

**SERMON FOR EARTH SUNDAY, APRIL 19, 2009**  
**Rev. Margaret Sagar**  
**KAIROS Ecumenical Service at AST Chapel, Halifax, 7:00 p.m.**  
**Proverbs 8. Selected verses; Psalm 104. 24-35, VU 827; Mathew 13. 44-46**

**OF WHALES, WONDER AND WISDOM**

**Whales- how many of you have seen a whale, the Leviathan of the psalm we just said?**

Humpback, pilot and minke whales feed in these Nova Scotia waters during the summer. My son and his wife told me of hiking off the Cabot Trail near Cheticamp where, although high on a cliff, they could clearly hear the sound of many whales spouting in the ocean below. Once, Alan and I were out in our tiny aluminum boat off Lower Prospect when a small whale breached just a few meters away! I stared ahead to see if it would reappear. Sadly, or fortunately, the whale continued its journey underwater!

While I was in Bermuda, I read a fascinating article in the island's newspaper magazine (*The Royal Gazette, Magazine February/ March 2008*). It was the story of Andrew Stevenson's close encounter with a whale in the waters off Bermuda. Andrew is a Bermudian who is making a documentary film about the humpback whales that migrate past Bermuda from the Caribbean to our shores every spring and return in the fall to winter and breed in warmer waters. In the article, he tells how his patient attempts to film whales were finally rewarded; he was snorkeling, with his 45 pound underwater camera in hand, when a humpback whale swam right up to him, remaining with him for a whole hour and forty minutes! Here are excerpts of how he describes this:

*"The whale swam beside me and looked me in the eye time and time again, his eye only feet away. He performed intricate maneuvers 360 degrees around me, under me, beside me. At times the whale almost touched me, but it seemed to know exactly where I was in relationship to any part of its body. .... A careless tap of his massive tail could easily kill me. And yet this huge animal was incredibly gentle. The delicate tips of his sixteen- foot flippers flexed, like the fingers of a human hand, as they almost touched my face. He lay quietly on his back as if embracing me, his flippers extending either side of me....he remained motionless, his head barely a couple of feet under me, as if he were listening to my heartbeat. But he never made a sound. Several times he swam directly at me and hung in the water beside me as his tennis -ball sized gray eyes peered intently into the camera lens....."*

When Andrew had to climb into his boat to change the clips in his camera, he saw the whale surface; he was astounded by the size of it, double the length of the 22 ft boat! Andrew wrote that this was such an emotional experience that he couldn't sleep for days afterwards or even talk about this encounter with "Magical Whale" as he called him. *"I felt I had been in the presence of a very intelligent being and that the whale had been communicating with me, but I was unable to understand what he was saying. So used to using words, the primeval ability to commune without them had atrophied.... "*

Andrew expected that Magical Whale was what's called a "friendly", a whale that makes a habit of approaching boats, but to his surprise this whale had never been photographed before, and was not in the whale catalogue kept in Bar Harbour. Did you know that whales have unique patterns

on their tale flukes by which they are identified? Another whale he photographed that same day- it had briefly joined him and Magical- was in the catalogue and had first been seen in 1978, 30 years earlier, in Newfoundland and several times since, both there and in the Dominican Republic. Andrew had a show of his still photos of Magical Whale. I bought this photo to support his project. Here is Magical Whale as he swam towards him! ([www.whalesbermuda.com](http://www.whalesbermuda.com) and [www.peaceinthewater.com](http://www.peaceinthewater.com) for videos of whales)

The very same week that I read that article, someone happened to send me an email with a story about a fifty foot humpback whale out on the west coast. This one had become hopelessly entangled in crab nets and was in danger of dying. Divers went to the rescue and reported that the huge mammal remained perfectly still while they cut through the many ropes wrapped around her. The diver cutting the ropes from her large mouth said she never took her eye off him, watching him intently as he worked to free her. Once freed, she swam joyously away. Then, unexpectedly, she returned to her rescuers, gently nudging each diver in turn. The divers said it was “an amazing and unforgettable experience, as though she was saying thank you.” Astounding though this is, I’m sure it is true since I also found it quoted, with source cited, in Bruce Sanguin’s book “*Darwin, Divinity and the Dance of Creation*” which I read this winter.

In that same Bermuda magazine Andrew wrote about the annual whale hunt by the Japanese in the Antarctic Whale sanctuary for so-called scientific research, and the destruction of the fishery through world wide over-fishing and careless fishing practices, like miles of longlines and bottom trawling, and the stress we are placing on the oceans. I can’t quote all his stats and evidence but he ends the article by writing:

***Our common oceans face a tenuous future. It is time for us all to rethink how we use them. If the oceans die, we die.”***

A few weeks ago at a presbytery workshop, I heard meteorologist Richard Zurawski talk about climate change. He mentioned that half the world’s plastic- plastic bags etc- is ending up in the middle of the Pacific Ocean where it destroys marine life and damages water quality!! We see lots of it around here too on our beaches! Stop using them, he says!

I could go on ad infinitum with whale stories! A week or two ago, I watched the documentary on TV called “Saving Luna”. **Encounters with whales, magnificent, intelligent creatures profoundly move human observers, evoking wonder, awe and humility.**

**Wonder, awe and humility!** Those are essential qualities which we **must** nurture within ourselves. Only then will **we care for the earth the way we should and must**, since it is **wonder that can lead us to wisdom**. We human beings of the dominant western culture have been living **arrogantly** for at least the last few centuries! The survival not only of whales, but also our own survival requires repentance of such arrogance. The escalating habits of exploitation and abuse of land, air, waters and other forms of life have brought us to today’s desperate crisis in climate change, the eradication of biodiversity, and the destruction of the very environment upon which human survival is totally dependent.

Looking into the eyes of a whale, a human being is awe struck, changed. We may not all have the opportunity to do that, but I’ll bet that most of you here have experienced such wonder and awe

and its resulting feeling of how small you are/ we are in this mysterious universe - Gazing across mountain tops, seeing pristine lakes, and beautiful lush valleys, staring at the night sky, -red sunset out one window and orange full moon low in the sky out of another, the stars in the deepening blue in between, as appeared a few nights ago at our home,- at sea in a fishing boat or kayak, watching eagles soar, or herons fish, snow and ice sparkle—whatever it is all of us here have likely experienced a sense of wonder and awe at some time or another. It is then too that we may feel an expansive oneness with all of creation and an acute awareness of the presence (or immanence) of God. Nurture such mystical experience! Live out of its meaning! Draw on the memory of such as you sit here now!

Matthew Fox suggests: awe = **A.W.E. = Awakening to Wonder Everywhere-** (*Bruce Sanguin page 249-quotingFox.*) In biblical terms, “*The earth is full of God’s glory.*” (Isaiah 6.3) and we are caught up in it!

**One of the earliest ecological prophets of our time was Rachel Carson-** she who told of the *Silent Spring*, warning us against the use of pesticides and other chemicals we had begun to spew into the air and pour onto the earth. She wrote an article in the 1950’s, posthumously published with photos as a book called *A Sense of Wonder-* the title also given to a biographical play I saw a few years ago, and a film now, I believe. Her theme was “*help your child to wonder*”... her philosophy that we have an innate sense of wonder about the natural world that parents and adults must nurture in the child and keep alive. She understood that human beings are but one part of nature, primarily distinguished by their power to alter it, even irreversibly. She recognized human vulnerability in a fragile ecosystem that we damage at our peril. Nurturing a sense of wonder keeps us conscious of our place in nature- our vulnerability and the fragility and the precious value of all life forms, intimately connected in a delicate balance with our own. A sense of wonder, and hence humility will stop us from destroying the earth with total disregard for life. I’ll come back to the implications of the word humility later.

Since Rachel Carson, other such ecological prophets have built on her work and endorsed her views; David Suzuki probably best known to Canadians because of his TV series *The Nature of Things*. The last 60-70 years have seen a huge expansion of knowledge and information through diverse disciplines of human inquiry about the nature of the universe and all life. Consider, Rachel wrote before the expeditions into space that showed us the now familiar, but I hope still breath-taking, view of planet earth swirling blue and white. **So there is among human beings a new consciousness of who we are and where we live, an ecological awakening. With that consciousness comes a fresh grasp of Wisdom, and a new look at theology.**

So what is **Wisdom?** In simple terms, **Wisdom lies in knowing how to live happily and well for the sake of the abundant life of all creation and in relationship with all with whom we share this planet.** Some people now recognize that there is a life-giving wisdom in the ecosystem of the earth itself. Scientist/ philosopher **James Lovelock brought together the discoveries of the past century into a theory related to the whole ecosystem of planet earth.** He gave the name ***Gaia to this earth our home as a living being in her self.*** (Google *Gaia Hypothesis or Theory if this is something new to you*). *Gaia* is Greek name for the Earth goddess (root *ge* found in words like geology and geography.) *Gaia’s* wisdom has over billions of years created an environment in which the conditions for life as we know it, including human life, can flourish on a planet unique in our solar system.

(Did you know that it takes 500 years for worms and other organisms to make one inch of topsoil, topsoil that human beings are now destroying through chemicals and erosion at an alarming and unsustainable rate? *quoted in Primavesi, page157* )

Human wisdom, therefore, is dependent upon Gaia's wisdom; human wisdom must learn from her in order to maintain those conditions and to live happily and well in harmony and co-operation with Gaia.

When we study the biblical texts through this contemporary lens of ecological consciousness, we discover that Gaia's wisdom is reflected in the wisdom literature of the bible. (No time to dwell on it now, but note *Wisdom* is personified as a woman, named in Greek *Sophia*, a feminine name like *Gaia*-there is deep significance to this.) You heard just now Wisdom's invitation and self description in the Book of Proverbs. There is more detail in books such as the Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach and Baruch that connects beautifully with Gaia's wisdom, connecting scientific inquiry and theology. In the biblical literature, Wisdom/Sophia is with God in the beginning, creating and continuing to create. Scholars have indeed concluded that Sophia is God. Her Spirit is God's Spirit present (immanent) in the world. She creates, redeems and possesses all knowledge. She is the principle of good order and government among all leaders and nations. And Jesus is the manifestation of Sophia in human life.

In Jesus' parable we just heard, it is wisdom that is the pearl of great value. What will we give to possess this pearl of wisdom? We learn from scripture that the beginning of wisdom is reverent wonder at the earth full of the glory of God, awe at the mystery of Sophia manifested in this living and life-giving ecosystem named Gaia. "*The ethical imperative implicit in this awareness is to be willing to exchange our lifestyles for the repair of the planet.*" (Sanguin, page 175).

**We need wisdom! Without Wisdom**, we human beings will continue on our disastrous path which will destroy life as we know it now-example through **climate change** indisputably induced by human activity –Richard told us the other week that **what scientists estimated would happen within a hundred years they now expect to happen within twenty years**- we will upset the balance of Gaia so that human life cannot be sustained. This destruction does not mean that life will not continue but rather that human beings will not be among that life! **What a jolt** for us who have arrogantly considered ourselves to be at the centre of creation, the earth there for us to use and to meet our needs! As we confessed earlier in this service, **use** easily turns into **abuse**, **needs** into **greed**, encouraged by a materialistic culture of consumerism, militarism, and money at any cost, the systemic sins of our society.

**God took a handful of clay or dirt** (Hebrew *adamah*) to create "*adam*"- a being of earth, an **earthling**. *Humus* is a Latin word for *earth*-from that root comes **human** and **humility**- **knowing our place in the earth's ecosystem; to walk humbly is to keep our feet in touch with the earth**,- "*take off your sandals for this is holy ground*"-thus **our body, intellect, emotions and spirit stay in touch with the wisdom of Gaia**. In addition, we know now that all life forms have come into being from the gases of the "big bang" billions of years ago. All matter is formed from these elements of life in mysterious and complex ways but in a single procession of life. Therefore, like all matter on earth, **human beings are created of stardust**- we should say at the graveside, "*earth to earth, ashes to ashes, stardust to stardust.*"

As we observe Earth Day, we are in the **Easter season, season of resurrection, of mystery, of the promise of new beginnings and new life. Despite the dangers and threats of today, we can live into that Easter promise and hope.** Our task as people of faith is to open ourselves to wonder at whales and worms, bacteria and Beethoven, mountains and valleys, people as well as stars; then we will find that pearl of wisdom. With wisdom we will be able to deeply lament the suffering of the universe, entering into the pain we inflict on life and the pain we know in ourselves; with wisdom we will with joy, good humour, hope and gratitude commit ourselves to do what we know we must to halt our reckless destructive impact upon Gaia. Each of us must be courageous and wise in our own actions. Together we must be persistent in our advocacy as we pressure the powers of empire (governments, businesses, financial and even religious institutions,) to do the right thing. It is no easy task; the powers of evil in empire will not give up their focus on business as usual, money and short term gain; their lack of wisdom is likely to continue. It will not be easy – we are all entrapped in the systems of the empire. But Sophia-God summons us and gives us her Spirit, a Spirit of liberation and delight.

The prophet Micah told us long ago:

“Earthling, God has shown you what is good: what is asked of you.

**Act justly, cherish compassion and loving kindness; walk humbly [on this earth-my addition] with your God.”**

*(Translation Primavesi, page 161)*

To the Holy Mystery at the Heart of the Universe who is Wholly Love and Source of All Life, to Her be all honour and glory, all love and all praise. Amen! Alleluia!

**Books quoted and which informed this sermon:**

Bruce Sanguin, “Darwin, Divinity and the Dance of the Cosmos.” CopperHouse 2007

Anne Primavesi, “Making God Laugh: Human Arrogance and Ecological Humility” Polebridge Press, 2004