

Earth Day 2010

This week we mark the 40th anniversary of Earth Day. I, for one, admit to being old enough to remember that first Earth Day, way back in 1970, with hippie-looking folks in Birkenstocks marching about and waving copies of the Whole Earth Catalogue. Now, in 2010, a great deal has changed: there are websites to visit and a green business supplement in the paper, the Hollywood blockbuster *Avatar* celebrates nature worship and there is even a large gathering planned for this afternoon on the Washington Mall. Much has changed, and yet – too much has not changed.

Where to begin? How about with creation itself? In her book, *Holy the Firm*, Annie Dillard begins with creation this way: “Every day is a god, each day is a god, and holiness holds forth in time. I worship each god, I praise each day splintered down, splintered down and wrapped in time like a husk....I wake in a god...” If this poetic voice seems a bit too pantheistic for the orthodox among us, let me move on and quote from the Bible, which also begins with creation. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...and it was very good.” What is good? All of it. In our Christian history and theology we have focused perhaps too much on the goodness of heaven.

But our scriptures tell us otherwise right in chapter one. The earth is God's creation, and it, too, is GOOD.

From the start, the earth is holy, each piece of it dreamed of, longed for, spawned by the holy God. It is a vast and intricate web of matter and teeming life, from sprawling galaxies to the tiniest plankton, perfectly engineered, unfathomable in its beauty, each thing and creature playing out its particular role: birthing, living dying, providing for new life. And God loved all of it because it was good – as an artist loves her best work, as a mother delights in her child. Each day is a god, each creature a piece of the image of God who created it and called it good.

From the beginning it was good; and from the beginning there were also choices. There are even choices for us as we read about the beginnings. Genesis includes two different creation stories. In the first, humankind is created last of all living things. God says, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." In the second creation story, the human creature is created first, before any plants or animals, gently formed from dust and mist by the breath of God. "And the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it."

Between these two images stretches perhaps the first human alternative: one is a conqueror, the other a gardener.

It is obvious which version our western culture has chosen as the blueprint for its destiny. It is a choice we made deep in the past, as far back as some ape-like Eve and Adam who reached out for the fruit of self-consciousness and control. With that bite we launched ourselves out of the ranks of animals, out of the intricate web of creation, and stood apart, believing ourselves to be like gods; the lords of creation, not its stewards or shepherds. The earth became a thing to be used for our own greed or pleasure, rather than a holy sisterhood. We have lived out that ancient biblical injunction by subduing the earth and domesticating its wilderness. Fence and fertilizer, bulldozer and bomb, we have forced the land and its creatures to follow our human agenda and not that granted them first by God.

AS we recognize the folly of our ways, it is easy for 21st century Christians to feel despair. Some may turn to other, less dominating cultures for different kinds of images and stories. In the creation stories of the Seneca Indians, Good Mind, one of the celestial beings, makes men and women out of clay in the likeness of his own face. Then, the legend says, when he had acquainted them with the other beings of creation, and shown them how to

hunt and fish and to eat of the fruits of the land, he told them that they should seek to live together as brothers and that they should treat each other well. This is of course the way the native peoples did live, acknowledging their relationship with mother earth and their fellow creatures, and honoring the delicately balanced web of life of which they knew themselves to be only one part.

For all our knowledge and technical wizardry, this native wisdom is something we have recognized very late. On one level our western culture has been extremely successful, dominating both the natural environment and other, less aggressive societies that have blocked our path. Only now are we truly beginning to count the cost of our progress, and to acknowledge the consequences of separating ourselves from the created web. Something has gone wrong in our quest for the so-called good life. The very earth is dying for our foolishness.

As Christians, we have choices. We do not have to turn to other traditions to find the models for an earth-centered religion. We have our own alternate stories, but we have to learn to raise them out of the dusty books and to tell them. We must read them again, with wiser eyes, and wrest the meaning of salvation from them – not just human salvation, but salvation for

all the living beings whose web of life is so closely linked with ours. What stories do I mean? Well there is that other creation story, that looks upon the first humans as gardeners and stewards. And there is the beloved story of the Good Shepherd – the image raised up for us by Jesus in today’s gospel. If Jesus is our shepherd and we, his disciples, are following in his way, then aren’t we too meant to be shepherds? shepherds of the earth? Look around at the mess we’ve made and ask – “what would Jesus do?”

A little knowledge is a dangerous thing, and with one bite we have failed to ingest the wisdom at the core. But it is not too late for us to make another choice. It is not too late to choose to be gardeners, and shepherds, rather than subduers of the earth. For the carrier pigeon, the moa, the ivory-billed woodpecker, the black rhino it is too late – those creatures, each unique and irreplaceable, are gone. For those of who remain, we stand at a crossroads of our planet’s destiny. Now, 2010, it is time for us to eat the remainder of the apple and to open our eyes to a deeper wisdom: we are not gods. No, we are not gods; yet each day is holy, bearing the thumbprint of the God who moulds it, fresh and sweet, from the dusts and mists of time. Each day is holy, God’s day, our day, earth day, and deserves our acts of worship.

So let us bring our gifts in reverence: recycled bottles and sun-dried laundry; green roofs and solar panels; bean casseroles and low-watt bulbs, a litany of choices that are the rosaries of modern sainthood. It is simply a matter of limiting ourselves, of embracing our true nature, of taking our rightful, humble place in the great web of life. Even so God once chose such limitation, and surrendered willingly to the frailties of human flesh. WE too must follow as disciples, forgoing our foolish pride and stepping back with grace into the endless beautiful ranks of God's creatures. Having swallowed all of the apple, we may find ourselves again in the Garden, this time not guilty children or greedy despoilers, but gentle friends, the good shepherds of this garden we call home.