

Sermon: April 30, 2023

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Earth Day Sunday: Acts 2:42-47; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10; Psalm 23

I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. Amen.

Our vocation as followers of Jesus is to protect and heal God's Creation. Yet, healing God's Creation in this day and age is no small challenge.

We are barraged daily with the doom and gloom news about climate change. I'm not here to spout statistics, except for a few important ones. It does seem so overwhelming to think that we can make a difference as individuals, or even as a church, with the staggering statistics we hear from climate scientists. Saving the earth...it's so large, so big...how can we possibly make a difference? The issues are complex, and it takes time to understand them.

I'm here to help us connect our climate crisis with God's wishes, I'm here to honor God, the One being that flows through everything. I'm here to find new hope, build community, and share thoughts about how we can think more deeply about how we sustain ourselves and our non-human neighbors. I also come with more questions than answers to the climate crisis.

The alarm has been sounded about where we are headed, and each of us has a choice about how we live our life with honesty and compassion, in the midst of climate disruption. As a church we also have choices...I wonder how God is calling us to be in relationship with this complex world. I've made the intention of bringing that question to the labyrinth walk on May 3rd right here in our parish hall.

I admit that some days I lose faith in humanity, knowing that we've already fallen short of being good stewards of God's creation. Turning to scripture again, I try and decipher God's voice speaking to me. Our readings for today connect to our Earth Day service, if we look closely.

Psalm 23 begins with: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want." This verse acknowledges God as the one who protects and guides. The words "I shall not be in want" could also mean "I have no lack," suggesting the Lord is all one really needs, that God's shepherding care provides all that is essential to life.

We all want things, different things, perhaps to make our lives easier, more enjoyable, or more comfortable. I want to travel to Amsterdam, I want a new shed in my backyard, and new carpeting in my bedroom.

Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas is a climate leader in the diocese of Western Massachusetts. She talks about consumption in her book Rooted & Rising. She reminds us that: "At this point of climate crisis when our civilization is no longer sustainable, what are the gods that we are called to bury in order to move forward? What are the idols through which we understand our purpose and our relationships? Here in the United States, we are and always have been a capitalist and imperialist nation built on domination.

These are the practices and perspectives that have caused the climate crisis, and I believe they are the gods that must be buried, in order for us to move on. Because capitalism is rooted in the ever-increasing extraction, production, and sale of goods, this is a worship that we can no longer afford. Infinite growth is not possible on a finite planet." *End quote.*

As Lloyd Alter put it in his book, Living the 1.5 Degree Lifestyle, “Do we really need a piece of ephemeral junk made in China delivered within a few hours after the order was placed on a computer? And (coming soon) by a drone, no less!” I wonder what God thinks about all these Amazon trucks.

There are 62 bible verses about giving, about possessions, so that’s a sermon for another time. But we are given a glance in our reading from Acts today...

We heard that: “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.” This describes a very communal, intensive community of people in Jesus’ day. Sharing and giving is a natural Christian response and we do a good job of that here at church. Yet our lives today look quite different than in Jesus day, as we often hold tight to our possessions, and we keep accumulating more and more. Is this an indication that we have not experienced such divine work among us?

What message do we send to the world about God by our own attitudes and deeds concerning our possessions? How can our own lives better reflect what God has done for us and the living presence of Christ in our midst? And how might relinquishing some of our power or re-directing our investments help those on the margins?

God, help us to think rightly about life. Help us to see the emptiness of the pleasures and pursuits and possessions of this world. Help us, we pray, to trust in you and your ways and your word as the way to abundant life, to full life, so that more equality in our world can be achieved.

In our Gospel reading this morning from John, we hear from Jesus, our good shepherd. Jesus is calling us, his sheep, by name. In Jesus day, each shepherd had a distinctive call and his sheep knew that they were the one they trusted to follow. The shepherd was the one who opened the gate to the pasture and closed the gate once all the sheep were corralled in the sheepfold. Then Jesus goes on to say that “I am the gate for the sheep. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.”

In preparation for my sermon today, I went to our diocesan church website, where one can read archived sermons to help discern God’s word. Here’s an explanation I found convincingly sound when thinking about Jesus as the gate to the sheepfold.

I quote: That means that everything that we have labeled as a barrier is actually Jesus. Everything we have set up to protect ourselves is actually our very means of being called out into a life of adventure, possibility, and yes, strife and conflict. And those careful walls we’ve placed between ourselves and others? Jesus is the gate. He’s made himself a secret entrance into our hardened hearts, and all kinds of scary people are going to get in. When we fully understand that Jesus is the gate—Jesus is the entry point into all change, depth, struggle, and love—it’s simultaneously terrifying and exhilarating. As the saying goes, “God loves us exactly as we are, and God loves us far too much to leave us that way.” *End quote.*

Jesus has given us the freedom of movement, to go in and out doors, to pursue abundant life, knowing that we are protected along the way. We can face our challenges and stumbling blocks because Jesus is inviting us to leave safety and security behind and go back out through the gate, into the world, knowing that we have God by our side at all times.

This gives me hope when I reflect on the climate crisis. I feel protected in my life, no matter how bad things get. Because I am one of many sheep, I see creation as belonging to God, and we are always in creation. Whether we are inside, outside, on a plane, in a cave, we are always in creation, being called by the voice of God. Through every door we go, we have choices to make about our being in creation.

All of our seemingly small efforts: recycling, minimalist living, water use, reducing our carbon footprint, etc. --- they will all make a difference if we all do them, with God's help. There is hope for our world, in saving our world, if we listen to the voice of God. Seems simple enough but it will take discipline, prayer, commitment, some suffering, and ongoing devotion to the God who loves us, dwelling in the house of the Lord for all our lives.

At this point in time, I would like to invite you up to our *Altar of Relinquishment and Altar of Hope*. After all you have heard me say this morning, I want to give you a chance to let God guide you and relinquish any fears or despair you may be holding about the climate crisis. I have a bowl of water here with disappearing paper. You are invited to come up and write down something you would like to let go of and place it in the water and give it a little stir.

You are also invited to come up and write down your hope for the future and place your thoughts in our *Box of Hope* for the climate crisis. I believe it's important to face our fears. Once we do that, hope can follow. These are a few of the doorways I mentioned earlier. Please enter in as you feel moved.

AMEN.

Resources:

Rooted and Rising, Leah D. Schade and Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, editors

Living the 1.5 Degree Lifestyle, Lloyd Alter

<https://www.diomass.org/news/pray-learn-act-advocate-ma-bishops-declare-climate-emergency>