

Psalm 19, Luke 12:22-34 Newtonbrook United Church February 28, 2010
We Sing of “Response-ability”; a sermon by Rev. Allan Baker

Welcome to the second Sunday worship service during the season of Lent, 2010. As you know, Lent is a season for reflection – reflection on our journey as Christians who live in God’s world. Today’s sermon is titled “Response – ability” and we will be thinking about this beautiful world which God has created for us to enjoy and live in, and our “Response – ability” to assist in making this the world of God’s dreams. God is where life and love are to be found. If you wish to have confirmation of that, Luke’s gospel reading for today is a good starting point.

A brief review - last week we examined two of the creation stories in the Book of Genesis. In the story that appears first, the one that has creation happening over the course of seven days, God affirms daily that creation is “GOOD”. God is pleased with what God has made – and that includes you and I.

Last week the sermon had an emphasis on moving away from the story of creation as recorded in Genesis, chapter 1 to living the second creation story, found in the second chapter of Genesis. In the latter story, God put human beings into the garden “to till and to keep”¹ the garden – not to dominate it or to exploit it for human purposes!

Tilling and keeping the garden for God is far different than the concept of “having dominion” over the earth, as in the first creation story. Barbara Brown Taylor, a respected theologian, says that in 1967;

*“a historian Lyn White wrote an article for Science magazine in which he charged that the roots of the ecological crisis are essentially religious.”*²

This is because Christians have been taught that they are, “*superior to nature, contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim.*” This is a result of having interpreted – mis-interpreted in my view – the Biblical words of having “dominion” over creation.

I tend to concur with United Church of Canada author and eco-theologian David Hallman who writes;

*“I believe that churches in the North have not yet come to grips with the degree to which Christian theology and tradition are implicated in the Western capitalist development model that has dominated our countries since the industrial revolution, many other countries through the colonial periods, and more recently every part of the world that is touched by the new “global economy.” This goes well beyond the critique of Lyn White Jr. and the theological responses to it. It has to do with economics, cultural values, worldviews and even understandings of faith.”*³

Our understanding of faith is not the whole explanation of how we have come to exploit God’s garden of creation, but it is an important part of the explanation.

¹ Genesis 2:15 (NRSV)

² Barbara Brown Taylor, Introduction to The Green Bible, page I-88

³ David Hallman, Ecotheology: Voices from South and North, page 5

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When people are asked, “Where do you see God?”, frequently the response is, “In nature.”

After our visit with our friends at Northminster United Church, we showed pictures of people here on the screen while listening to the song, “If God Were One of Us”. God is among us as children of God, as well as in nature.

One of my favourite quotations from American author John Updike is;
“God is in the world just like salt is in the ocean, giving it taste⁴.”

What have we humans done to this garden of creation?

Each week there are stories in the media of an environmental destruction; stories of species extinction; stories of melting polar ice; stories of retreating glaciers; stories of climate change caused by human actions.

Sea Sick is the latest book by Alanna Mitchell, Toronto author and member of Beach United Church. In that book one of the topics that she explores is what are called, dead zones.” These are areas of the ocean where there is little or no oxygen to support life. Remember, God created the oceans of the world and they have had life-giving oxygen to sustain life.

Alanna reports that there are 407 “dead zones” in the oceans of the world, “a figure that has doubled each decade since 1960.”⁵ She also reports that,

“Scientists are also finding that vast oxygen-starved zones in the deep waters of the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans are expanding. They are thickening and moving nearer to the surface, the direct result of climate change that is warming the ocean.”⁶

Some of us are old enough to remember the debate about acid rain and how INCO in Sudbury increased the height of its smokestack so that the effects would not be as severe in the Sudbury area. You may recall that vegetation was devastated by acid rainfall in that area, making the landscape look as if it were a moonscape.

I recall being on an Air Canada flight, returning from Thunder Bay. It was a clear morning and as we flew over Lake Huron I could trace the smoke from that higher stack until it dissipated near the south shores of Georgian Bay.

Here in Toronto we blame industries in the Ohio Valley for summer smog days – but where does the smog that we create go to? Whose lives does it harm?

⁴ Mary O’Connell, Updike and the Patriarchal Dilemma, page 201

⁵ Alanna Mitchell, Sea Sick, page 42

⁶ Alanna Mitchell, Sea Sick, page 43

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Human contributions to climate change have primarily been caused by those of us who live in the parts of the world that have the highest levels of consumption, and energy use. This is the area of the world that David Hallman refers to as, “the North.” The adverse effects of climate change will be felt most by those who did not cause it – primarily in “the South.”

“In Africa, as around the world, awareness is growing that climate change is not a remote threat but an immediate danger causing more frequent “extreme weather conditions” of drought and flooding. Ice is melting at the poles and on Mount Kilimanjaro. The waters of Lake Chad are disappearing. Drought cycles in East Africa are becoming more unpredictable. According to the latest estimates, the entire African continent was responsible for only 3.7% of the world’s annual CO2 emissions, compared to China with 21.5%, the United States with 20%, and the European Union with 14%.”⁷

Are we tilling and keeping creation; are we “**living with respect in creation**” – as we say in the New Creed; OR are we still living as if creation is something that was made by God for humans to exploit and to enjoy?

Can our theology help us to change the way we live in this garden of creation? What has all of this to do with Christianity?

“There is no evident relation between the gospel and climate change” according to Jakob Wolf, head of the Department of Systematic Theology at the University of Copenhagen. “However, to the extent that climate change is a consequence of human activity, it falls within the imperative of ethical principles, because human beings are responsible for their actions. The ethical demand to love one’s neighbour applies here as “planet Earth has become our neighbour”⁸ – a neighbour that is vulnerable to human activity.

“Religion is not what you believe, but how you behave.”⁹ According to Karen Armstrong, an internationally acclaimed author.

- Yes, we are culpable in this crisis.
- Yes, we can change. We can use the “Carbon Fast” calendar from KAIROS this week to reflect on, and possibly change, our lifestyle. This week’s theme is, “travel.”

⁷ William Minter, Climate Change and Natural Resources, (www.AfricaFiles.org), October 29, 2009

⁸ WCC Press Release, How Theology Can Save The World From Climate Change, December 22, 2009

⁹ Karen Armstrong, The Toronto Star, September 30, 2006

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If we Christians love the world, as God loves the world, we will make this a better place for our neighbours, and for future generations. In a strange way, climate change is bringing congregations together in groups like the Green Awakening Network with a mandate to share information and best practices on how we can live with respect IN creation. The crisis of climate change is bringing denominations together, not only in Toronto and in Canada, but at the table of the World Council of Churches. Greening our theology is an ecumenical movement for change. It is not simply a matter of helping poor African countries; it is a matter of survival for humanity; a matter of saving God’s world and life as we know it.

Why would we change our lifestyles and live more simply? I believe that is what God is calling us to do. We know what our present way of life here in North America has done to God’s creation. We know that God wants abundant life for all creatures here in the garden we call earth. The question is whether or not we will continue down the path of domination, or whether we will turn and begin **to till and to keep this garden** as a place of beauty. Are we “response – able”?

God is where life and love are to be found. Let’s all join our hearts in the following prayer:

A Prayer for the Care of Creation - # 311 in Voices United

**O God, the only source of life and energy and wealth,
defend your planet earth.
Teach us to conserve, and not to squander the riches of nature,
to use correctly the heritage of former generations,
and to plan for the welfare of our children’s children.
Renew our wonder, awaken our concerns,
and make us better stewards, and more careful tenants,
of the world you lend us as our home.
Hear us, O God, our Creator and Redeemer,
we pray as disciples of Jesus. Amen.**

Hymn # 260 – God Who Gives to Life Its Goodness

Questions for reflection:

1. We have been invited to participate in a “carbon fast” during Lent, 2010. Are we using the KAIROS calendar as a means of reflection on how we are living with respect IN creation?
2. Jesus indicates that God will provide for us, just as God provides for the lilies of the field. What stops us from living as simply as possible?
3. Psalm 19 speaks of the beauty of creation. Is this the only place where we discover God’s presence? If not, where have you seen God’s presence this week?