

Earth Day

Jamaica Plain, April 20, 2002, Rev. Terry Burke

On April 22, 1970, the first Earth Day observance was held in our country. I was a junior at Bentley High School in Flint, Michigan; our country was in the midst of war and domestic unrest. At the time, I considered buying an Ecology Flag that was advertised on the back cover of the Evergreen Review. Earth Day and the ecology movement seemed to promise a different kind of warfare, a struggle in service to the future of our planet. I was disappointed when, shortly after that first Earth Day, the state of Michigan made soda and beer bottles non-returnable. I felt guilty. Why were we throwing out all those glass bottles when we had just celebrated Earth Day? I learned the answer years later; the new law helped large bottlers drive out smaller firms by allowing them to reach much wider markets with non-returnable bottles.

Many Earth Days have passed since then. After the struggle of many people, we have curbside recycling in Boston. However, recently a huge hunk of Antarctic ice broke off. Congress prevented oil drilling in the Arctic Wildlife Refuge, but we continue to engage in military actions because of our need for oil. Yet our political leaders don't ask people to make any sacrifices for the conservation of gas.

Ezekiel, our Bible "book of the month" for April, is full of strange visions by the prophet. In today's call to worship, Ezekiel delivers a word from God against the Pharaoh of Egypt. The God/King owned all the land of Egypt; too holy to be called by name, he was called Pharaoh or "Big House" after his residence. "The Nile is mine," he says. Then in Ezekiel's vision the powerful ruler is seen as a dragon sitting in the midst of the Nile River. The dragon Pharaoh is hooked like a fish by God, and left in the wilderness of the desert to die, and be eaten by birds and beasts.

Ours is a culture that gives the unholy word that we are the God/ Kings/Queens, in the "Big Houses," who have a divine right to Lord it over the earth with our nuclear wastes, our cars, and our greed. This is the culture of the sham Pharaohs, who think that 'we are God' and can do what we want with the earth.

However, Unitarian Universalist values are often counter-cultural; a Quaker friend says that we like to see ourselves as the "liberal government in exile." That means that as a liberal religious type, I feel guilty about what I do and don't do regarding the environment: I usually drive the 2 miles from home to church rather than take a bus, we still don't have a compost bin, and I throw away the paper wrappers from my tea bags. Unitarian Universalists talk about the "interdependent web of creation;" for me it feels more often like a web of complicity in which I engage in countless daily actions that harm the earth. People tell me that they feel guilty for simply being alive because of their impact upon the earth.

Life is extraordinary gift. We are all a part of the earth that we should care about. In our liberal guilt, may we remember that, just as we are not Pharaoh, we are not God, that we are full of imperfections and faults of commission and omission. We need to remember that there is grace and forgiveness, and that we are not God.

One place where I find that sense of grace and forgiveness is in our Wednesday night church prayer group led by Emerson Stamps. As part of its practice, the group recites Psalm 23 about six times, prayerfully, as a sort of mantra. Psalm 23 suggests that in our Being in God, God provides for us like a shepherd, with a vision of a natural world of green pastures, still waters, and feasting. As God is a caring shepherd for us, we share in responsibility for the natural, created world. We are shepherds trying to practice proper stewardship on our pilgrimage on this earth, trying to live simply and in right relationship with others.

Our second reading comes from a "Good Shepherd," Wendell Berry, who tries to promote such stewardship in our culture. Berry writes powerfully of what American

society loses from our lack of contact with the natural world; the loss of intimacy with the earth parallels the loss of our intimacy with one another. Wendell Berry gave up life in the academic world to return to his ancestral home of Port Royal, Kentucky, where he farms and writes novels, essays, and poetry.

In the poem we heard today, Berry writes of digging a trench on his property at the start of spring. In the trench, he places the winter's wastes of mind and body – paper from his reading and writing, and the accumulation of his outhouse. He clearly sees the latter as good waste, "light of the sun, and growth of the ground." Rather wallowing in guilt, he confesses his sins to the sky, wind, and the trees and asks forgiveness for not being happy enough, considering his good luck, for listening to too much noise, for having been inattentive to wonders, and for lusting after praise. After this ritual confession, a day of (limited) atonement, he covers over the trench, and begins anew.

The Czech Unitarian martyr Norbert Capek, who died in the Nazi death camps, popularized in his church a "flower communion," where worshipers bring in a flower, and take a different one away. This Earth Day Sunday, may we practice a "waste communion," after Wendell Berry. Let us now mentally dig a big trench in the church graveyard. Now add at least a symbolic amount of bodily wastes – maybe a bucket's worth? Or a thousand flushes? Then add our mental wastes –mine would include newspapers, books, journals, newsletters, sermons, articles, evaluations, lists, letters, and email.

May we ask forgiveness – to the sky, wind and the trees.

I confess that I have not been happy
Enough, considering my good luck;
have listened to too much noise;
been inattentive to wonders;
and lusted after praise.

Then we close the trench with shovels of earth, and begin anew.

This trench warfare is a year to year battle of increments. On this Earth Day, may we begin anew to change our lives and the world around us, to be better pilgrim stewards on this holy planet.

Readings

Prayers of the Mad Farmer, Wendell Berry

At the start of spring I open a trench
In the ground. I put into it
The winter's accumulation of paper,
Pages I do not want to read
Again, useless words, fragments,
Errors. And I put into it
The contents of the outhouse:
Light of the sun, growth of the ground,
Finished with one of their journeys.
To the sky, to the wind, then,
And to the faithful trees, I confess
My sins: that I have not been happy
Enough, considering my good luck;
Have listened to too much noise;
Have been inattentive to wonders;
Have lusted after praise.
And then upon the gathered refuse
Of mind and body, I close the trench.
Folding shut against the dark,
The deathless earth. Beneath that seal
The old escapes into the new

Ezekiel 29:3-6

Thus says the Lord God:

I am against you,
Pharaoh king of Egypt.
The great dragon sprawling
In the midst of its channels,
Saying, "My Nile is my own;
I made it for myself."
I will put hooks in your jaws,
And make the fish of your channels stick to your

Scales.

I will draw you up from your channels,
With all the fish of your channels
Sticking to your scales.
I will fling you into the
Wilderness,
You and all the fish of your channels;
You shall fall into the open field,
And not be gathered and buried.
To the animals of the earth and
To the birds of the air
I have given you as food.
Then all the inhabitants of Egypt
Shall know
That I am God