



## **Earth Sunday 2020**

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At the age of eighteen, I went away to college. I left my home and went to a University that was an eleven-hour drive from my hometown. I knew no one at that school and I started from scratch making friends and forming a community. Five weeks into that journey, on a Friday afternoon, my dorm room phone rang. I picked up the phone and it was my mother. She asked me if I was alone or if anyone was with me. This was odd, very odd and so I asked her to tell me what the matter was, why had she called.

She told me that my father had died a few hours earlier from a massive heart attack, unexpected, a surprise, unanticipated but that he was dead. Anyone who has ever gotten one of those calls knows what that feels like. The confusion, the shock, the emptiness, the inability to wrap one's head around a few simple words. My mom told me that my sisters would come and get me the following day to bring me home for the funeral.

I hung up the phone and stood there frozen for what seemed like hours until my roommate came in and asked me what was the matter. I told her about the call and the death and then I walked out the door. I wasn't sure where I was walking to, I just knew I needed to not be standing still. I walked out of my dorm, tears streaming down my face. I wasn't sure what direction I was going, or where I was heading or why I was walking. I just walked.

My dorm was located on north campus and once you left the area where the dorms and some other buildings were located, there were these lovely paths through a beautiful Michigan forest. I found myself on those paths for a bit until I just turned and walked right into the forest itself. It was a sunny fall day and the leaves had not yet begun to turn color. The sun was streaming through big leafy maples and oaks.

I walked until I came to a little stream. I heard it before I saw it. I sat by that stream and could hear no other sounds except for those of the stream and the forest. Birds in the trees, the rustling of a gentle wind, the sound of the water sliding gently over glossy rocks. I took my shoes off and I set my feet into that water. It was cool and fresh.

The rest of the world slipped away. In that moment, there was just me in my shock and my grief and forest wrapped around me. The longer I sat there with my feet bathed by that gentle stream, the stronger I felt. The longer I sat listening to the sounds of the forest breathing around me, the calmer I felt. The longer I sat in that urban oasis, the more I felt held. I felt connected intimately with all the natural world that surrounded me.

After some time, I knew I had to leave and go back and face whatever changes were coming in my life from my father's death. I put my shoes back on and I traced my footsteps out of the forest, back to my dorm room. And that experience of being held stayed with me through all of the days to come.

That was thirty-five years ago and yet it feels like just minutes. I can still feel with such clarity that experience of being wrapped in the natural world and held and sustained and strengthened, of feeling intimately connected with the natural world that surrounded me. My guess is that I am not unique in that incredible experience in creation. My guess is that most of us have had an experience of being out in creation, standing in front of the ocean, deep in a forest, maybe in an urban park, interacting with an animal, or working in our gardens, where we have felt something special, something different, some sort of connection or peace.

For thousands of years, Christians have believed that we had dominion over creation. That meant that we held that God entrusted us to, humanity, to the overlords of God's creation. More recently, we have evolved to think of ourselves as stewards of creation, in charge of its health. I've come to believe that there is something fundamentally broken about both of those ways of viewing our relationship with creation. How we have traditionally viewed the earth we walk on has been much different than the experience I shared with you the day my father died.

That something that is different, I'm thinking, that something is power. To have dominion over or to be stewards for creation means that humanity oversees creation, humanity has the power over and above the natural world. Frankly speaking, humanity doesn't have the best track record when it comes to having power over anything. Too frequently instead, we have used that power to serve our own needs. That has certainly been the case for our relationship with the natural world.

Unfortunately for our earth, humanity's role as the overseer of creation has led to destruction. For example, it's believed that up to one half of all plants and animal species on dry land could face extinction by the year 2050 due to global warming. Humanity as the overseer of creation means that close to 100 species die each day due to tropical deforestation. It means that since the rise of human civilization, 83% of all wild animals have been lost. It means that if current trends

continue, then the state of our environment will continue to decline and climate change, loss of biodiversity, land degradation and water scarcity will escalate dramatically.

Something must change. I happen to believe it isn't just our actions that need urgently to change but our entire understanding of how we relate to the environment, the natural world, God's creation. And so I'm called back to that day my father died and that sense of connection and sacredness I felt with the earth. That connection, that sacredness calls me to wonder if we want to save our planet, we will have to rethink our fundamental understandings of the relationship we have with Mother Earth.

I've come now to believe that save our earth, we must be willing to reject an image of having dominion over or stewardship for this world and instead, we must understand ourselves as being interdependent with, in relationship with, connected with our natural world. To save our world, I believe that we need to understand that we are in relationship with this world. Not having dominion **over** or being stewards **for**, but in relationship **with**.

I've been alive long enough that I have known good and bad relationships. I've learned that in the very best relationships, in the very best relationships, there is a foundation of unconditional love. The best relationships want the very best for the other. The best relationships want the other to thrive. The best relationships require accountability for actions that hurt the other, that wound the other. The best relationships require advocating for the other, fighting for the other. The best relationships require doing nothing that keeps the other from flourishing. The best relationships let go of power and lean into love. That is what the best kinds of relationships look like.

And that is the sort of understanding we need to have with our planet. It is a part of us, and we are part of it, connected, related, bound to each other. The stakes are high here. The time is short. As a people of God, we are called into the path of right relationship. We are called into the path of peace and justice. We are called to work and change and advocate and fight so that our beloved planet flourishes and thrives.

What will it take to make that happen? Over the past four weeks we've seen some baby steps in that direction. Since the global pandemic of COVID-19, air pollution in India has lifted enough that for their first time in their lives, some residents can see the Himalayas from their city. In fact, satellite images from across the globe show that pollution levels dramatically decreased as the world moved into isolation to slow the spread of the coronavirus. It is almost as if the planet has breathed a sigh of relief as we have slowed down, eased up on our consumption and stayed home.

We have shown over the past weeks that we as a people can be different! We can mobilize for the common good of love for humanity, to slow the spread of a virus. The question we now face is, can we mobilize for the good of our planet. Can we translate the changes we have made over the past four weeks to those that would be required to address the climate crisis? Will we come

out of this pandemic and return to business as usual or will we refuse to go back to the status quo that was so damaging to God's beloved creation?

My prayer is that we come out of this time and enter into a loving relationship with the earth in a way that calls us forward into right and just relationship. My prayer is that we come out of this time and cede our sense of power over the earth. My prayer is that we come out of this time and become something different for our planet and that we allow ourselves to feel connected with all of creation in a new and vulnerable and intimate and life-giving way.

Last week, we celebrated Easter and the holy and sacred resurrection. On that day, we lifted up that change is always possible, renewal is always waiting, and hope is never dead. We lifted up that in the midst of darkness, there is light. In the pain of death, there is life. We lifted up that in the face of what appear to us to be overwhelming odds, God is at work in us and in the world, working for life abundant for all creation.

We now face overwhelming odds to heal our beloved earth. But we are the people of God and we are called forth into that work of healing, of justice, of right relationship, of advocacy and of love for all of creation. As God's people, we are called to sacred connection, interdependence and relationship with God's beloved creation.

May we rise to that challenge. May we work to heal our earth, our beloved.

May it be so, may it be so!

Amen