

“Cycle of Life”

B, Easter 4 Earth Day; John 10:11-18

April 22, 2018; 10:00 am

Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO

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I. THE ONE IN WHOM WE LIVE AND MOVE

“The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof....”

To Jehovah *is* the earth and its fullness, The world and the inhabitants in it.

The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge.
They have no speech, they use no words;
no sound is heard from them.

Yet their voice^b goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world. (Psalm 19)

And Creator God looked upon all that was created and declared that it was *good*. *VERY GOOD!* Tov meod!!!
Outstanding in the ancient Hebrew.

‘Look! God has come to dwell with humans! God will dwell *with* them, and they will be God’s beloved ones, and God himself will be with them and will be their God.

“We will mount up with wings as eagles. We will run and not be weary. We will walk and not faint. For God is our strength.”

You care for the land and water it;
you enrich it abundantly.
The streams of God are filled with water
to provide the people with grain,
for so you have ordained it.^[a]

¹⁰ You drench its furrows and level its ridges;
you soften it with showers and bless its crops.

¹¹ You crown the year with your bounty,
and your carts overflow with abundance.

¹² The grasslands of the wilderness overflow;
the hills are clothed with gladness.

¹³ The meadows are covered with flocks
and the valleys are mantled with grain;
they shout for joy and sing. (Psalm 65)

Creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the Children of God. (Romans 8:18-25.)

For God *so* loved the Cosmos.....the entire universe,
that God made Love incarnate.

The Lord, My Shepherd, leads me beside still waters,
in green pastures, and restores my soul.”

“Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin,²⁹ yet God cares for them, as God cares for you.”

“His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me.”

“All things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Colossians 1:17-18)

“I am the Good Shepherd. I love my sheep and they know my name. I lay down my life for my sheep, and find new life again and again. When a sheep is lost, I go out and search to the ends of the earth and never stop seeking until you are found and brought safely home.” (Jesus)

²⁸ ‘For in him we live and move and have our being. (Paul, Acts 17:28)

“Earth is crammed with heaven and every bush aflame with God.” (Elizabeth Browning)

“God is everything that is good, and the goodness that everything has is God.” (Julian of Norwich)

This is my Father's world,
And to my listening ears
All nature sings, and round me rings
The music of the spheres.
This is my Father's world:
I rest me in the thought
Of rocks and trees, of skies and seas;
His hand the wonders wrought.

This is my Father's world,
The birds their carols raise,
The morning light, the lily white,
Declare their maker's praise.
This is my Father's world,
He shines in all that's fair;
In the rustling grass I hear him pass;
He speaks to me everywhere.

II. CELTS “GOT IT” - TWO BOOKS

The ancient Celts heard God “still speaking.” Everywhere. In the natural world, in the scriptures written and oral, and in the traditions of the faith that were brought to them and explored and expanded with them.

“God speaks to us through two books: the ‘little book’ of Scripture and the ‘big book’ of creation.” John Scotus Eriugena wrote in the 9th century.

These scriptures, lines of poetry and words to hymns I’ve just shared with you are only a droplet in the pool. For there are declarations too many to count of God’s speaking and revealing God’s presence in the natural world – testimonies come down over the eons from ancient peoples of bible times, ancient Celtic times and the centuries since. Humankind has known and experienced deeply the Sacred in creation in countless ways, times and places.

Kenneth McIntosh, a UCC pastor and author well-steeped in this ancient way to view the world and the wonder of the Divine, shares a glimpse of the Celtic perspective.

“For the Celts, all creation is God, but there is more to God than creation. You can worship God and not worship God’s creatures, but *all* God’s works – every beast and insect, every leaf and twig, and every puddle and clod of dirt – are communications from the Divine.
“

“For the ancient Celts, a split between their Christian selves and their nature-loving selves would have been impossible; the two aspects of their lives were like strands of a single rope. Christ the Divine Logos equally revealed God to humanity through the scriptures, in the wilderness, in the meeting of God’s people, and out on the ocean. Restoring a parched field to arability was an act of *worship*, and the rituals of the church underscored the importance of the Earth. (Kenneth McIntosh, *Water from an Ancient Well: Celtic Spirituality for Modern Life*.)

Others have expressed it in their own words:
“More things are learned in the woods than from books. Animals, trees and rocks teach you things not to be heard elsewhere. (St. Bernard)

“Christ is vibrant in the material world, not just the spiritual world.” (George MacLeod)

II. THE ONE IN WHOM WE LIVE AND MOVE

Contemporary theologians like Matthew Fox and Marcus Borg have carried on this vital stream of belief, with helpful understandings of “creation theology” – including the notion that we are all of us – human and creature alike – born into a state of original blessing *not* “original sin.”

Our traditional understandings, such as God being “lofty and far away in the heavens”, separate from us and the earth, have not been helpful in our times, and we do well to explore new understandings – and yet, we find those “new ideas” date back millennia and are reflected in the scriptures themselves.

GOD AS SOUL OF THE UNIVERSE!

Marcus Borg continues John Scotus Eriugena’s 9th century refreshing theology of “**Panentheism** (meaning “all-in-God”, from the Ancient Greek πᾶν *pân*, “all”, ἐν *en*, “in” and Θεός *Theós*, “God”)[1]

This is NOT to be confused with pantheism, which asserts that “all is God”. Panentheism is the belief that the divine pervades

and interpenetrates every part of the universe and also extends beyond time and space. In panentheism, God is viewed as **the soul of the universe**, the universal spirit present everywhere, which at the same time "transcends" all things created.

Borg says we've too long pictured God "as 'out there', separate from the world; a supernatural being who created the world a long time ago and who and who may from time to time intervene within it." That God is hard to relate to, and can be very detached from us, our life and the world in which we live.

Borg came to think of God very differently after experiencing God in powerfully present ways in Nature. "I began to think of God as "the Encompassing spirit. "I now see the world as infused with that spirit." He began to think of God (and to remind us all in his teaching) as Paul describes in The Book of Acts as "the One in whom we live and move and have our being."

Put simply, "We are in God like fish are in water."

III. GOD IS ON THE "DOWN LOW" WITH US

Mary Luti casts light on why keeping God "up in the sky, lofty, detached from us" limits our experience of God, and is really not an accurate portrayal of God's dealings with humankind over the eons.

She tells us: "The Bible says God is "up there." God reigns on high. God goes up to joyful shouts. Raise your eyes to heaven. Lift your hearts to God. God is a higher power. But the Bible *also* says God is "down there." In chasms, valleys, bedrock, graves. In the depths of love, loss, and pain. In the depth of prayer, too, where sighs replace words. God is a **lower power.**"

Moses, Jonah, Ezekiel and Jesus Christ all discovered this! In seas parting and dry ground coming up from the depths; in the presence found in the darkest times in the belly of the whale; in dry bones coming back to life with the very breath of the earth blowing through.

Luti continues: "Christ went deepest of all, dispossessing himself of highness in a mother's womb. One silent night she laid him to sleep in a lowly trough. Deep in rock he was laid to sleep again, dead from wounds we gave him. In the final abyss God found him. Easter took place in a grave.

God of the deep, O deepen me."

IV. LIVING IN THE SPIRIT ON THE EARTH

What if, like the ancient Celts, and other forebears in the faith, we considered God, the Creator, the Sacred One as an “encompassing Spirit?” Considered that we and everything that is are *in* God. Knew, felt, deep in our bones, that God is not separate from us and creation – not *somewhere else* but *right here*? The “One in Whom we live and move and have our being,” as scripture so profoundly declares?

And what if, we truly lived in that Spirit; walked our days on the earth in that knowing? What if we human creatures experienced eternal and ever-present abundant life “in God” in Creation, as the fish live in the sea without even thinking about it?

Fish don’t know they’re in water. Think about it.

If you tried to explain it, they’d say, “Water? What’s water?” They’re so surrounded by it, that it’s impossible to see.

“There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says “Morning, boys. How’s the water?” And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes “What the heck is water?!” (David Foster)

What if we lived and moved in God more like fish live and move in water?

V. EARTH DAY TODAY

On this Earth Day Sunday *and* Fourth Sunday of Easter, we consider the lilies and we consider life itself. For all living things are sacred gifts from our Creator. We give thanks for our own lives and the ever-rising, ongoing new life brought to us as Easter People.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, teaches us the cycle of life itself: laying down one’s life and rising up again. We who follow Jesus are called to be Good Shepherds *with* him – caring for all living things entrusted to us. Laying down our lives for others – human and creaturely – and taking them up again. Death, life, rebirth – just as nature goes through its cycles.

So what does it mean to celebrate God in creation on this Earth Day/Easter Sunday? It is to know we, too, are in the care of the Good Shepherd, even as we are called to care for others, as we walk on this earth. That, as we cycle through life and death and resurrection again and again, we trust that we are not alone, and the One we follow journeys through that cycle too – and keeps laying down his life for us.

David Lose puts it well: “Jesus cares for us enough to die for us, to lay down his life, and to remain with us through all things until we enter good pastures once again. Jesus said that he could be found among “the least of these,” and if we care for them, we are caring

for Jesus himself. If that is the case, then Christ is found even among the least of these in nature, and by caring for them, we care for Christ himself.”

Imagine.....
and rejoice!

“On Eagle’s Wings” (duet)

We are cared for infinitely – raised up on eagle’s wings, carried on the breath of dawn. And we can care for others infinitely, not on our own strength or power alone, but on the infinite breath of the infusing Spirit.

Fyodor Dostoevsky said it so well – this charge to us for life and love:

“Love all of God’s creation, the whole of it and every grain of sand. Love every leaf, every ray of God’s light! Love the animals, love the plants and love everything. If you love everything, you will soon perceive the divine mystery in things. Once you perceive it, you will begin to comprehend it better every day. And you will come at last to love the whole world with all-embracing love.”

Imagine...

God, the Sacred One

Known in three parts – and so many more:

Creator, Source

Redeemer Christ

Holy Spirit, Comforter – is in all and through all.

Not limited in any way except by our imaginations.