

Sermon for Earth Day 2023 (Lectionary A)

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Lessons

- *First Lesson:* Isaiah 55.6–13
- *Second Lesson:* Romans 8.19–23
- *Gospel:* Luke 12.22–32
- *Psalm:* 104.1–2, 5–18, 25, 28–31

Sermon

Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. In the name of God unbegotten, God incarnate, and God among us. Amen.

The ravens don't store up food, yet God feeds them. The lilies don't worry about clothing, yet God clothes them—splendidly. We're the ones who worry. God has provided for our needs, and the needs of all living creatures, in the intricate wisdom of the Earth's ecosystems. To make a world that meets our needs, as the Earth alone can do, lies far beyond our powers. But we do have the power to do serious, perhaps even fatal, damage to the Earth. And we also have the power, thanks be to God, to help the earth heal from the damage we have done. The Earth faces a life-or-death crisis of our making, and every living creature needs us to be stewards, not exploiters—healers, not abusers. If we are to become stewards who heal, we must turn away from the rapacious ways of the nations of the world,

compulsively driven by the anxious pursuit of material goods. We must trust, as the ravens and the lilies trust, in God's abundance. The choice between these two ways of life is nothing less than the choice between life and death. Jesus challenges us to choose life.

Jesus lifts up the lilies and the ravens to teach us that our priorities are out of order. And for us today, on Earth Day, there's another teaching in these familiar words, one that will bring us back around in the end to Christ's teaching about how to get our priorities in order. The birds and the flowers, and the multitudes of creatures in today's psalm, speak to us about the divine wisdom implanted in the earth. The people who heard the Sermon on the Plain from our Lord's own lips could appreciate as well as we can the exquisite beauty of the plants and animals so movingly celebrated in our psalm. What we can appreciate even better than they did, thanks to the modern science of ecology, is the divine wisdom that weaves all these beings together into the delicate tapestry of an ecosystem. The psalmist sings of the rain God sends down to water the fields, which in their turn bring forth plants that nourish God's creatures. And there is heavenly wisdom within this earthly beauty. When we look with the eyes of science beneath the breathtaking surface of the Grand Canyon, we find not one but five ecosystems. One of these, the Pinyon Juniper Woodland, is named for the pygmy trees there that never grow higher than 20 feet, and so can provide shade for the animals in the blistering heat of summer. The water retained by prickly pear cactus is a vital source of hydration for the bobcats and small mammals that abound in these woodlands. And why shouldn't we see God's wisdom at work in the ecosystems of the Earth? In the prologue to his gospel, John tells us that the Word that became flesh was with God in the beginning, that *[all] things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being*. The christological reflection of the early Church identified the Word in John's gospel with the figure of divine Wisdom in Proverbs, who says that *when [God] marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master worker . . . rejoicing in [the] inhabited world, and delighting in the human race*. God's wisdom fills and sustains Creation, and in our second lesson Paul tells the Romans that God's Spirit fills the Creation with longing like our own, for the fullness of life that only God can bestow. The lilies and the ravens in the Sermon the Plain speak to us of God's providential care, and the intricate web of life we share with them speaks to us of God's creative wisdom.

The divine Wisdom that crafted and sustains the delicate web of life is indispensable, and irreplaceable. Our very lives depend on the stability of that web. We cannot repeat God's creative work. But we can damage

the Earth so severely that it can no longer support us. And at the same time we can, if we choose, help the earth heal from the damage we have done. We know we can't remake the earth, because we've tried, and failed. In the early 1990s eight scientists were sealed in a huge glass and metal dome in Arizona, dubbed Biosphere II. The idea was to engineer, with the assistance of \$200 million worth of technology, a small-scale replica of Biosphere I, that is, the Earth. What we learned, over the two years that the eight researchers spent closed up in Biosphere II, is that we cannot create an environment that generates the water, air, and food that human beings need to survive. Only Biosphere I can do that. In the words of a sign one often sees at environmental protests, there is no Planet B. If we wreck the planet God made for us, the party is over. And the awful truth is that we *can* wreck the planet, and are already well on our way to doing so. Our addiction to fossil fuels has already added one degree Celsius to the average global surface temperature, as compared with the pre-industrial average. If we overshoot a total increase of one and a half degrees, as we well may, the consequences of climate change will become truly catastrophic. Nor is this the only damage we are doing to the Earth. The Colorado River, the lifeblood of the Grand Canyon's ecosystems, is at the top of the list of endangered rivers compiled by American Rivers, an environmental watchdog. The dilemma is that the Colorado provides water not just to the Grand Canyon, but also to much of the American southwest, including Los Angeles and Phoenix, and the industrial farms of California. Our overuse of the River, compounded by the accelerating effects of climate change, has brought the whole ecosystem to the brink of collapse. But even as it dramatizes the terrible damage our thoughtlessness can do, the story of the Grand Canyon River Basin also provides glimmers of hope. The humpback chub is an endangered species of fish found only in the Colorado River basin. Construction of the Glen Canyon Dam and the introduction of rainbow trout and other nonnative fish have led to a drastic decline in the humpback chub's numbers. The Grand Canyon Monitoring and Resource Center has taken steps to remove nonnative species and to encourage breeding, and as a result the chub population is beginning to rebound. Only God could make the Earth, but we can do it harm and, thanks be to God, we can help the Earth recover from the harm we have done.

Like all our relationships, our relationship with the Earth takes its orientation from our relationship with God. Jesus challenges us to choose between two fundamental orientations for our lives. On the one hand, we have the compulsively anxious striving for food, and clothing, and all the other material goods that are worshipped as idols by the nations of the

world—including our own. Of course Jesus isn't saying that there's anything sinful about our basic human needs. Where we go wrong is not in needing food and clothing, but in failing to trust that God provides for us as God provides for the ravens and the lilies. When we trust only in ourselves and not in God's abundance, we wind up grabbing as much as we can, as fast as we can, for fear that someone else will grab it first. To see where that madness leads, look no further than June 1844 on the island of Eldey, twelve miles off the Iceland coast. Eldey was the last breeding ground of the great auk, a majestic flightless bird that had once ranged from Newfoundland to Italy, highly prized for its meat and its feathers. By 1844, four centuries of aggressive hunting had reduced a population numbering in the millions to two birds and one egg on Eldey. Once those birds had been strangled, and their egg broken, the great auk was gone. The men who choked the last great auks saw them with the greedy eyes of the nations of the world. But what if they had seen these magnificent birds instead as gifts from God, gifts to be enjoyed, to be sure, and at the same to be treasured? Indigenous peoples had eaten auk meat for centuries without driving the species to extinction. If we look at the Earth as a gift to be treasured, our enjoyment of its bounty won't degenerate into destructive exploitation. Jesus presents us with a choice: will we base our lives and our relationship to the Earth on loving trust in God, or on our own anxious self-centeredness? Moses challenged the Chosen People to make the same choice as they prepared to enter the Promised Land: *I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life, so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him.* God's will for Creation, revealed to us in Jesus Christ, is abundant life. When we choose life, when we choose to care for the Earth instead of plundering it, we say yes to the future God has in store for Creation. *The power of the future, Walter Brueggemann has said, is not in the hands of those who believe in scarcity and monopolize the world's resources; it is in the hands of those who trust in God's abundance.*

Choose life. Trade worry in for trust. God has created a world that can provide for us. But we must provide for the Earth in turn. The Earth can still heal from the damage we have done. Every living creature needs us to turn from exploiters into stewards. All Creation needs us to trust in God's abundance. *Amen.*