

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
Fourth Sunday of Easter – April 22, 2018 – Earth Day Sunday
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister
John 10:11-18

FOR REFLECTION

“I realized up there that our planet is not infinite. It's fragile. That may not be obvious to a lot of folks, and it's tough that people are fighting each other here on Earth instead of trying to get together and live on this planet. We look pretty vulnerable in the darkness of space.”

~ Alan Bartlett Shepard, Jr. (1923-1998) (Rear Admiral, USN, Ret.)
second person/first American in space...
later commanded the Apollo 14 mission/ fifth person to walk on the moon.

Garden Shepherds

Last night Leslie Koch Ochs and our Green Committee hosted the first in a series of movie nights dedicated to our planet. “Before the Flood” – a 2016 documentary film about climate change directed by Fisher Stevens and produced by Leonardo DiCaprio among others – was a stunning visual presentation about the global environmental breakdown we are experiencing and our last chance to save the planet.

(www.beforetheflood.com)

One of the facts that stunned me was that scientists were talking about exactly this – what is happening now – in 1958 – on camera. This isn't news. This is us in water that has been brought to a boil around us – and we're just noticing we're about to die. Discussion over. Action now.

Back in the year 90 they didn't have cinematic visuals in order to bring people to consciousness about a catastrophe. But they had metaphors. And they used them to advantage.

Metaphors are symbolic. They are ancient visualization tools – word pictures that don't take 1,000 words. The writer of the Gospel of John is a master of metaphor. And Jesus as The Good Shepherd is his most memorable and enduring snapshot – captured in stained glass, oils on canvas and the human imagination.

Way back in Exodus 3:14 God tells Moses I AM WHO I AM – also translated as I WILL BECOME WHO I WILL BECOME. Using that same verbal structure, John has Jesus claiming to be “I AM” – with seven metaphors:

1. 6:35 - "I AM the bread of life"
2. 8:12 - "I AM the light of the world"
3. 10:7 - "I AM the gate for the sheep"

4. 10:11 - "I AM the good shepherd"
5. 11:25 - "I AM the resurrection and the life"
6. 14:6 - "I AM the way and the truth and the life"
7. 15:1 - "I AM the true vine"

<http://www.agapebiblestudy.com/charts/The%207%20days%20and%207%201%20AMs%20of%20John's%20Gospel.htm>

Today's metaphor includes a qualifier: I Am the GOOD shepherd – not the LOUSEY shepherd, the hired hand, the thief, the neglectful-half-hearted youngest son or the college student doing this as a summer job. Jesus KNOWS and CARES for his flock – and, only in John, “lays down his life” for those in his care.

John uses a great number of other metaphors. Another enduring snapshot is Easter morning in the garden outside the tomb – where Mary mistakes Jesus for the Gardener. Jesus makes many a speech with gardening metaphors and claims to be the True Vine – God being the gardener in that case. But it is also a vivid picture that has continued in the human mind and art forms to this day.

As Paul evangelized the Mediterranean, he set Jesus up theologically as a second Adam – the first Adam being our first Gardener [in the Garden of Eden] who brought sin into the world:

...the Son of God began His sufferings in a Garden [praying] and brought them to a close in a Garden [cemetery]... Jesus is the second Adam undoing what Adam did and doing what Adam failed to do (Rom. 5:12-21; 1 Cor. 15:47-49).

www.alliancenet.org/christward/jesus-the-true-and-greater-gardener

So, in true Christian fashion, I'm going to run with a mixed metaphor:

We are called in our day and time to follow in the footsteps in Jesus
as Garden Shepherds.

Like most True Prophets – Jesus saw the connections between things. MLK saw the connections between racial issues, economic issues and warfare. Jesus saw the connections between poverty, purity laws and Roman occupation. And in our day and time it is hard NOT to see the connections between human mis-behavior – our “sins” – and our environmental crisis.

If MLK had lived, he would have been in the thick of the movement to end the war in Vietnam – and, most likely, at the forefront of the fight against putting toxic industries and waste in poor communities.

If Jesus were here today, it is not hard to imagine him in the midst of the environmental movement – walking on the waters that are now covering islands and coastal cities – as the sea rises and people cry out to be saved.

Pope Francis sees it clearly. In 2015 he wrote a published a powerful encyclical entitled “Laudato Si: On Care for our Common Home.” The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops summarized:

Laudato Si' is the new appeal from Pope Francis addressed to "every person living on this planet" for an inclusive dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. Pope Francis calls the Church and the world to acknowledge the urgency of our environmental challenges and to join him in embarking on a new path. This encyclical is written with both hope and resolve, looking to our common future with candor and humility.

<http://www.usccb.org/about/leadership/holy-see/francis/pope-francis-encyclical-laudato-si-on-environment.cfm>

I wish I could just go ahead and read the entire encyclical to you. It is earth-shattering stuff. But it is book-length with 172 footnotes – so I will spare you a dramatic presentation in its entirety. I WILL post the link so you can read it before bed tonight.

And here are some highlights:

4. In 1971, eight years after *Pacem in Terris*, Blessed **Pope Paul VI** referred to the ecological concern as “a tragic consequence” of unchecked human activity: “Due to an ill-considered exploitation of nature, humanity runs the risk of destroying it and becoming in turn a victim of this degradation”...

5. **Saint John Paul II** became increasingly concerned about this issue. In his first Encyclical he warned that human beings frequently seem “to see no other meaning in their natural environment than what serves for immediate use and consumption”. Subsequently, he would call for a global ecological conversion...

6. **My predecessor Benedict XVI** likewise proposed “eliminating the structural causes of the dysfunctions of the world economy and correcting models of growth which have proved incapable of ensuring respect for the environment”. [10] He observed that the world cannot be analyzed by isolating only one of its aspects, since “the book of nature is one and indivisible”, and includes the environment, life, sexuality, the family, social relations, and so forth. It follows that “the deterioration of nature is closely connected to the culture which shapes human coexistence.”...

10. I do not want to write this Encyclical without turning to that attractive and compelling figure, whose name I took as my guide and inspiration when I was elected Bishop of Rome. I believe that **Saint Francis** is the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically... He was particularly concerned for God’s creation and for the poor and outcast... He shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace.

My appeal

13. The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change. The Creator does not abandon us; he never forsakes his loving plan or repents of having created us. Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home. Here I want to recognize, encourage and thank all those striving in countless ways to guarantee the protection of the home which we share. Particular appreciation is owed to those who tirelessly seek to resolve the tragic effects of environmental degradation on the lives of the world's poorest. Young people demand change. They wonder how anyone can claim to be building a better future without thinking of the environmental crisis and the sufferings of the excluded.

14. I urgently appeal, then, for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all. The worldwide ecological movement has already made considerable progress and led to the establishment of numerous organizations committed to raising awareness of these challenges...

http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

This is the POPE talking – a man whose position claims to represent Christ on this planet making these connections and raising our spiritual and environmental consciousness as a global family. He goes on to talk about the loss of biodiversity, the decline of the quality of human life, global inequality and social breakdown. And then he offers tangible hope beginning with faith and biblical wisdom, moving to the mysteries of the universe and harmony in creation, universal communion and, frankly, a Christian view of socialism and the common good when it comes to earth's resources. He points out the failure in our thinking and our lack of action – and the changes necessary to survive.

The man has a master's degree in chemistry, respects scientific methods, is a theologian and philosopher – and has a deeply compassionate heart. Read this thing. It is amazing.

One of the stories Leonardo DiCaprio told in the movie last night – was about a painting that was above his bed as a child. It was Bosch's three panel depiction of the Garden of Eden, Humans in acts of debauchery and sin, and the world completely destroyed by human behavior.

<https://www.beforetheflood.com/explore/the-painting/>

DiCaprio's parents were rather *avant garde* – but I still can't believe they did that to him. However, the result is his passion for the environment – and his ability to make the connections between humans and climate breakdown. Apparently, his movie "The Revenant" is full of images of humans vs. the environment – in not-very-appealing terms.

As artists, actors and teachers,
as Christians, Americans and Advocates of social justice,
we are in a privileged position to use the metaphors and media of our time
to salvage our planet.

It is up to us to write the end of our “movie”
and produce the documentary of Earth’s Salvation “Beyond the Flood.”
We are the Garden Shepherds of our time,
the voices and hands that Earth must use to save herself from annihilation.
From now on, EVERY Day is EARTH Day.
Our lives depend on it.

Scripture Reading for Sunday April 22, 2018 – Easter 4 – Year B

John 10:11-18

11 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away--and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13 The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 16 I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. 17 For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 18 No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

From “Laudato Si: On Care for our Common Home”

4. In 1971, eight years after *Pacem in Terris*, Blessed Pope Paul VI referred to the ecological concern as “a tragic consequence” of unchecked human activity: “Due to an ill-considered exploitation of nature, humanity runs the risk of destroying it and becoming in turn a victim of this degradation”.^[2] He spoke in similar terms to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations about the potential for an “ecological catastrophe under the effective explosion of industrial civilization”, and stressed “the urgent need for a radical change in the conduct of humanity”, inasmuch as “the most extraordinary scientific advances, the most amazing technical abilities, the most astonishing economic growth, unless they are accompanied by authentic social and moral progress, will definitively turn against man”.^[3]

5. Saint John Paul II became increasingly concerned about this issue. In his first Encyclical he warned that human beings frequently seem “to see no other meaning in their natural environment than what serves for immediate use and consumption”.^[4] Subsequently, he would call for a global ecological conversion.^[5] At the same time, he noted that little effort had been made to “safeguard the moral conditions for an authentic human ecology”.^[6] The destruction of the human environment is extremely serious, not only because God has entrusted the world to us men and women, but because human life is itself a gift which must be defended from various forms of debasement. Every effort to protect and improve our world entails profound changes in “lifestyles, models of production and consumption, and the established

structures of power which today govern societies”.[7] Authentic human development has a moral character. It presumes full respect for the human person, but it must also be concerned for the world around us and “take into account the nature of each being and of its mutual connection in an ordered system”.[8] Accordingly, our human ability to transform reality must proceed in line with God’s original gift of all that is.[9]

6. My predecessor Benedict XVI likewise proposed “eliminating the structural causes of the dysfunctions of the world economy and correcting models of growth which have proved incapable of ensuring respect for the environment”.[10] He observed that the world cannot be analyzed by isolating only one of its aspects, since “the book of nature is one and indivisible”, and includes the environment, life, sexuality, the family, social relations, and so forth. It follows that “the deterioration of nature is closely connected to the culture which shapes human coexistence”.[11] Pope Benedict asked us to recognize that the natural environment has been gravely damaged by our irresponsible behaviour. The social environment has also suffered damage. Both are ultimately due to the same evil: the notion that there are no indisputable truths to guide our lives, and hence human freedom is limitless. We have forgotten that “man is not only a freedom which he creates for himself. Man does not create himself. He is spirit and will, but also nature”.[12] With paternal concern, Benedict urged us to realize that creation is harmed “where we ourselves have the final word, where everything is simply our property and we use it for ourselves alone. The misuse of creation begins when we no longer recognize any higher instance than ourselves, when we see nothing else but ourselves”.[13]

.....
Saint Francis of Assisi

10. I do not want to write this Encyclical without turning to that attractive and compelling figure, whose name I took as my guide and inspiration when I was elected Bishop of Rome. I believe that Saint Francis is the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically. He is the patron saint of all who study and work in the area of ecology, and he is also much loved by non-Christians. He was particularly concerned for God’s creation and for the poor and outcast. He loved, and was deeply loved for his joy, his generous self-giving, his openheartedness. He was a mystic and a pilgrim who lived in simplicity and in wonderful harmony with God, with others, with nature and with himself. He shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace.

.....
My appeal

13. The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change. The Creator does not abandon us; he never forsakes his loving plan or repents of having created us. Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home. Here I want to recognize, encourage and thank all those striving in countless ways to guarantee the protection of the home which we share. Particular appreciation is owed to those who tirelessly seek to resolve the tragic effects of environmental degradation on the lives of the world’s poorest. Young people demand change. They wonder how anyone can claim to be building a better future without thinking of the environmental crisis and the sufferings of the excluded.

14. I urgently appeal, then, for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all. The worldwide ecological movement has already made considerable progress and led to the establishment of numerous organizations committed to raising awareness of these challenge...

http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html