everyone can do something as we make the health of the world our priority. Every reusable bag carried to the store, every reusable water bottle, every pesticide purchase forgone makes a difference. We all make a difference, every day. May it continue and grow. Amen.