

Chris Murphy

March 26<sup>th</sup>, 2023

Scripture: Genesis 1: 1-31, Genesis 2: 1-3

Sermon Title: Sacred Earth

Prayer...

Introduction:

Last week I was in Atlanta, Georgia participating in the ministry of the Renovare Institute. Renovare is a Spiritual formation program originally founded by Richard Foster, who back in the late 1970's was an Associate Pastor for Newberg Friends Church here in town and who is also the author of Celebration of Discipline and Streams of Living Water.

During my time with Renovare, I gave a talk on Listening to God in Daily Life. As part of my talk, I shared about the role of nature in helping us experience God's love. I shared about my love for Celtic Spirituality with its emphasis on connecting to God in nature and many of the students in the Renovare Institute were excited to talk with me more about Celtic Spirituality.

One of the highlights of the week was walking the grounds of the Jesuit Retreat House where we had the week long training program. I walked this beautiful trail during a time of solitude and prayer and witnessed the sights and sounds of nature, including a beautiful waterfall. I was reminded of how nature conveys God's presence of love.

In his book, *Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul- Celtic Wisdom for Reawakening to what our Souls know and healing the world*, John Philip Newell includes a chapter on Sacred Earth, where he describes how nature is one of the key aspects of Celtic Christianity and Spirituality.

Newell begins his chapter on Sacred Earth by writing, "In Celtic wisdom, we remember the earth is sacred. Every tree and bush, every flower and creature, every hill and mountain is on fire with the divine. The life within all life is holy. What we do to the body of the earth is what we do to God."

Newell goes on in this chapter to highlight the story of the well known modern prophet of ecological concern and conservation, John Muir.

Most of us remember John Muir for his efforts to work with President Theodore Roosevelt and others to protect National Parks like Yosemite in California.

Did you know that John Muir was originally born in Scotland and like many people from his community grew up in the Church of Scotland?

Muir's father unfortunately was an angry Calvinist, who agreed with the theological idea that human beings are "poor worms of dust, conceived in sin." Muir's dad forced him to learn the entire New Testament and much of the Old Testament by heart, but also would beat him if he did not recite the Scriptures correctly. This was sadly a normal form of education in Calvinist Scotland in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Although Muir continued to appreciate the Christian faith and the Holy Scriptures, he grew to understand that God could be known not only through the Bible, but also through nature. Echoing John Scotus Erugiena, a philosopher and theologian of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, Muir taught that we have two books, the Book of Holy Scripture and the Book of

Creation. In nature, Muir saw the wisdom of God being revealed to the world. Mountains, rivers, trees, and all of the universe have the ability to awaken us to the divine. According to Muir, the water, the winds, the springs, are all “words of God.”

John Muir would highlight that Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount is preached on every mountain. The earth is a disclosure of the sacredness of God.

I wonder as I share about the life of John Muir and his theology of creation, how you feel? When I was in my mid thirties, I became close friends with a couple named Doug and Catherine Gregg. They worked together in a ministry of spiritual formation at the Church of our Savior Episcopal Church in San Moreno, CA near Pasadena. Catherine who served as an ordained Episcopal priest was the first person who taught me about the idea that we have two special books that reveal God to the world, the Book of Scripture and the Book of Creation. Catherine and Doug would later take Karen and me on our pilgrimage to Scotland

and we hiked with them in nature and learned to enjoy God's creation as an expression of God's love to the world.

When I first heard about the concept of a book of creation, I was afraid that this idea might compete with the special role of Holy Scripture, but now I realize that my relationship with God is actually enhanced by relating deeply to God in nature.

In Oregon and other parts of the Northwest, we have a special appreciation for the beauty of nature. I find it is common for people to tell me that the best way for them to experience God's presence of love is in the beauty of God's creation. God is revealed in nature and God is revealed in Scripture. In the book of Romans chapter 1 verse 20, the Apostle Paul teaches this truth by saying, "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse."

Paul learned to experience God in nature from reading the Psalms, the book of Genesis, and other Holy Scriptures that tell the story of creation. We read today the first chapter and the first few verses of the second chapter of Genesis. Our Bible begins with highlighting God's creation of the heavens and the earth. God goes on to create the sky and the waters, the plants and trees and the animals. Creation culminates with the gift of humanity. We are part of God's creation and our role is to steward creation. God does not want us to be separated from creation, but to deeply connect to nature and to care for the earth. The word dominion in Scripture means to care for the earth, not to dominate it. However, it is common for human beings to neglect care for God's creation and to neglect care for our own bodies as reflection of God's creation. I find it interesting that after God creates the earth, God rests. God teaches us to slow down and enjoy God's creation and to care for it. We are to rest in creation, not to neglect or control it.

Celtic Spirituality encourages us to deepen our relationship with ourselves and all of creation in order to meet God in nature and to care for nature. I have shared with you before that my wife Karen is fond of saying the closer we are to nature, the closer we are to God.

What she is referring to is that our proximity to nature helps us feel God's love. Celtic Spirituality naturally values nature because like Native American Spirituality and other indigenous cultures, the Celts have always lived close to nature. They have always encountered God in creation. Unlike other parts of Europe, where large Cathedrals were built, the Celts initially were drawn to worship God in nature rather than large buildings. I worry that in our own American society, we tend to separate from nature too much. We spend too much time in our homes, cars or glued to our computers, phones, and televisions. When we disconnect to nature, it is easy to feel disconnected to God.

I am encouraged though that young people like the well known female activist, Greta Thunberg from Sweden are encouraging people of all

ages to address the crisis of climate change and the need to steward creation, so that the earth can be sustained for generations to come. In her book, *No One is too small to make a difference*, she writes...

“We are about to sacrifice our civilization for the opportunity of a very small number of people to continue to make enormous amounts of money. We are about to sacrifice the biosphere so that rich people in countries like mine can live in luxury. But it is the sufferings of the many which pay for the luxuries of the few.”

I appreciate Greta Thunberg’s passion for caring for God’s creation. She understands that caring for the earth is also about caring for the most vulnerable in our world, so that all of life can be sustained. We all need to repent for our lack of concern for creation and to take responsibility for our actions. I am proud to say that the Presbyterian Church USA is committed to environmental stewardship as an expression of our faith in God. Some Presbyterian churches in our presbytery identify as Earth Care congregations. They make specific efforts to recycle and limit



abuse of natural resources. I wonder if our church might choose to become an Earth Care congregation. If this interest you, let me know and we will form a team to help our congregation grow in this area of Creation care.

Friends, like the Celtic Christians and other indigenous people we are invited to love the earth and meet God in the beauty of nature. Then we are called to steward God's creation out of love for God, one another, the animals, the mountains, trees, and streams. We are called to be responsible and to have our spirituality be deeply connected to God's creation.

On March 17<sup>th</sup> every year, we celebrate Saint Patrick's Day. Saint Patrick used images of creation like the Shamrock to remind people of how God's creation can remind us of the Holy Trinity and the way nature relates to God. The story of Saint Patrick is one of a former slave who went on to share the good news of Jesus with the people who once enslaved him. Along with Saint Brigid of Kildare and Colomba, Saint

Patrick is one of the three patron Saints of Ireland. As we remember God's invitation to care for the earth and to meet God in creation, let me offer a version of Saint Patrick's Breastplate prayer..

I arise today

Through the strength of heaven;

Light of the sun,

Splendor of fire,

Speed of lightning,

Swiftness of the wind,

Depth of the sea,

Stability of the earth,

Firmness of the rock.

I arise today

Through God's strength to pilot me;

God's might to uphold me,

God's wisdom to guide me,

God's eye to look before me,

God's ear to hear me,

God's word to speak for me,

God's hand to guard me,

God's way to lie before me,

God's shield to protect me,

God's hosts to save me

Afar and anear,

Alone or in a multitude.

Christ shield me today

Against wounding

Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,

Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,

Christ on my right, Christ on my left,

Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down,

Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,

Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,

Christ in the eye that sees me,

Christ in the ear that hears me.

I arise today

Through the mighty strength

Of the Lord of creation.

AMEN

## Genesis 1

1 When God began to create[a] the heavens and the earth, 2 the earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God[b] swept over the face of the waters. 3 Then God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. 4 And God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

6 And God said, “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” 7 So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. 8 God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

9 And God said, “Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so. 10 God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. 11 Then God said, “Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.” And it was so. 12 The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. 13 And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

14 And God said, “Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, 15 and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.” And it was so. 16 God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. 17 God set them in the dome of the sky to give

light upon the earth, 18 to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. 19 And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

20 And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky." 21 So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. 22 God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth." 23 And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

24 And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind." And it was so. 25 God made the wild animals of the earth of

every kind and the cattle of every kind and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

26 Then God said, “Let us make humans[c] in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth[d] and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

27 So God created humans[e] in his image,  
in the image of God he created them;[f]  
male and female he created them.

28 God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the



sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” 29 God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. 30 And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the air and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. 31 God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Genesis 2:

2 Thus the heavens and the earth were finished and all their multitude.

2 On the sixth[a] day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. 3 So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.