

April 28, 2019

**An Earth Day Sermon
Lutheran Church of Honolulu
By
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In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Aloha and Happy Earth Day.

The first Earth Day occurred on April 22nd in 1970. It motivated parents and their kids to clean up rubbish from parks and beaches and college students to organize teach-ins and demonstrations on university campuses. It motivated concerned citizens to close city streets to automobiles and turn them into malls for pedestrians and bicyclists. Enough people had finally taken notice of environmental pollution and resource depletion to demand action.

Americans faced a different environmental crisis in 1970 when 20 million people gathered in the public square to celebrate the first Earth Day. Back then, they gathered in response to oil spills near the shores of Santa Barbara, California. They gathered because the Cuyahoga River caught fire from oil pollution in Cleveland, Ohio. They gathered because people could not breathe polluted air in Los Angeles and other major U.S. cities, because cars and trucks did not have effective emission control devices.

In the first chapter of Genesis, God declared Creation to be “good.” What makes Earth “good”? The Earth provides us with fertile soil, clean water, timber, and food. Healthy ecosystems

reduce the spread of diseases and protect against flooding. On a global basis, these ecosystems regulate concentrations of oxygen and carbon dioxide in the atmosphere to give us a livable climate. Scientists refer to these things as “ecosystem services.” Professor Robert Costanza at Portland State University estimated the value of ecosystem services at \$44 trillion annually on a worldwide basis.

The Earth is indeed a planet of beauty and abundance. It has an amazing capacity to assimilate waste and regenerate resources. But that capacity has limits, which have been augmented by advancements in technology over the last 200 years. Today, living creatures face unprecedented threats from human activities throughout the world. These activities are beginning to compromise the ability of Earth to sustain life. A respected scientific study revealed that 60 percent of 24 ecosystem services have either been degraded or they are no longer able to sustain human life as we know it. The study revealed that quote: “Every year we lose three to five trillion dollars’ worth of natural capital, roughly equivalent to the amount of money lost in the financial crisis of 2008 and 09.” Sadly, this loss of natural capital has not yet convinced or motivated some business and political leaders to take more aggressive action to protect our earthly home.

Scientists tell us that we are not doing enough to preserve and protect our earthly home for ourselves and for future generations. We are not living sustainably based on many different metrics. Many fear that our earthly home is changing for the worse. They fear that we now face a tipping point – our climate is changing, species face extinction, and more and more natural resources are being exhausted. We are now seeing more intense storms and severe

floods with greater frequency. We are now seeing glaciers melting and sea levels rising. The length and the intensity of heat waves has gone up dramatically. Two years ago, Professor Hope Jahren, a former member of our congregation, told us that plants and trees are flowering earlier in the year and birds and animals are moving toward the poles to avoid heat in the lower latitudes.

Scientists predict that by the end of this century, it is likely the ocean will rise one-and-a-half to four feet. The Hawaii Sea Level Report projected that 18 miles of coastal roads will become impassable and 13,000 residents will be displaced, if sea levels rise three feet. The report predicts that this could happen within 40 years...the lifetime of our children and grandchildren.

We have three basic options to deal with this problem. We can do nothing and let our children suffer the consequences. We can adapt as the changes unfold, or we can act now to mitigate the damage. The more we mitigate, the less we would need to adapt. The more we adapt and mitigate, the less we and our children will suffer in the future. The good news is that cities across America are preparing plans to adapt and become more resilient to the negative impacts of climate change, such as more powerful tornadoes and hurricanes. To make our cities more resilient, city planners and others are learning the lessons of Superstorm Sandy in New York, and Hurricanes Harvey in Houston and Maria in Puerto Rico. These lessons offer us hope for the future. For example, my students at UH have learned that social capacity ... the willingness of neighbors to trust and work together ... enabled many people to recover from the effects of Superstorm Sandy.

In the first chapter of Genesis, God said to Adam and Eve: “Be fruitful, multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” Does this Bible passage give us the right to do whatever we want with Creation? No, I believe that view is contrary to the meaning of stewardship. As Christians, we need to remember that the Earth still belongs to God. God asks us ... we who are made in His image ... to care for Creation as He would care for it. In other words, we are to be “responsible caretakers” and “good stewards” of what God has given to us. As such, we are accountable to God for our stewardship. Instead of exploiting the Earth’s resources to live extravagantly, or as some might say “high on the hog,” we need to become more aware of the beauty and vulnerability of God’s creation.

I want to offer hope, not false hope, but hope that is realistic and grounded in both science and the Bible. First, let’s recognize and be thankful that we have indeed been warned by respected scientists and others. The “eco-prophets” of the past – people such as Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson – deserve much credit for their contributions to the environmental movement that began over 50 years ago. Leopold’s book, *A Sand County Almanac*, defined a responsible relationship between people and the land they inhabit. Carson’s book, *Silent Spring*, broke the conspiracy of silence on the wide-scale use of pesticides that gave impetus to the environmental movement in the 1960s. Sadly, respected scientists of our time have been summarily ignored by political leaders at the highest levels of government in Washington, D.C. Nevertheless, these scientists, along with environmental organizations, enlightened policy makers, perceptive journalists, and many of our fellow citizens

have sounded the alarm. My hope is that more people will listen to them and heed the ways in which God speaks to us today and has throughout history.

Today, God speaks to us through physical signs and through individuals who speak up, because they are attentive to what is happening in our world. Fritz Fritschel was one such person. As many of you know, Fritz passed away in March of last year. During the fall of 1988, Fritz asked me if I would help him plan a “Care of the Earth” symposium at LCH. Together, we recruited 21 speakers from academia and from governmental and non-governmental organizations in Honolulu. Many people attended that symposium, which was held on our church campus in January, 1989. Many of those who attended this symposium were not members of LCH. I think they left that event with a more favorable view of our church. Over the years, Fritz continued to offer opportunities to become better educated on environmental issues.

Science and the Bible also tell us that all of us are indeed part of the same Creation. But Creation is more than just scenery that we enjoy for its beauty. People and animals are also part of God’s creation. Jesus urged us to love our neighbors as ourselves. He said: “In as much as ye have done it unto the least of these, ye have done it unto me.” Thus, God calls us to care for all Creation -- for the Earth and all its creatures and for our fellow humans, especially the most vulnerable.

Who are the most vulnerable to climate change? One example here in the Pacific would be the people of the Marshall Islands. Those islands are home to 50,000 people and a vibrant culture.

Today, they may become a new kind of refugee: a climate refugee. The Marshall Islands rise to less than seven feet above sea level. During high tide, water flows into their homes and washes away graves. One of my former students is from the Marshall Islands. A friend of hers recently became the voice of the Marshall Islands to the outside world. She wrote a poem to her own daughter about the world she will face in the future. She read this poem to delegates at the United Nations. It reads as follows:

“dear daughter,
I want to tell you about that lagoon
That lazy lagoon lounging against the sunrise
men say that one day
that lagoon will devour you
they say it will gnaw at the shoreline
chew at the roots of your breadfruit trees
gulp down rows of your seawalls
and crunch your island’s shattered bones” (55)

It’s hard for us to connect to this tragedy, but that doesn’t negate the reality of sea level rise. If the Marshall Islands disappear, which islands will be next? The Marshalls are like “the canary in the coal mine.”

What should we do, given this threat to life on this planet? Many people are still in denial and are unwilling to alter their behavior or lifestyle to this new reality. Others are more sympathetic, but are unsure how to lighten their footprint on the Earth. If you want to learn what you can do, please visit the exhibits in the courtyard after the service. Also, please join us for the Adult Education Hour

on a date still to be determined in June to learn about the work of the city's new Office of Climate Change, Sustainability, and Resiliency. Their mission is to: 1) increase community preparedness to natural disasters, 2) develop resilient infrastructure, and 3) integrate sustainable and environmental values into plans, programs, and policies.

Many people -- after taking very simple steps, like installing LED light bulbs in their homes and recycling bottles and cans -- may believe that these small efforts alone will be enough ... that changes in public policy will not be needed. Actually, we need both efforts. We need both personal action and elected officials who want to protect the Earth for future generations. Good personal and public policy choices can often encourage and reinforce each other in a wonderful feedback loop.

Many people really care about the Earth, but they feel overwhelmed by the enormity of it all. You may ask: "How can one person make a difference?" Let's look at the life of Jesus. He did not heal all the lepers in Palestine, only the ones right in front of him. He did not heal all the blind people in Jerusalem, only the one or two right in front of him. He did not feed everyone in Judea, only the 4,000 or 5,000 right in front of him.

I took this message to heart during my last year of graduate study at Northwestern University. I made a personal effort that year to pick up at least one discarded soda or beer can every time I walked along Sheridan Road next to campus. By the end of the year, the sidewalk along Sheridan Road—which I came to regard as my personal sidewalk---was relatively free of trash.

Climate change will clearly be the biggest threat to life on Earth in the coming decades. My colleagues at UH say we have no time to waste to deal with this problem. They predict that sea levels will rise in our state by over three feet within 40 years and perhaps sooner. They are calling for a “managed retreat” from our shoreline over the coming years. To slow the pace of climate change, we should oppose efforts by leaders in Washington to weaken our nation’s fuel economy standards for motor vehicles. Even small changes in driving habits can substantially increase the gas mileage of a car. One of the exhibits in the courtyard has great suggestions on how we can drive more efficiently.

What else can we do? Did you know that a light-emitting diode or LED light bulb uses 90% less power than an incandescent bulb. Changing a single light bulb can prevent the burning of 500 pounds of coal in a power plant in one year. Power plants that use coal give off huge amounts of carbon dioxide, as well as air pollutants that cause asthma and respiratory diseases. These pollutants can cause heart attacks leading to 30,000 premature deaths each year. To do our part, we should also plant more shade trees in our yards. Shade trees remove carbon dioxide from the air through photosynthesis and cut the need for air-conditioning when temperatures rise. We should do these things so that the Earth remains a livable place for future generations ... for our children and our grandchildren.

Remember these words from 1 John 3:18: “Let us put our love into action and make it real.” Let’s make informed choices that will lighten our ecological footprint. Let’s recycle, reuse and re-purpose

things that clutter our homes and no longer have any value to us. Let's take TheBus or join a carpool when we commute to work or school. Let's walk or use a bicycle more often. We all know that walking and biking are good for our health. Finally, don't forget to become better informed when you vote in city, state and national elections.

To commemorate Earth Day, please remember that a sustainable more resilient planet is also a place where we care for and love one another, where we care for all Creation -- for all creatures great and small ... for pandas and penguins and polar bears, and for our friends and neighbors, too. Our earthly home is the only livable planet that -- by God's grace -- we have been given.

Let us pray. Dear Lord, thank you for your wonderful Creation ... for the air we breathe, for the water we drink, and for all living things that exist on the land and in the air. Help us to learn the lessons that nature can teach us. Remind us that each generation has a duty to care for your Creation for future generations. We ask this in Jesus name. Amen.