

First Congregational Church of Winchester, UCC
4th Sunday of Easter, Creation Care Sunday
April 30, 2023

The Rev. Dr. Jessica McArdle

Title: “Our Most Ancient and Pleasing Vocation”

Text: Genesis 2:4-9, 15; John 20:11-18

Genesis 2:4-9, 15-23

In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, ⁵when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; ⁶but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground— ⁷then 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. ⁸And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. ⁹Out 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.

¹⁵ The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

John 20:11-18, selected verses

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. [Alerting some other disciples of this, they left after seeing that the tomb was empty]

But Mary [remained] weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look* into the tomb; ¹²and she saw two angels in white...¹³They said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping?’ She said to them, ‘They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.’ ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?’ Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.’ ¹⁶Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’ She turned and said to him in Hebrew,* ‘Rabbouni!’ (which means Teacher). [Directed by Jesus to tell the other disciples] ¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced..., ‘I have seen the Lord’

Prayer before Sermon: Risen One, as your beloved creation resounds with echoes of your grace, may we earnestly attend and listen to your Living Word. We ask this in the moments to come and in the unfolding of the days and months ahead. Amen.

Sermon:

What if our vocation doesn't emerge when all is well but in response to the cries of humankind and all Creation?

There is a story about a man who was a landscaping and repair specialist working off Cape Cod. One morning, while checking the piers at an adjacent beach for storm damage, Nate Spears suddenly spied a ten-foot pilot whale heading for shore. He then saw a second whale followed by a third. Though not unusual for these gentle mammals to beach themselves on Cape Cod, given the speed they were coming in, he realized he'd have to act quickly. Running towards the water, Nate threw off his shoes and socks, rolled up his pant legs, and started wading out in the turning surf. He had no idea what he was going to do. Nevertheless, he went to the first whale, catching up with it in waist-deep water on a sand bar.

By now, the whale was thrashing about, and he could see the cuts on the mammal's body from contact with the rough sand. But what could he do? He was just one man. And then, as if moved by instinct alone, he placed both hands on the whale and held them there. Then the whale became utterly still. It was as if both human and whale were trusting each other in an encounter that neither had experienced before.

Once the whale had quieted, Nate gently turned it around and pointed it back to the sea. As the whale made its way into the open waters, Nate quickly caught up with the second whale, who had also beached itself on a sand bar by this time. Again, he touched the creature, and its thrashing stopped. After turning it back towards the open sea, others joined Nate to help turn the third whale back.

While common for whales rescued after beaching themselves in one location to come ashore in another, that was not the case here. For whatever reason, the whales returned to their natural habitat. While there is no proof, the author pondered if this one man's willingness to hold the whales in their distress made the difference.

What if our vocation emerges not when all is well but in response to the cries of humankind and all Creation?

Introduce Scripture:

Before us this morning are two sharply contrasting images in today's scripture readings. The first is the Genesis retelling of Creation, and the second takes us eons later to the first Easter and Christ's resurrection. The first is a highly symbolic and mythical retelling of Creation. In contrast, the second has the disciple, Mary, wondering if she stumbled upon the gardener when frantically searching for the body of Jesus: The first place the locus of God's creative activity as acting upon the soil itself, while the second passage draws our attention to the resurrected Christ as the one who liberates us and all Creation from the power of death.

But there is a problem within these passages that prompts us to ask: Given the seemingly insurmountable odds we're facing now, where do we go from here?

Yes! We can do what we can through composting and recycling; we can shift our diet to a plant-based one; we can do what we can to change to clean, renewable energy in our households and houses of worship. We can be examples to our children and youth by taking seriously the impact of global warming AND what our congregation has remarkably done and continues to do, joining with committed others in lowering our carbon footprint to be an example to others and the wider community.

Yet what do we do with our anxiety and trepidation in the face of significant environmental change? What do we do when feeling outnumbered and overwhelmed in the face of it all? What do we do when we want to bury our heads in the sand and tune the lousy news out? (pause)

For some months now, I've been a part of an online clergy group trying to figure out how to have these kinds of conversations about the environment without freaking people or ourselves out. There are about 100 of us, all ordained, all concerned about what's happening to our planet and our communities, trying our darndest to find a way to communicate to folks and whole houses of worship that doing what we can (climate-wise) isn't only a good thing to do, it is the profoundly faithful, conscientious and fitting thing to do.

There's a story about a farmer out in the Midwest who, through a great deal of hard work on misused and depleted land, pulled together an agricultural oasis that was productive and sustainable. So appealing was the farm; folks visiting the area would drive by to have a look. One morning, one such visitor came by. Parking a large Oldsmobile alongside the road, the visitor sauntered over. Walking up to the rustic-clad farmer, he said, "You know, even though I've never been at this farm before, I can tell that God has abundantly blessed you." Then he pointed his finger directly at the farmer and leaned in, saying, "I only hope you've been giving thanks to the Almighty for what He's done for you!"

To his credit, the farmer didn't respond right away. Instead, he looked down at the rich soil he'd been cultivating and then shifted his gaze to the carefully tended fields beyond. He then eyed the man standing before him and said, "Yes, the Lord has blessed me. But you should have seen this joint when God was doing it all alone."

What if our vocation emerges not when all is well but in response to the cries of others and all Creation?

Author, poet, farmer, and ecologist Wendell Berry convincingly argues that there is **no** separation between how we treat one another and Creation itself. Our relationships with one another, not those just closest to us but across the globe, is intrinsically bound up with how we treat this planet we call home, which raises some tough questions: For instance, dare we ask if there is a relationship between the proliferation of assault weapons and the dismissive attitude shown not only towards the most vulnerable in our society but the rivers, oceans, and air that sustains all of us? Or, dare we ask, as people of faith, if there is a relationship between drought and the overconsumption of water and other natural resources? Dare we ask, is there a relationship between suppressing voting rights for people of color, making way for toxic industry to be situated next to neighborhoods and playgrounds for those on the margins?

There's a story about a pastor serving here in the northeast who learned that the beloved nephew of a parishioner was in prison for drug dealing. The lad was only twenty-one. When visiting him, the young man told the pastor that – being smart – once he got out of prison, he'd elude law enforcement next time. Curious, the pastor asked him, "Well, of course, you're smart, only what kind of smart are you?" The young man said, "Whaddya mean, what kind of smart? His pastor replied, "Well, there is the smart that ends in self-destruction. But there is another kind of smart that ultimately leads to wisdom and life."

Like that young man in prison, we as a nation and global community are also at a critical crossroads. What used to be justifiable, billed as hugely beneficial, and considered smart: deforestation, fossil fuel drilling and production, pumping toxins in the atmosphere and our water supply, undercutting environmental regulation, denying the connection between spiraling health costs and climatic changes, while rolling back initiatives and advances in developing renewable energy, at this juncture, it's not looking so clever or intelligent anymore.

What if our vocation emerges not when all is well but in response to the cries of others and all Creation?

It is hard for us to fathom, but in the 1960s, there were no environmental regulations or laws to protect our water supply or the air we breathe. Why? Because deemed a hindrance to the nation's economy and a stumbling block for consumers, nothing was in place to protect the ecosystem that sustains us.

Yet when we return to the Genesis account, the language used is not one of exploitation but is expressed as the one who tends to and protects Creation. The charge given to humankind was to "till and keep" God's garden and Creation. Not exploit. Not dominate. Not misuse.

From the beginning, Creation belonged to God and God alone.

Imagine if our vocation as people of faith summons us to be stewards and caretakers of one another and Creation itself? As recorded in the resurrection account of John's Gospel, the most vivid allusion to Jesus on Easter morning is that of a gardener who stands in the dawning light of God's good Creation. Jesus, as the one who responsibly, faithfully, and properly reconciles God, neighbor, and earth, summons us to do likewise: Which is Good News!

Fifty-three years ago, the United States and other countries celebrated Earth Day. Though it emerged as a global movement that involved people from varied cultures and faith persuasions, it was in the context of needing to protect and safeguard Creation that the first Earth Day gained widespread support.

We began today by recalling one man who stepped into the current of the ocean and, in so doing, had a life-changing encounter. He could never have imagined doing what he did that morning, but such is the case with vocation. Vocation emerges not when all is well and predictable but in response to the cries of others and God's beloved Creation.

No, I'm not suggesting you go out and find yourself a whale to have an encounter with. And getting started, your response may seem small, certainly not whale-sized, especially at first. But consider that what makes it the stuff of vocation is that you are responding to the urgency and need before you.

Marianne Wilson writes, "Our worst fear is not that we are inadequate. No, our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frighten us. The resurrection, not death, is the most terrifying."

Beloved in Christ, fear not the vocation that God summons you to. "For you will go out with rejoicing and in peace you be brought in. The mountains and the hills will burst in jubilation before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands."

Thanks be to God. Amen.