

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, APRIL 21, 2024

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

FOURTH SUNDAY of EASTER

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP *(from Psalm 19)*

One: "How clearly the sky reveals God's glory!"
All: **"How plainly it shows what the Lord has done!"**
One: "Each day announces it to the following day."
All: **"Each night repeats it to the next."**
One: "No speech or words are used, no sound is heard."
All: **"Yet their voice goes out to all the world and is heard to the ends of the earth."**
One: God gives us this world to rejoice and be glad in it.
All: **Let us give our thanks and praise to God.**

***OPENING HYMN** "I Sing the Mighty Power of God" GtG 32

- 1. I sing the mighty power of God
that made the mountains rise,
that spread the flowing seas abroad
and built the lofty skies.
I sing the wisdom that ordained
the sun to rule the day.
The moon shines full at God's command,
and all the stars obey.**
- 2. I sing the goodness of the Lord
who filled the earth with food.
God formed the creatures through the Word,
and then pronounced them good.
Lord, how thy wonders are displayed,
where'er I turn my eye,
if I survey the ground I tread,
or gaze upon the sky!**

(continued...)

3. **There's not a plant or flower below
but makes thy glories known.
And clouds arise, and tempests blow,
by order from thy throne,
while all that borrows life from thee
is ever in thy care,
and everywhere that we can be,
thou, God, art present there.**

Words: Isaac Watts, 1715, alt.

Music: *Gesangbuch der Herzogl. Württembergischen
Katholischen Hofkapelle*, 1784; alt. 1868
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UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Dear God, you have blessed us with the beauty of this world and all the good gifts in it. But we do not take very good care of your gifts. And we are not very good at telling you, "Thank you." Forgive us, O Lord. Teach us how to care better for your creation. Help us to appreciate the true beauty of the world, that we might work to share that beauty with others. For it is in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

SILENT CONFESSION

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

One: God knows us better than we know ourselves. God knows when we do wrong, and when we fail in the way God wants us to go.
All: **But God is also patient and kind, loving us always.**
One: So we seek God's grace with boldness because we trust in Jesus Christ, the One who loves us and laid down his life for us.
All: **So we rejoice in the good news, that through Jesus Christ we can know forgiveness for our sins ... and help in living better lives.**

THE PEACE

One: The peace of Christ be with you.
All: **And also with you.**

(From your seat, a brief sign of peace may be shared: a wave of the hand, a nod of the head, etc.)

THE WORD

SCRIPTURE READINGS Genesis 2 (selected)
Hosea 4:1-3

GENESIS 2 (selected) (Today's English Version/Good News Translation+)

When the Lord God made the earth and sky, ⁵ there were no plants on the earth and no seeds had sprouted, because the Lord had not sent any rain, and there was no one to cultivate the land. ...

⁷ Then the Lord God took some soil from the ground and formed a human out of it, breathing life-giving breath into its nostrils, and the human began to live.

⁸ Then the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the East, and there put the human God had formed. ...

¹⁵ Then the Lord God placed the human in the Garden of Eden to cultivate it and to take care of it.

HOSEA 4:1-3 (Today's English Version/Good News Translation)

¹ The Lord has an accusation to bring against the people who live in this land. Listen, Israel, to what the Lord says: "There is no faithfulness or love in the land, and the people do not acknowledge me as God. ² They make promises and break them; they lie, murder, steal, and commit adultery. Crimes increase, and there is one murder after another. ³ And so the land will dry up, and everything that lives on it will die. All the animals and birds, and even the fish, will die."

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON "To Borrow, or Sing the Blues" by Pastor Bill Vincent

Today I thought we might diverge a little bit from our attention to Easter and the resurrection, and spend some time focusing on Earth Day, which is tomorrow, and its related themes.

Hence the scripture passages for this morning.

To guide our reflections, we'll start with a kid's Vacation Bible School song, move to a children's movie, and then to something I remember learning when I was growing up.

And go from there.

The theme for that summer's Vacation Bible School was creation. One of the catchier songs the children were being taught was entitled "The Creation Blues."

**I'm singing the Creation Blues.
God told me to not abuse
the earth, or hog it for myself,
God said to share with someone else.
But if I care and keep it clean,
I won't have to sing the Creation Blues.**

(from *Living in God's Creation Songbook*, Augsburg Fortress)

Of course, the song goes on to suggest that all too often we're not "caring and keeping it clean," so we are singing – or we are bound to sing – the Creation Blues. Because there's
junk and trash layin' everywhere!

...

the rivers are dirty, the air makes ya sneeze,

– and not just from natural allergens –

and garbage is growin' instead of trees!

The ozone is missin', the land is a mess,

animals are dyin' and its time to confess.

The Creation Blues. A reminder. A caution. A warning.

One also expressed by another character. "Tall Tale" is a tale about a young boy and legendary characters...including one Paul Bunyon.

At one point during the conflict between the boy and his family farm, and an out-of-town land-grabber and nascent "developer" – you know the kind: if the land's just sitting there and nothing's happening on it, it's useless and needs to be "developed" to be productive – productive, at least, from one point of view. But I digress – or do I?

At one point during the conflict, Paul Bunyon laments the use of all sorts of machines and technologies to cut down the trees and advance the logging business. "**They're not loggers,**" he says,

they're butchers. Them and their fancy machines, cutting down everything in sight – the weak with the strong, the sappling with the full growth – so that nothing could ever sprout again. ... Maybe I'm just old fashioned, but in my day, we didn't kill the land, we just borrowed from it. (Disney movie "Tall Tale: The Unbelievable Adventures of Pecos Bill" 1995)

"We borrowed from it." Didn't take and rape, use up and throw away. But borrowed.

Some of you may be hearing, in the back of your mind, the advice of Polonius to his son, Laertes:

Neither a borrower nor a lender be.

(William Shakespeare, "Hamlet")

We might think that is good advice, too.

But fortunately, or no, we cannot help but be borrowers. It's the nature of our lives and this world we call home.

And I remember what I was taught about borrowing. Maybe it's just me; maybe not.

What I was taught about borrowing:

-You take care of what you borrow, because it doesn't belong to you, it belongs to someone else.

-You return it in decent time.

-And you return it in as good a shape, if not better, than when you started.

So how do you think we're doing in our borrowing?

Maybe also think about it this way: the more and more someone mistreats and shows disrespect and lack of caring toward those things they borrow from you, the more and more reticent you are to lend to them.

In some ways, we could say that goes on with us and the rest of the world.

When we treat the land with respect and care for it, appreciate it, and work together in harmony with it, understanding and respecting its own rhythms and needs, then we reap the benefits – literally.

But when we do not, we reap something far different.

When we mistreat and abuse the soil, it begins to lose its ability to produce, and it becomes harder and harder to eke out a living from it.

And in many ways, that same point is made by those words from the prophet Hosea.

The Lord has an accusation to bring against the people who live in this land. ...

"There is no faithfulness or love in the land, and the people do not acknowledge me as God. They make promises and break them; they lie, murder, steal, and commit adultery. Crimes increase, and there is one murder after another."

And then the kicker:

"And so the land will dry up, and everything that lives on it will die. All the animals and birds, and even the fish, will die."

The root of the created world's suffering is identified as the same as the root of the human community's suffering: the people's sinfulness.

As James Limburg notes,

The roots of this ecological crisis are to be found in the same attitudes of arrogance, irreverence, selfishness, and greed which expressed themselves in the failure to acknowledge God or to care for the neighbor. (Hosea-Micah, Interpretation series, p.18)

So maybe it is time to confess – to confess our arrogance, irreverence, selfishness, and greed – and to make a change.

And to borrow.

We borrow because we recognize we are connected: you know, the 'circle of life', the 'web of life', and such.

We are connected, not only to one another, but to everything around us.

And we are connected in ways that we acknowledge and know, and in ways that we do not.

Some of you may be noticing, in your yard or another's, that the peonies are beginning to bloom.

And some might want to bring some of those blooms into the house, but there're ants all over the blooms. And I remember one woman who was aghast at all the ants, and sprayed ant-killer all over the blooms. Which may not have harmed the peonies themselves, but did kill the ants...and left the peonies defenseless.

You see, the ants don't harm the peonies. They work together. There's a mutuality between them. The ants get to enjoy the nectar of the peonies – that's what they're borrowing,

that's what feeds them. But the ants also protect the peonies, because the ants ward off those other insects that do not borrow, but burrow into the plant, and deface it and cause harm and damage.

Connections that sometimes we know, but sometimes we don't.

Some 75 years ago, Aldo Leopold wrote these words:

We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect. (*A Sand County Almanac*, 1949)

And borrow instead of abuse, because we realize we're borrowing from ourselves.

Use it, not abuse it.

Respect it, not rape it.

Care for it, not kill it.

Because we are part of this exact same community.

And think of that community in broader terms.

We can think of this community as one previous to us, with a VBS song and a children's movie and my own childhood. Borrowing from the past.

Borrowing from things we see right around us even now.

But maybe we need to expand that sense of community and recognize we are also borrowing from that community yet to come.

A Kenyan proverb puts it this way:

**We should think of our resources
not as having been left to us by our parents
but as having been loaned to us by our children.**
(found at the Sedgwick County Zoo, Wichita KS)

Do we really want to disappoint our children, our grandchildren, and pass on to them a world that is worse off?

And so we borrow.

I thought of strip mining. I've seen it. You've seen. We've all seen it before. Where the top of a mountain is stripped off. We may need to use some of those resources. We can use some of those resources. But can we also make sure we take care of the runoff from that strip mine? Because the runoff is going downstream, and it's not going to somebody else, it's going to us. And can we return the land to a place of goodness and growth – a home to trees and flowers and animals – so that the time will come when you won't even notice there was a strip mine there.

Can we remember when we're cutting down trees for our use, that they may be bigger than the plants that we have in our backyard gardens, but they are plants nonetheless? And we need to 'garden' and till them just like the gardens in our backyard. And re-plant and re-sow, and nurture the growth that comes from it, not only for us, but for the generations to come.

And can we be a little more committed to recycling and to re-using? Not everything needs to be one-use and done. Because again, we're using up resources at an incredible rate. But how much of what we throw away can be used again and again; and why not? Because again, we may think that the trash goes somewhere else, but it's already in our backyard.

And maybe if we focused a little more on this care, instead of taking all the time, we might avoid what one person termed,
the ultimately suicidal consequences of destroying [our] own environment. (in August 1988 issue of *National Geographic*, p.138)

Then the Lord God planted a garden in Eden...and there put the human God had formed ... placed the human in the Garden of Eden to cultivate it and to take care of it.

To care for the whole world, like the garden we take care of in our backyards.

Cultivating and caring for the soil and all the land and all its inhabitants. Tilling and caring for the land, like the farmers who know that we need this same soil to be fruitful and provide for us in the coming year and the year after that, and in the decades and generations to come.

The same is true for everything about this world, from the animals we enjoy, to the water we drink, to the minerals we mine, to the soil we require.

But is there also a sense that we are 'borrowing' from God?

We didn't create this garden planet. God did. And put us here to tend and care for it.

I think of the parable of the talents. The master calls several of his servants and gives gifts – 'talents' – to them, and then goes away. And when the master returns, he calls them in, and there's a sort of reckoning, an accounting of their activity. As if the Master asks, "So, what have you done with that which I gave you?"

I wonder how we will answer our Master when it comes time for our accounting.

"Well, I couldn't care less for this plant or that animal, and I didn't see the use of that one, so I killed 'em all off. And this piece of land didn't seem to be doing anybody any good, so we built a highrise on it and stripped it of all its life and beauty and did whatever we wanted to. And after we had used it up, we discarded it and moved somewhere else, after displacing the people who were already living there, because they weren't folk like us and we didn't care none for them. And we used up all the energy we could simply because we could. And we smoked our lungs into COPD and abused our bodies with whatever drug would make us feel better. And generally did whatever we darn well pleased to whomever we darn well pleased. And well, here's your world back; it's a mess, but hey, whatever."

Well, I dare to say we'll really be singing the blues then.

But what if we sang a different tune, and started now.

A song of praise and gratitude. Praise to the God who created this world and created us and all things. And gratitude for those gifts: for our own life and the life of all things. And

started to use those gifts – use them, not abuse them – care for them, and share those gifts and that life and this world, now. So that, even now, we work together with this gift of creation, and indeed join together with creation and its community – which is our community – in singing this song of care and respect, nurture and flourishing, joy and love.

You know, I think God would join us in that song, and indeed does. For it sounds a lot like the song of affirmation and joy, love and life that we hear from an empty tomb and a resurrected Lord.

God singing a song over us and over the whole of creation. A song whose vision and climax is seen and lived out in the gift of life – new life – for all.

So...

We can sing "The Creation Blues," mourning our own destruction and demise.

Or we can borrow, and tend well and carefully to this garden world of ours lent to us by God. And join in a song of praise and thanksgiving and love for all God has entrusted to us.

***HYMN “Touch the Earth Lightly” GtG 713**

**1. Touch the earth lightly,
use the earth gently,
nourish the life of the world in our care:
gift of great wonder,
ours to surrender,
trust for the children tomorrow will bear.**

**2. We who endanger,
who create hunger,
agents of death for all creatures that live,
we who would foster
clouds of disaster,
God of our planet, forestall and forgive!**

**3. Let there be greening,
birth from the burning,
water that blesses and air that is sweet,
health in God’s garden,
hope in God’s children,
regeneration that peace will complete.**

**4. God of all living,
God of all loving,
God of the seedling, the snow, and the sun,
teach us, deflect us,
Christ reconnect us,
using us gently and making us one.**

(next page...)

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***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH**

One: As creatures made in God's image, what responsibility do we have for the earth?

All: **God commands us to care for the earth in ways that reflect God's loving care for us. We are responsible for ensuring that earth's gifts be used fairly and wisely, that no creature suffers from the abuse of what we are given, and that future generations may continue to enjoy the abundance and goodness of the earth in praise to God.**

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PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

One: God of mercy, Creator of goodness...

All: ...hear our prayer.

THE LORD'S PRAYER (Contemporary)

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.**

Give us today our daily bread.

**Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.**

**Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.**

**For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and forever. Amen.**

OFFERING

Invitation

Reflection

**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

**We thank you, God, for birds that sing and rain that waters the earth.
We thank you for all the resources of the world that provide us with so much
goodness, joy, and life. As we bring our offering, accept also the offering of
our hearts, as we recommit ourselves to caring for all you have created in
love. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.**

SENDING

***CLOSING HYMN “God of the Fertile Fields” GtG 714**

**1. God of the fertile fields,
shaper of earth that yields
our daily bread:
forth from your bounteous hand
come gifts your love has planned,
that all in every land
be clothed and fed.**

**2. We would be stewards true,
holding in trust from you
all that you give;
help us in love to share,
teach us like you to care
for people everywhere,
that all may live.**

**3. As grows the hidden seed
to fruit that serves our need,
so your reign grows.
Let all our toil be used,
no gift of yours abused,
no humble task refused
your love bestows.**

**4. God of the countryside,
dear to the Christ who died
to make us one:
we pledge our lives anew
in faithful love to you.
Guide all we say and do.
Your will be done.**

(next page...)

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***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

One: ...And let the gathered people of God say...
All: ...**Amen.**

POSTLUDE

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