

SERMON FOR APRIL 27, 2008 SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
EARTH SUNDAY

Rev. Margaret Sagar, Ebenezer Methodist Church, Bermuda

Acts 17:22-31. Psalm 8; John 14:15-21.

LIVING WITH RESPECT IN CREATION IN THE POWER OF
THE HOLY SPIRIT

On BBC World News on Friday there were dramatic pictures of a once huge glacier in the mountains of the south island of New Zealand which is rapidly turning into a vast lake as it melts at an ever-increasing rate. How many of you have seen Al Gore's award-winning documentary "An Inconvenient Truth"? "Inconvenient" because none, or few, of us really want to make the big life style changes that the truth about climate change demands of us.

How many of you have a bag similar to this one, from a store in Halifax, produced by Greenrock, with a new take on the old acronym BYOB-bring your own bag? I bet all you older folk remember the days (as even I do!) when we always took a shopping bag to the store. Nobody expected to be given those free plastic bags or even the paper ones you favour here. Most of us were slow to realise the impact those plastic bags would make on land fills and wild life in the early days of their convenient use. Nor did we recognise, or care, how many trees would be destroyed to make paper bags. Nor did we recognise, or care, how many harmful chemicals would be released in the manufacturing processes into the air we breathe, into the lakes, rivers, ocean habitat of fish we eat, and eventually into the rain, the water we directly drink here, and into the soil in which food is grown. Now, in Canada there are moves to ban plastic bags totally.

Are any of you involved in organizations like Greenrock, or Bermuda Environmental and Sustainability Task group, (BEST) or the National Trust, the Audubon Society, Buy Back Bermuda, the Aquarium and Zoo or others related to conservation of green spaces and indigenous species of fish, coral, birds, flowers and fauna? Please tell me if you are because I would like to know and would like your help.

I was delighted to discover the Royal Gazette [Bermuda's daily paper] Magazine's Green issue in Thursday's paper. Green cleaning supplies for homes and institutions, good old fashioned helpers, that I confess I'm not good at using – easier to buy a bottle of some already mixed chemical or the commercially prepared "green" products like Seventh Generation, Nature Clean and Ecover! Green cars and bikes for these islands to cut exhaust pollution so our lungs stay

clean and healthy, and to reduce Co2 emissions responsible for global warming!! Terrific! In Saturday's issue of the Royal Gazette, more discussion of alternatives to oil-produced electricity, wind, solar, tidal power, or nuclear power which brings other challenges of what to do with dangerous radio-active waste products.

At the beginning of our worship we recited an affirmation of faith to remind us that we are called "*to live with respect in creation*"- a phrase added in 1995 to the 1968 creedal statement to confirm our deepening awareness of the detrimental effect we are having upon our fragile environment. In the past 20 years or so, both that knowledge and the actual impact of the damage we are doing have been growing exponentially.

Last Tuesday, April 22, was Earth Day, observed in many parts of the northern hemisphere to draw attention to and learn more about the impact of human beings upon our planet earth. On a day close to Earth Day, many faith communities focus their worship on their relationship with the earth. Maritime Conference asked us to do this and gave us ideas for such focus in worship and for follow up action in Practical Hope!

But first, I wonder if you have ever connected what you believe about God and about whom we are as human beings with how we behave towards the earth and our environment? For, indeed, they are connected. Theology, how we think about God, and biblical interpretation, change as we learn more from science and other spheres of human study. "*God has created and is creating*"- things are not static! Such changes in how we interpret the Bible and how we understand God and our relationships are of the Holy Spirit. In the gospel for today, Jesus told his disciples that the Holy Spirit would be active in them and in the world after his departure from this existence in time and space on earth. The Holy Spirit would be with them as Comforter, one who strengthens, as advisor, advocate, lawyer and one who "*will guide them into all truth*" (John 16.13). We are invited to obey Jesus' commandments, to love him as he has shown us. That implies that we respect all relationships and honour all that God has created and is creating. So God's Holy Spirit is with us to guide us and to give us the power to face the truth about ourselves, and the energy to be transformed to make the changes necessary to live more sustainably and to ensure a future for our children's children. As we rethink old understandings in the light of new knowledge, we are grateful to God for new insights, for the incredible amount of new learning that continues to take place. How we use that knowledge and how we view our selves in relation to God and creation are vital to our survival. Dismissing all connection with the sacred is not an option. Rather, discovering a deeper understanding of the sacred is beneficial.

So let's think about it:

(Excerpt and adaptation from "Green Moment" by Wilf Bean, circulated with Practical Hope info)

How we view the world and see our place in it is fundamental to how we live our lives, and how we live our lives has a direct impact on the earth's climate and its ability to sustain life. Reflect for a moment on this view of Creation:

The whole earth is sacred space.

Every moment of life is sacred time.

All life is sacred.

Our interconnection in the web of life is a Sacred Trust.

This humble view of our selves as part of Creation challenges the earlier interpretation of the verse in Genesis, "God gave man dominion over all the Earth." Psalm 8, while it emphasizes the awe we experience as we gaze at the stars, puts it like this in the VU translation we said today: "You[God] have made us rulers over all creation and put all things under our feet" In the past, "dominion" had been understood as the right for "man" to use the earth as he pleased. Nature was to be conquered, overcome for the benefit of *mankind*. I use *man* and *mankind* deliberately- because this has been a predominantly male view point in recent centuries in the philosophy and theology of Europe in particular. However, there is strong evidence world-wide that women's spirituality has always been more closely connected with the earth and with the sacredness of all life forms. Now we, men and women alike, know that human beings are not above or separate from the rest of Creation. We are all interconnected and interdependent. All Life depends upon a chain or web of life.

In the United Church of Canada, this humbler view of the place of humans in Creation was first expressed in 1977 when the Task Force on the Environment warned that "[the drive for] ever greater growth in our industrial consumer-oriented society is a disease of which environmental problems are the symptom."

The Task Force recommended that:

"a world view in which we take responsibility as partners in Creation is more appropriate than seeing ourselves as the dominant species."

This worldview reveals a different set of responsibilities. We have no right of dominion over nature or over other people. Our position is even more humble than stewardship. We are only one precious part in a sacred web of life.

In 1992, (the year of the UN Earth Summit) the United Church of Canada issued the policy statement “The One Earth Community”, which says, in a nutshell, that life is a gift from God and elicits our respect, awe and reverence. It calls us to recognize Earth Community as a sacred trust and that we are called “to live in harmony with this total community, to draw on the Earth’s sustenance responsibly, and to care for it that all may benefit equitably now and in the future.”

You have been party to these discussions through your participation in General Councils over the decades of the Wesleyan Methodist Church of Bermuda’s association with the UCC. While Bermuda was perhaps slower to be sucked into consumerism and subsequent environmental destruction, sadly it has caught up with the rest of the world now! Even remote islands are not isolated any more! Globally we are all connected and impacted. We are in the same boat, desiring to have more and more stuff to use and toss out, and mistaking this for progress. We make this mistake at huge cost to our own health and that of the planet and all life! (In Bermuda 18% participation in recycling versus 50% in Canada.)

So Maritime Conference has invited its member congregations to pay particular attention to being green as a matter of living our faith with practical hope. What can we do? Well, we are asked to name someone as a Green Enthusiast to be a contact person and take some leadership on this topic. There’s a questionnaire to answer for Maritime Conference. One thing we could do is learn more about the connection between faith and the environment and what options for action there are for us here. I have some ideas shared with the Official Board and a few individuals for a forum to which we could invite some guest speakers and other faith communities.

We have changed most of our light bulbs to the new ones! Could the next car the church buys be a “green” one? Your ideas are needed too. Feedback! And a volunteer Green Enthusiast!

In a Canadian magazine I was reading this week, I noticed one of the ads the UCC is using to attract younger people to the church. I wish I could project it for you to see! It’s a stained glass window with a new compact fluorescent light bulb featured prominently and the caption: “And God said “let there be energy efficient fluorescent light”. Underneath it there is a question and invitation: “Is environmentalism a new religion? From spirituality to the environment, WonderCafe.ca is home to lively discussion on the topics that matter today”. If you are computer savvy you can join a discussion group at that web site or read the provocative articles. You can also search for Ecology on the UCC web site and discover more about the UCC’s stand on these issues.

Finally you might like to Google “The Great Turning” and check out the websites you’ll find. That phrase is both the title of a book by David Korten “The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community”, and the name given to a global movement. “*The Great Turning is a name for the essential adventure of our time: the shift from the industrial growth society to a life-sustaining civilization.*” Of course, as disciples of Christ we are called to turn the world upside down as Jesus did- all kinds of biblical evidence about that! Mary’s Song, the “Magnificat,” celebrated God’s promise to do just that. The song we are about to sing is a contemporary paraphrase and includes the phrase “the world is about to turn!” [More Voices # 120, (Canticle of the Turning)]. We refuse to turn at our peril!

May God’s Spirit empower and transform us and all peoples so that life may go on!

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