

Homily for Lenten Evening Prayer Week II
What's love got to do with us . . . and creation?

Recently, my husband and I watched a fantastic National Geographic Series about planet earth on Netflix called, “One Strange Rock.” It begins with host Will Smith stating, “I’m going to tell you about the most incredible place. And you know what? You’re walking on it! Our planet is literally bursting with life. There’s so much activity and our planet is right in the middle of it. The strangest place in the whole universe might just be right here.” Why would he say that? After all, we’ve all seen at least one Star Wars or Star Trek movie—those aliens out there all seem pretty strange if you ask me. Have you ever thought that we might be living in the “strangest” place in the whole universe? Why would they begin this series on the story of earth with such a statement?

The strangeness arises from our uniqueness. The series tells the story of just how unique, intricately balanced and perfectly calibrated earth is in order to generate and support life. As you watch the series and hear eight astronauts talk about the earth from the perspective of having left it and looked at it not only from space, but also through the lenses of their particular scientific expertise. Their conclusion is that we are unique in the solar system, perhaps in the universe because in order for life to generate you need an energy source, liquid water, and an oxygen rich environment—and this all has to be very carefully calibrated so that they work together in harmony.

For the most part, we are completely unaware of how extraordinary our planet is.

We are generally unaware of how extraordinary it is that life exists at all, but also in so much abundance and diversity. If you haven't seen this series, I highly recommend you try to see it. You will never think about the oceans, the land and the sky in quite the same way ever again.

Because, though the scientists don't use this word, life truly is a miracle.

This series made me even more aware of how astounding it is that God created all of this beauty and wonder, and then turned it over into our hands, for us to steward.

We tend to forget, as the psalmist reminds us,
the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it.

We are not the owners of this strange rock.

We are the stewards of this extraordinary planet and all that is in it.

We are God's agents, God's representatives—made in God's image and given a vocation from the dawn of creation—to fill and subdue and have dominion over the earth and living thing. That's a fairly incredible responsibility, don't you think? The earth and all that is in it has been given into our care as a gift.

Our care of creation reflects the way we treat the life—the miracle of creation—God has given us.

But, sadly, we have often interpreted God's command to fill the earth, to subdue it and have dominion over it in disastrous ways.

We have filled parts of the earth with toxic waste, garbage, and overdevelopment such that the existence of living things in the air, the land and the seas has been threatened, and in some cases even destroyed.

Instead of subduing the earth as in calming, moderating, and taming its wildness, we have too often crushed and vanquished living things (including people) in our zeal to defeat and conquer to exploit natural resources to benefit ourselves.

We have interpreted dominion as domination.
What if we had interpreted dominion as having authority
or dominion as in a protectorate or place
where we and all of creation are protected, cherished and cared for?

We are called, as God's created and loved beings,
to care for one another, not just in words, but also in action.
This responsibility extends to how we treat all of what God has created,
from our fellow human beings to every living thing in creation.

Did you notice what God said to Jonah?

*And should I not be concerned about Ninevah that great city, in which
there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not
know their right hand from their left,
and also many animals?*

Now we are not considering tonight
what love has to do with us and our enemies,
but this piece of scripture lays some groundwork
for us as we go forward.

And ground zero is this:

God loves what has created.

God wills the good for what has created.

Over and over in our creation story, God says "it is good,"
even saying on the last day of creation "it is very good."

All of creation is bound together in the common good of God's love.

We were given to each other creation
to humanity and humanity to creation.

When it comes to caring for creation, it may be helpful to remember
what Luther taught about the freedom of a Christian.

A Christian is the most free lord of all, and subject to none;

A Christian is the most dutiful servant of all, subject to everyone.

This is a distinctive contribution we can bring to care for creation.

Being saved by grace through faith frees us to boldly do
works of justice and mercy in the world for humans and for creation!

We have received all creation as a gift.
To receive, in Christ, the freedom to walk lightly as creatures
and not as gods upon the earth, is our baptismal vocation.

We are called to be caretakers of creation in an all-encompassing way.
By caring for the world in which we live,
we are working to make a better world for ourselves and
our brothers and sisters now,
but also for those who will come in the future.
We are not called to be self-serving consumers,
grabbing all we can get now
and forsaking those who come after us later.
Instead, we are called to take what we have, our material resources,
and share them with others—or at the very least protect them
so that others, too, might enjoy what we enjoy.

Creation care is another way, then,
that we live out God’s instructions to love.
It can be as simple as seeing a piece of trash and picking it up,
or following the classic “reduce, reuse, recycle.”
It can look like considering our usage of plastic products,
which have been identified as one of the most dangerous threats
to both nature and wildlife.
We can organize grassroots networks of people seeking to keep the
sacred at the center of our earth care, our advocacy and our action,
both inside and outside the walls of our church.
We can equip each other with resources, ideas, and information
for a shared journey toward a healthier planet by growing and sharing
our theological understanding and perspectives on eco-justice issues.
We can inspire and encourage each other through stories of individuals
and groups who have responded to the sacred call to care for the earth.

One of the stories is about a woman who organized a grassroots network
of women and equipped them with resources, ideas and information.

The late Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Wangari Maathai, began a movement to reforest her country, Kenya, by paying poor women a few shillings to plant trees. This was part of her Green Belt Movement which she founded in 1977. Its mission was to plant trees across Kenya to fight erosion and to create firewood for fuel and jobs for women. Her Green Belt Movement has planted more than 30 million trees in Africa and has helped nearly 900,000 women, according to the United Nations. In doing this she inspired similar efforts in other African nations. When she received her Nobel prize she said, “In the course of history, there comes a time when humanity is called to shift to a new level of consciousness, to reach a higher moral ground. A time when we have to shed our fear and give hope to each other. That time is now.” That sounds to me like a call for repentance, a call to will the good for all of creation. It even sounds to me like a call to plant a tree!

As Christians, we are called to pay attention. We are called to see the needs of the world around us, in every sense of the word, and respond in love-filled action, that is to will the good for all living things. In this way, we become caretakers of creation, following the Good Shepherd who continues to lead us in acts of compassion and justice. The Good Shepherd who put everything on the line for us, that we might have the freedom to love, to will the good of all living things as boldly as possible.

May God’s love for us through Christ give us that freedom and courage to act, for the sake of the gospel and the good of every living thing on this extraordinary, unique, and wonderfully made strange rock.