

Earth Stewardship Sunday
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She's old now, this earth. She's been around a long time, longer than myths have been made about her, longer than the stories that spin religion's truths, longer than the theories that supply science, longer than thought itself. She's old, and holds wisdom still undisclosed. When she was young she was incandescent - a blaze of fire and glory. Eons may have gone by since she was born, but her past is not forgotten – there are the bones of shells buried in her high white crown of mountains – mementos of the vast wide life-bearing seas of her youth.

How beautiful she is –even now, furrowed with age. Red rock canyons layer the years like pages of a book, each sedimentary sheet has a history to tell. Clear water spills down slopes, carving sensuous curves. Plants and trees take root in her, life blossoms as she turns, now towards the light, now away, now bright and warm, now cold and dark. Seasons shift as she twirls slowly around, keeping time. How beautiful she is, all art simply imitation of her color and form. How full of life, teeming with life, - life in such dazzling variety, each dependent on a balance of relationships, each claiming its own place and partners, all nourished by her.

Yuri Glazkov, Russian astronaut, in a book called “The Home Planet”, said Nature has been limitlessly kind to us, having helped humankind appear, stand up and grow stronger. She has generously given us everything she has amassed over billions of years of inanimate development. We have grown strong and powerful, yet how have we answered this goodness?

How have we answered this goodness? Our answer depends on our view of the natural world and our place in it. The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein. These poetic words outline the most basic terms of an ancient contract. The earth belongs to the one who created her – not the ones who inhabit her. She is not a possession, but a place to call home, our one and only. A beautiful home supplied with all we need. Yet as time has passed, and human society has left the ecological balance of primitive cultures for a rapidly accelerating technologically based global society, human beings have damaged, exploited, and in many ways ransacked this planet we call home. Truly, we are not owners, but tenants. Tenants of a gracious landlord. As William Penn said in the 17th c., we have nothing that we can call our own; no, not our selves: For we are all but Tenants, and at Will, too, of the great Lord of our selves, and the rest of this great Farm, the World that we live upon.

She is old, this earth, and although accommodating, there are limits to her patience, limits to the amount of abuse, neglect, and injury she can tolerate. There is no arguing the science – intensified storms and severe weather patterns; these can no longer accurately be called “acts of God” by insurance companies seeking to limit damages. No, such measurable changes in climate could now rightly be classified as the predictable consequence of human activity, human consumption and human pollution. Not acts of God, but acts of God's human creatures that are estimated to result in food shortages for 130 million people by 2050 and threaten to cause drought and higher seas by 2030, according to a U.N.

report released April 10th. The climatic changes threaten ecologically rich sites like the Great Barrier Reef and Antarctic islands, according to the latest report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. It is not only an environmental crisis, but a spiritual and moral crisis as well.

It's as if the earth herself were running a low-grade fever, sign of infection, a virus for which the treatment is cleansing and care. Care that is in the hands of human beings who from the beginning have had great power to correct and change, or defy and destroy. By our Biblical creation myth, children of Adam, Admah named for the dust of the earth from which human beings were formed. Children of Adam, entrusted with intelligence and awareness to be caretakers of the earth and all that dwell upon it, stewardship of the earth from the very beginning has been a divine mandate. Yet the story tells us Adam and Eve ignored the established limits, took what was not theirs to take to satisfy themselves. According to some Jewish writings, the original trespass of Adam robbed the earth of fruitfulness, and disrupted the cosmos. An ancient Jewish Midrash teaches that when God took Adam around the Garden of Eden and showed his it's magnificence and splendor, God spoke to him, saying, "If you destroy it, there will be no one else but you."

The earth is old, and yet within our lifetime, the impact of human consumption and pollution of her abundant resources threatens irreparable damage to habitats and elimination of species in an unprecedented type of environmental genocide. Rev. Samuel T. Lloyd III in a recent address to thousands at the National Cathedral in Washington focused on the present climate change crisis as a wake up call. "The spirit is moving in our world now to renew the face of the Earth. The question is, will we join in?" he asked.

The time to debate the mounting evidence is past. The time to heed the call to change is now. To learn how each one of us can make a difference in the choices we make, the habits we change the goods we purchase, the vehicles we drive, the priorities and policies we commit to, and urge our leaders to agree upon. What is at stake is no less than the future health and well-being of our one shared habitat, this venerable, ancient and stunningly beautiful planet earth, our only home. The natural world, this earthly home, as the Native American proverb says, that we do not inherit from our ancestors, but borrow from our children.

She's old, this earth, and deserves our respect and care. She's resilient, and no doubt would endure long past our eviction, if we cannot abide by the natural limits and restrictions of our God-given occupancy. The present climate calls for change, for humanity to exercise more humility than hubris, more reverence than arrogance. As E.B. White once observed from his farm in Maine, I would feel more optimistic about a bright future for man if he spent less time proving that he can outwit Nature and more time tasting her sweetness and respecting her seniority. May we indeed remember, the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein. May we practice with all reverence and humility our stewardship of the earth, and wisely, prudently, taste her sweetness, and respect her seniority. Amen.

There is a story from the Talmud about Honi, the wise one. One day Honi was walking on the road, when he saw a man planting a carob tree. Honi asked the man, "How long will it take for this tree to bear fruit? The man replied, "Seventy years." Honi then asked, "And do you think you will live another seventy years and eat the fruit of this tree?" The man answered, "Perhaps not. However, when I was born into this world I found many carob trees planted by my father and grandfather. Just as they planted trees for me, I am planting trees for my children and grandchildren so that they will be able to enjoy the fruit of these trees.