



Iowa IPL Earth Words Sermon Contest Honorable Mention

“Earth Day 2010”

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St. Paul Cathedral – Des Moines, IA

Presented Sunday, April 25th, 2010

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This is the 40th Anniversary of Earth Day. This event was launched on April 22, 1970 by US Senator Gaylord Nelson and a Harvard graduate student Denis Hayes to be a day set aside for environmental teaching and established to help raise awareness about the ecological issues confronting our planet. Some 20 million people participated across the United States and Earth Day was born in the United States. Politicians took notice and this single celebration led to unprecedented clean air, water, and wildlife legislation plus the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency.

It all started in the United States and by 1990, 200 million people, not just the 20 million on that first day in 141 countries, not just the US, are acting locally on environmental issues. This year, on the 40th Anniversary, 17,000 organizations in 174 countries have joined together to create a “billion acts of green” around the world. We all realize that this can’t happen in one day so the new slogan is “Every Day is Earth Day,” so today we are celebrating.

We are in the 4th Sunday of Easter celebrating the glorious resurrection of our Lord, but what happened to the earth when Jesus died? Matthew 27:50-51 explains, “Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split.” The earth did not stay silent when it witnessed the Son of Man’s death. There was an earthquake. At this time in our calendar year we often hear in homilies the story of the curtain but I don’t remember hearing much about the earth splitting. We don’t like to think about that. To me God was sad and he was in the earth that shook. Is he still in our earth?

Continuing in Matthew 27:54 “Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, ‘Truly this was God’s Son.’” And finally in Matthew 28:2 another earthquake, “And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone.” This was the resurrection.

Before Jesus’ death in Mark 13:8 Jesus tells of the end to come. “For nations will rise up against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.” I am not here to preach about the end of the world but how can one not have some thoughts about it when there is instability in the Middle East, international terrorism is alive, global markets collapsed, there is a financial crisis, epidemics, disappearance of animal species, pollution of the seas and atmosphere, exploitation of our natural resources; An earthquake in Haiti, one in Chile, another in China and multiple quakes in California. All present the ingenuity of the human family with a challenge of survival. You don’t have to be a pathological pessimist to begin to wonder how all this will end. Is God still in the earth? Is God in the volcano in Iceland?

In Acts 16:26, God rescues Paul and Silas from prison, but how? With an earthquake. "Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened."

There is a connection between the gospel and the earth and the Word and the world.

Our world today is in peril as we continue to exploit our natural resources. That is not just trees and water but also our people. It is an issue of justice as well. Caring for creation is not just advocating for water, air and trees but people. A recent piece of advocacy that caught my attention has been taken by James Cameron, the director of Avatar, highlighting his trip to the Amazon Rainforest in Brazil. He was there to defend the tribes whose land is under siege as their government plans to alter rivers to build the third largest dam in the world. Do you remember when this same cry went up in China when they announced they would be building the Three Gorges dam which would displace 1.2 million people by covering 13 cities, 140 towns and 1350 villages with water? Those people were not so lucky for they lost their homes, their land, their culture and their history. How would you feel if someone came to your door and announced that you would need to move because there would soon be water covering your ground? Just look at the devastation floods have brought to people in Iowa, but they most often remain hopeful of returning to their home as soon as the water recedes. The people in China had no such hope and James Cameron is fighting for those in the Amazon. Hoping that they might be able to continue to live as they have for generations. Brazil is under siege as it is not only this dam project that threatens the people, but numerous forest areas are being stripped for planting, not for the benefit of the natives but for industrial multinational companies and their monocrops, that is corn and soybeans. However there is hope in this area as it is documented that 70% of the world's population are currently peasant farmers, loosely described as small farmers. They have no need to eat food shipped large distances or with unpronounceable chemicals added to preserve it. They eat what is grown locally in the season it is grown.

We live on the only planet in the galaxy that has a living breathing, skin. Our earth's planet skin is called dirt. I know some refer to it as soil, but haven't you enjoyed playing in the dirt? We were reviewing old family movies recently which reminded me how I loved to play in the dirt. Stomping around in those muddy puddles after a rain was the best. I guess I am no different today as come spring I can hardly wait to get my fingers in the dirt and plant seeds. Our dirt or earth's skin is filled with 10 million living micro organisms. It is living. It is composed of the same molecules as are plants, animals and humans. Remember, we pray in the Commendation prayer for the dead, "You only are immortal, the creator and maker of mankind; and we are mortal, formed of the earth, and to earth we shall return. For so did you ordain when you created me, saying, "You are dust, and to dust you shall return."" Many of earth's cultures share the same story of creation. In the Amazon people believe that the sun hurdled a stick rattle piercing the ground from which man was created. The Egyptians believe God took some clay and shaped it into humans and put them on this earth. Jews, Christians and Muslims all believe that God scooped up some dirt and blew into man the breath of life. Genesis 2:7 says, "then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being." And continues in verse 9, "Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." God created man out of the dirt, he also created the food that nourishes us which grows in this dirt. (Show the dirt) I heard a wine connoisseur explain that when he visits a vineyard he looks at the vines and the grapes, takes a handful of dirt, smells it, then tastes it, for if the dirt tastes good so will the wine.

We are not treating earth's skin with care. Today many cities are referred to as concrete jungles. This is not a flattering term as there are buildings upon building, next to cement sidewalks which lay along side streets where people walk. Not a bit of living dirt anywhere. Nothing alive. Well this is changing as urban dwellers are demanding green spaces, community gardens, parks and trails.

There are programs to have Churches be "green" and St Paul's has made a good start at this. Do you remember the Cool Congregations program? This is an ongoing program that just recently sent out a survey to churches that have begun their awareness and work. I will admit that I was a little hesitant to answer it as I didn't think we as a church building were making much progress, however I was happily surprised. Yes, we have had an Energy audit; yes we have installed more energy efficient bulbs; some carpool and others who use mass transportation. Others have recently purchased energy efficient cars. We are doing more communicating via email thus saving on paper. And due to a combined effort we will soon realize an eco friendly parking lot which will brighten the view for many in the surrounding office buildings while providing habitat for urban dwelling birds. There will be native flowers blooming in season where there once was asphalt; a rain garden will catch the rain water where it lands avoiding polluting runoff. We are leaders in this area in Des Moines. (Do come to the Undercroft after the service to hear Lynnae Hentzen, Executive Director of the Center on Sustainable Communities speak on other green projects in Iowa and hear more about our own.) Keeping dirt where it is and enhancing it is a goal. We are a culture who wants to rearrange God's plan for the water and the land as we are constantly building dams and hauling dirt here and there in pursuit of a better life. 1/3 of our world's population builds their homes with dirt found on the spot and uses less energy for building and heating and cooling than we do. This technique is catching on as more people in the United States are reaping the benefits of building with dirt.

We have not been so successful at recycling at St Paul's but are working on this too. We are investigating cooperating with Principal and Pace to get started. We need to put together a "green team." This would be a group of people who would lead us together into becoming more aware of what we can do to care for creation leaving a healthier earth for coming generations. This group could plan activities for our youth and perhaps put little snippets in the weekly email update or in the Journey encouraging us to save energy by putting our computer equipment on a power strip which can turn off all those little lights when not in use or encouraging us to dry one load of laundry a week on a clothes line, each reducing the carbon dioxide put in our air. (There will be a sign up sheet downstairs as well for this ministry.)

So here we go...What am I asking of you this year? ; to ride a bike to church, no I did that once, and you did; to change your light bulbs, no you are already doing that; challenge us to not allow another Styrofoam cup in this church, you bet; ask that we wash dishes instead of filling our landfill with disposable products such as paper plates, flat ware and cups? Yes.

Do I have a passion and an attachment to God's creation? I believe that is obvious. Henry and I have 5 beautiful grandchildren. We would love to leave them a better world than we have now and there isn't much time.

Straying a little from the popular themes of Earth Day like air and water I will close by talking about you. The question is; if you don't care for your body where will you live? Yes, if you don't take care of your body where will you live?

There has been a great deal of publicity recently about what our children are eating in school and how many calories we consume in restaurant meals. Almost too much, but remember the Earth Day goal,

every day is earth day so any time you do something good for your body or help another you are taking care of our earth and a precious resource...You.

Jamie Oliver, a well known British chef starred in a TV reality show recently called "Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution." He highlighted the food fed the children in the school cafeterias of Huntington, W.VA. It was not pretty. That show has prompted so much conversation that habits are changing. People are taking action and our government officials are listening. I know you are probably aware of Michelle Obama's anti-obesity campaign but might not have heard of the "Fed Up with Lunch" blog written by an anonymous school employee in the Midwest who is spending a year eating and publishing photos of awful looking food in her child's school cafeteria. This is in the Midwest. Might she be at your school?

Those closest to our hearts, our children, were interviewed during the show and could not identify a potato but certainly knew what a French fry was. The children could not identify a tomato but loved ketchup. In the worst and most scary presentation Jamie Oliver showed the children a raw chicken. Most had never seen one. He proceeded to cut off the legs, no response. Then the wings, the thighs and the breast and explained the parts to them. He took what was left over, the skin, bones, cartilage and yes very little meat and put it in a blender. Ground it up to a pink material, patted the ground material into a small patty and put it in a frying pan. There were immediate smiles as the children called out, "those are chicken nuggets!" Do you know what your children are eating? Please find out as we all care for your children.

Did you realize how much healthier you would be if you just shopped the exterior where the real food is. That is the fruits, vegetables, meats and dairy products. Look for local products. Avoid going in the center aisles for nourishment. But if you must look at the labels and note the number of ingredients. Remembering less is better.

This Earth Day let us strive to protect our earth's skin and ourselves by remembering today's words from Revelations: "Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, 'To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever.' And the four living creatures said, 'Amen!' And the elders fell down and worshipped."

Our dirt is our life. Please treat it with care always remembering God is in the earth.