

Abundance: Beyond Measure
4/17/05

I first heard James Weldon Johnson's "Creation" at an outdoor service of worship in Medford MA, sometime in the mid-1970's. It was read by my friend John Coakley, who was almost as animated as God must have been when God created the Earth. The poem was a black man's rendition of how God flung the sun into the darkness and spat out the seven seas! It was an active depiction of how God labored to overcome loneliness. As I listened to the poem being read, I really felt God's excitement after every stage of newness. "That's good," God would say, satisfied with what was before him. It was as if the story from Genesis that I had heard and read dozens of times was now filled with the actual breath of life for the very first time. As it should be. And that was good! It's amazing how a poem can give you an entirely new sense of appreciation for the world!

I am reminded of the day two church members stood in the back of church one morning after worship. Surveying the fairly lifeless crowd, one turned to the other and said, "The trouble with the church is ignorance and apathy. What do you think?"

The other replied without hesitation, "I really don't know and I really don't care." There should be no question of our respect for the earth. For God's creation of it! As we look around, at the beautiful lakes and mountains in this area, at the marsh and seashore where I live...there should be no question that God has breathed life into every element of our surroundings. It's a beautiful world in which we live. The Spirit of God's love fills every pore of the Earth's being. As you walk along, you have to be downright obtuse not to notice the beauty and grandeur of how everything pulsates before our eyes. How can you not say to yourself, as God must have, "It is so good! So very good!"

But as we all know, many people look around at the world in ignorance and ignore the results of God's work. They live in environmental apathy. Spring is always a mixed time of year for me. It reveals the contradiction of a spirited God and unappreciative, uncaring human beings. While the melting of snow serves to reveal the seed of new life inching its way upward, we also see the accumulation of winter's throwaway trash, lying dormant by the roadside. Bottles and cans and paper cups littering our way, a message to all that we take our surroundings pretty much for granted.

When we think of Stewardship (and we are in that season now) we think primarily of giving money. However, Stewardship is about our respect for the earth and human life. Stewardship is about the well-being of all God's creation. Ultimately it is about how we choose to live and care for the world God has created. Our temptation is to say that we live "in the world that God has created for us," but that is all wrong – it's exactly our problem. We have become so removed from our earthly surroundings (so detached) that we consider them as separate from ourselves. As if God created the world for us. That we are better than other forms of life. Not so! Once upon a time all creation was one. In Genesis I see that. God created human life as part of one entire process. Our stewardship is necessary, but we are not better than what surrounds us. We are designated only as the caretakers of earth – its stewards, if you will.

If you want to read about how we have betrayed God's vision, you read Wendell Berry. A farmer who happens to be a theologian, he senses how we have allowed our false assumptions to truly damage God's creation. "We have lived by the assumption," he writes "that what was good for us would be good for the world. And this has been based on the even flimsier

assumption that we could know with any certainty what was good even for us. We have fulfilled the danger of this by making our personal pride and greed the standard of our behavior toward the world – to the incalculable disadvantage of this world and every living thing in it. And now, perhaps very close to too late, our great error has become clear. It is not only our creativity – our own capacity for life – that is stifled by our arrogant assumption; the creation itself is stifled.”

In other words, by our arrogance and our apathy, we have been wrong. And our wrong headedness has in turn wronged the earth. Calvin DeWitt has identified seven major environmental problems facing the world today. They are a recording of the outcome of our false assumptions. Land and habitat destruction; land degradation; species extinction; waste; ozone depletion (the Greenhouse Effect); global toxification. But perhaps the most harmful of all is his last item – “human and cultural degradation – the severance of cultures from the land and the loss of diversity.” A good example of this might be the plundering of the Native American population. By taking their land and removing them from it, they denied the validity of their culture and the belief that God was in everything and in everyone. The settlers of North and South America failed to trust Native American theology. In spite of having their own Genesis Story of Creation, they ignored the native culture’s understanding of God’s very existence in the soil of the earth.

I would question whether many ministers have used today’s Gospel account to help explain our Stewardship of the Earth, but I sometimes go where others fear to tread. First of all, let’s remember that Jesus was part of a culture that was close to the earth. He and his neighbors fished the waters and farmed the fields. Their existence was dependent upon the land. They may have been a transient society, but in a very different sense than we are today. Wherever they went, they were dependent upon being able to co-exist with the elements.

In John, the image is of the shepherd to the sheep. The Good Shepherd. The one who cares for his charge. The need to be attentive, but more than this, responsible. The Shepherd is never detached from the sheep. They are not merely his form of employment; they are his livelihood. They have been entrusted to him and the Shepherd truly cares for them. The Shepherd must protect them from danger. His well-being is dependent on this assumption. That they are in this together.

Too often today, the Shepherds plunder their charge. Beautiful mountain slopes are torn for ski lifts. Rain forests are cut to the ground. Species eliminated. The need to have vegetable products without blemish, meatier and fuller, has led to fertilizers that pollute rivers and waterways with contaminants. The oil crisis seemingly would tell us something about how we have handled our resources. Instead we fight to see whether more oil can be found in Alaska. A telling scenario – until the oil is gone, we will search for more, fighting alternative power sources and smaller vehicles that use less energy. We falsely believe that the land has been set there by God for our personal use.

The Good Shepherd always puts the welfare of her charge in the forefront. You get the idea from John that if a sheep is injured or lost, if the Shepherd falls asleep on the job, then it’s much more than someone saying, “Oh don’t worry, I can get another sheep.” One has failed at protecting what has been entrusted to him or her. One has failed at being a steward.

Whenever I give a sermon on stewardship of the earth, people come out of church nodding in agreement. I had one soil scientist who congratulated me every time I used the words “recycle, reduce or reuse” in a sermon. It was as if church was the old Groucho Marx

show and the secret word was said during the hour. Basically, it's hard to go wrong when you talk about preserving the environment.

I am glad of the response. However, I am not talking about the world way out there someplace when I am lifting up how we have mistreated it. That's often the idea I got after church – “Yup, those polluters who dump trash in our oceans should be brought to justice.” “I can't believe what they are doing to the National Parks, allowing snowmobiles everywhere like that.”

However, it's not them that I am referring to. It's nice to point to the big polluters and the injustice of industrial smokestacks and how often it's the innocent citizen who is afflicted with lung cancer or leukemia. Yet, we have no one to blame but ourselves. We allow this to happen. We have hurt local farms by insisting that we buy cheaper produce from far away. We want beautiful lawns and have used the chemicals to get them. We have neglected the trails in our woods and the sands of our beaches. You and I, we all live near water. Look at how the shoreline property has been built up. The quiet public places, inland or on the coast, have been sold for private development with little thought of the consequences.

We have met the enemy and it is indeed us! If we want to be Good Shepherds, then it behooves us to attend meetings of our local planning and zoning boards. We must join and support conservation societies. We need to write our representatives in Congress and tell them how we feel. We need to stop throwing litter from our cars and we need to pick up what others have thrown. We need to insist that measures be taken to change our American way of consumption. Mercury products should not be purchased. Cars and trucks must begin to have better mileage. Laborers must be well paid (Fair Trade Coffee is a justice issue, ultimately helping the local farmer while preserving the environment). Our world's future – our children's and grandchildren's future – depends on what we do - The decisions we make today.

One translation of the Gospel, from the Living Bible I think, invites people to enter through the gate, because there you will find “green pasture.” I like that translation. I like the idea that Jesus welcomes us to a world – a place – where if things are good, they are green! Lush, healthy and where God reigns. A green pasture – May our stewardship of this world provide for places that nourish the spirit and the soul and help to keep us whole. We are blessed with abundance – abundance beyond measure.