

It's Always Earth Day

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“The earth is the Lord’s, and all that is in it.” – Psalm 24:1

If it seems a bit perverse to be celebrating the integrity of creation in the midst of a pandemic, I would refer you again to my text, which we read responsively to open the service: “The earth is the Lord’s, and all that is in it.”

The operative word from that verse for this morning is all – all that belongs to earth belongs to God, and that includes viruses. Creation’s integrity comes from God, and we religious people warp that concept when we talk about it with others if we even unconsciously equate creation’s integrity with what we want. God didn’t put the world together that way, and joy comes from aligning our wants with God’s will.

We want rainbows on roses and whiskers on kittens, as Julie Andrews famously sang, but what we often get is torrential rain, hailstones the size of golf balls (as they recently were in Texas), and tornadoes tearing swaths of destruction across miles of landscape as happened recently in Tennessee. Sometimes we get pandemics, as we’re living through right now, and none of that is what we want. And yet all of it belongs to the creation that God created and called good. It’s hard to see the goodness of creation under the cloud of a pandemic, and yet our faith forces us to open our hearts and minds and eyes to that goodness wherever it’s found, even in the valley of the shadow of death. “Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life” that psalm famously says, “and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” When you remember that the earth is the Lord’s and that we are earthlings, we are going to dwell in God’s house forever, come what may.

Last Thursday evening I stopped at church for a Zoom meeting from my study, and as I got out of my car, four families of geese came parading past with their twenty-seven goslings. Most baby animals are cute, which is why their parents put up with them, and goslings are nothing short of adorable. And I was in a virtual sea of them. I paused beside my car as they passed, waddling and honking and occasionally hissing to tell me to keep my distance, and I couldn’t help but be lifted for a few minutes out of the anxiety and uncertainty that is pervasive just now. The goslings are no less real and no less a part of creation’s integrity than covid-19 is, and I’m just as entitled to rejoice in them as I am to worry about the virus, because the earth is the Lord’s, and all – all – that is in it.

Even as creation groans, to use Paul’s language in our second lesson, beauty and bounty are all around us, and the groaning of creation is the birth process of something that we’ve been calling our new normal. There’s a lot of talk these days about our new normal – the one

we're living in right now and the one that is yet to be born – and like all births, we don't know what we're going to get. Oh, we've got some general ideas, of course, but none of us knows exactly what God will gift us with – IF we'll accept the future as gift and not as a human-engineered reprise of the past.

It's quite understandable that people are talking a lot just now about getting "back" to normal. But there's also a less audible conversation of which I'm a part that's talking about not going back to where we were before because there's a lot in our past that needs to be left there and not brought forward into whatever our new normal turns out to be. For many reasons, we need a genuinely NEW normal, not just a fresh coat of paint on the old normal, and God has given us an enormous opportunity to pause, to take stock, and to ask what's working and what's not.

A doctor friend of mine in Los Angeles referred to this time as "this pause in the life of the world" as though God has hit the pause button on the streaming of history. The entire earth has been given a time-out, and as every parent or teacher knows who's given a child a time-out, you want the child to make good use of that time, mainly by breaking the downward spiral that called for the time-out in the first place.

I don't know much about sports, but even I know that a coach doesn't call a time out when you're winning. When you're winning, you just keep playing the game! It's when things are not going right, when you're struggling to overcome difficulties, when you're barely hanging in there by the slimmest thread of hope – that's when you typically call a time-out to give yourself some very, very precious time to fall back, re-group, re-think, assess, and move forward in a different direction.

When we're children we need a time-out; when we're grown up we say, I need a moment, and in that word "moment" is the time to make all the difference.

In the New Testament of our Bible, there are a couple of Greek words for time. Chronos is the word for typical time; it's where we get our word chronology. That's common time, the ordinary passage of time, the march of time, tick-tock, tick-tock time. It's used about 50 times in the New Testament.

There's another word for time in the New Testament, and that's *kairos*, and it's used almost 90 times, and it refers to the "I need a moment" kind of time. Kairos time we don't spend or waste or kill; this kind of time we use and need, as in "I need a moment." I need a moment to calm down. I need a moment to start thinking clearly again. I need a moment to step back, take a breath, take stock, and then calmly and rationally try to move forward. That's kairos time, and that's where earth is living right now.

We're in kairos time. The earth needs a moment; we need a moment. And we've been given that moment in the form of a highly disruptive and unwanted virus. This time that we've been forced into is our kairos time. A time to stop sleepwalking through history. A time to gather our wits. A time to collect ourselves. A time even to tell jokes about toilet paper.

Barb Holtz sent me a collection of one-liners about covid-19 a few days ago, and one of my favorites was from the guy who said that before covid-19 he used to spin the toilet paper roll like he was on Wheel of Fortune. Since covid-19, however, he turns that roll like he's cracking a safe.

So what's wrong with being mindful of toilet paper? What's wrong with being mindful of our mindless consumption? I remember Nancy Jacquet, I believe, telling me one of the

sayings they taught children in grade school about using paper towels: Why take two when one will do? This pestilence has forced us into a new mindfulness about how much we use, how much we don't need to use, and how better to use what we have – and that's all good.

We've been hearing about the change in the atmosphere in places like China and Los Angeles and New York now that air pollution has dropped significantly. Covid-19 has done what no governmental agency or accord has been able to do. Being forced to do something we should have done willingly isn't a bad thing. Freedom is abused when we use our freedom to abuse others – all others and any others – who are part of the earth, which is the Lord's.

A barrel jellyfish was spotted in one of Venice's canals a few days ago, where they haven't been seen in decades because of the pollution. Foxes have been seen at Jerusalem's Western Wall recently since the crowds there have dispersed, and a pair of raccoons found their way into the library stacks at Arkansas State University recently, perhaps to make themselves better rac-coon-teurs, as someone tweeted, or, as a university official in rain-soaked Arkansas suggested, the animals weren't just looking for higher ground, they were looking for higher learning as well.

On planet earth it's always Earth Day, because we have no other option. The earth is the Lord's, but we humans have been acting like it's ours. God is reminding us, in this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, how to take better care of the earth – including ourselves – than we have been doing especially since the Industrial Revolution. God may still be speaking, as Linda Brooks reminded me when I told her about the twenty-seven goslings, but are we listening? Are we ready to work with God to co-create not just a new normal, but a better normal – for the planet, for ourselves, and for those who must live with the consequences of our actions?

One of my professors used to say that death is a teachable moment, and there is so much for us to learn in this time of widespread sickness and unexpected death. We can re-learn the skills of caring for one another, of looking out for one another, and for paying attention to one another – paying attention to all of us in the biosphere – if we won't spend this kairos time pining to return to the suicidal bad old days.

The only forward, philosopher Diogenes Allen says rather obviously, is forward, and now is one of those rare moments when science and medicine are helping us to see that to be a tree hugger is to be an authentic conservative. If we really want to go back, which is what a lot of people are saying, then let's go all the way back – back to the garden of our great story – where we earthlings began, and where we were put, not to till it and to keep it, as our anthropocentric translations put it, but rather to serve and preserve the paradise of our earthly existence. That's what the Bible actually says – it says serve, not till – and that is our God-given role in creation. To be servants in the service of others – all others in the biosphere – as plain members and citizens, as the naturalist Aldo Leopold called us back in 1949.

Even during life's hardest moments there is still so much to celebrate. God does move in mysterious ways, as the eighteenth-century hymn writer William Cowper wrote, and sometimes those ways are frightening, but here's what Cowper wrote about that:

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take:
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.

This is a time of great clouds and great mercy – a severe mercy, to be sure – for those who love God and who are called to God’s purpose. That’s us – we are the saints who love God and are called to God’s purpose here on planet earth, where it’s always Earth Day.