

A Sermon for Creation Season
Memorial Episcopal Church, Baltimore, Maryland
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It's an honor to be able to speak to you on this first Sunday of what has been designated as "creation season" in a number of dioceses, including ours. The timing is related to the day for St. Francis of Assisi, which is this coming Wednesday. Francis is a much beloved figure, and when you read accounts of his life, it's hard to separate legend from reality. But it is clear that he was born wealthy, and gave up his fortune to advocate for the poor, and that he was one of the earliest and clearest champions of the idea that all of creation is sacred, that all creatures matter to God.

Much of the theological justification for a Christian environmental ethic can be found even earlier, in the Hebrew Scriptures, where we see the ideas of jubilee, of Sabbath, of allowing land to lie fallow, all of which point to a connection between environmental and social justice, between caring for the land, and caring for each other. Yet in today's reading from Numbers, the Israelites aren't thrilled to be out in the wilderness. It's a harsh and forbidding place, and they long for the comforts of Egypt, even if it means returning to slavery. And on some level, who can blame them? Creation, wondrous though it is, is a rough and tumble business, with predators, prey and parasites all trying to make their way in the world, not to mention bacteria, fungi, and even viruses. Along with the cute and fuzzy, we have the slimy and creepy crawly. We get fruit, flowers and acorns, and we also get poison ivy.

It's not all about us, but maybe that's a good thing. In his book *I and Thou*, the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber argues that whenever we experience any being, whether human, animal or plant, as a subject with whom we have a relationship rather than as an object intended solely for our use, we also experience the divine. We see, however fleetingly, the world as God sees it. Which is great, but I still find spiders pretty challenging.

And maybe that sort of ambivalence is one reason we have been slow to talk about creation and its care in church. For the longest time, I wouldn't have either, even though I am a wildlife biologist and a life-long church geek. I was slow to make the connection between environmental and social justice, slow to consider my profession a calling in the truest sense of the word.

I became a biologist simply because I loved wildlife and thought critters of all sorts were cool, but also out of a sense of sadness and crisis as I watched the farms and forests of my childhood disappear. I wanted to do something to counter the vague sense of helplessness I felt. It seemed the world was unraveling at the seams. Global warming, the loss of aquatic vegetation and oysters in the bay, PCBs, you name it. I decided I would become a wildlife professional. I'd put on my white hat. I'd be one of the good guys.

Yet the more I got into it, the more the line between the good guys and bad guys seemed blurred. For instance, my specialty is waterfowl, specifically ducks, and in North America, their main breeding area is on the prairies of North and South Dakota, and southern-central Canada. This is also an important agricultural area, and one major impact on ducks and other waterbirds is the draining of wetlands to make room for crops.

Simplistically, I'd see a drained wetland, and say to myself, "Isn't that terrible?" Yet I was doing my research in an area that grew wheat, specifically the durum wheat that is used to make pasta, and I do like a nice plate of spaghetti. And because I was a student, I ate a lot of it. Now what? And what of the farmer and his need to make a living? I started to make the connection between the way I live and its impacts on the environment and other people, even though spaghetti is pretty benign relative to a lot of other things. Being a biologist, and writing a check to Ducks Unlimited or the Nature Conservancy was no longer enough.

I think a lot of us feel that way, but we are unsure what to do. We wonder if anything we do makes a difference. We wonder where to start. Paper or plastic? Cloth or disposable diapers? Someone gives us a book about 50 simple things that save the environment and our eyes glaze over after the first 5. We don't want to eat brown rice and tofu for the rest of our lives.

A good general rule about whether to do anything is to ask yourself whether it would make a positive difference if everyone did it. If the answer is yes, then there's your green light. A person might tutor 1 or 2 struggling students every week and realize it made a difference to those kids, but despair about the others that were missed. But if a lot of folks tutored kids it would make a big difference. We can't be responsible for the whole world, just our little piece of it.

So I think might help to treat the stewardship of creation as more of a math problem than a moral judgment, and make the things that have the most impact our top priorities. I find the book, *A Consumer's Guide to Effective Environmental Choices: Practical Advice from the Union of Concerned Scientists* really helpful. The authors have crunched the numbers for us, and I have placed handouts that summarize their results in the back of the church for you. Some quick highlights: the size and efficiency of your car matters a lot, as does the amount of driving you do. Likewise, the size of your house, its energy efficiency, and whether or not it is newly constructed has a big impact and can make a big difference. So does the food you eat, though it need not be brown rice and tofu. But things like paper vs. plastic? Disposable vs. cloth diapers? Doesn't make much difference, so don't sweat it.

Second, I'm convinced an environmental ethic won't look the same for everyone or even anyone. We all have different lives and different temperaments. Although a smaller house has less environmental impact, a person might choose a larger one if they frequently entertain or otherwise offer hospitality. I know it would be better for the environment if I lived closer to my work, but that would take me away from friends,

family, this church community, and other activities, which, I hope, count as God's work. Do your best, but as one of our parishioners frequently says, "Be gentle with yourself."

Third, we can be evangelists. In today's reading from the book of James, the early Christians are holding each other accountable, and there is certainly room for that. But I cringe a bit at the harsh tone. Sometimes we have to be bearers of bad news, but we may be most effective when we can tell the good news of God's work in the world, when we can say, "come and see."

For instance, my friend Virginia is a biologist in Cape May, New Jersey. Last fall she said "Hey Pam, come and see my garden that's full of native plants and provides habitat for birds and butterflies." Better yet, she drew up a design suitable for my backyard, and went with me to pick out plants that the critters will love, and that will be tough for me to kill. Turns out that you can help some threatened butterfly species even in a little rowhouse garden just by getting the specific plants they need for nectar and egg laying.

And my colleague Mike said, "come and see the new hybrid car I bought, and why don't we carpool some too." So when I finally had to put my old truck out to pasture, I bought a car like his without a second thought.

Or take my friend Lynn, a fruit and vegetable farmer in western Howard County. She practices Integrated Pest Management. Instead of just spraying her crops on a set schedule, she hires a "bug scout" who comes out weekly, looks at the crops and insects and tells her when to spray. She saves enough in pesticides to pay his salary, and she feels good about putting fewer chemicals on her land. The bug scout, who is a high school teacher most of the time, gets a summer job. And every year, thousands of people come and see the results, and pick the best produce around.

Back here in Baltimore, the Loading Dock is a self-sustaining non-profit that offers salvaged and surplus building materials that would otherwise be landfilled for resale at a fraction of their retail cost. They have been a model for similar efforts throughout the country, and they employ 16 people. I have gotten a lot of joy doing projects at my house using supplies from there. The latest is a bathroom, which I am way too excited about. I'm saying "come and see, and while you're at it, use the bathroom," and people are like, "oh wow, I can hardly wait."

All those environmentally friendly practices promote community, friendship and civility. They even save people money and provide employment in some cases. And don't forget, the things that various folks in this congregation work for, such as better education, lower crime, and better housing also help the environment by creating livable, sustainable cities and discouraging sprawl. It's not either or, it's all God's work.

So come and see. Then go and do. Amen.