

April 25, 2021 (Earth Sunday) | Sanctuary Worship Service

TEXT: [Isaiah 40:12–18, 21–23](#)

TITLE: Foundational Answers

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

On this Earth Day Sunday, shouldn't a biologist or geologist be speaking to you instead of a preacher-theologian? Our focus today is on the environment, not exegesis—on saving the planet, not so much on saving souls. Yet some of the wisest words about caring for creation are found in scripture if we are willing to ask the right questions and remember some foundational answers.

So for us to talk about all this, I need you to quiet yourselves and silence the busyness of your brains for a moment. Take a breath—imagine yourself out in nature in some place that feeds your soul: a green field, a forest, a seashore. I want you to see a wide horizon before you and a deep sky above you. Then remember this first fundamental truth: History is so much longer than your individual life. Every day you are bombarded with messages that say you are the center of the universe—you deserve to have it all, to buy it now, to celebrate yourself first and foremost. But the bible calls us to take a humbler approach to life. We are not the center of the universe. It is not all about us. We are a moment in time—a brief flower of the field, one sparrow amid millions of others who fly for a season and then sleep in the dust of the earth.

It is true that this planet existed for billions of year before we ever emerged on its surface. There have been millions of years in which earth knew creatures of the air, land and sea but had no knowledge of us. Mammals first appeared 65 million years ago; great apes about 15 million years ago; homo sapiens maybe 300,000 years ago. It used to unnerve the old-time preachers that the Lord of heaven and earth would create a world that lacked rational beings for most of its history. It seemed wasteful and inefficient to them. But that sentiment is not found in the bible. Let the writer of Psalm 8 come stand beside you and break the silence with this timeless question: *When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established, what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for [us]?* (Psalm 8:3-4)

The foundational truth of the matter is that creation faith requires a spirit of humility not of pride. We can marvel at the wonder of human life without becoming inebriated on the potent drinks of selfishness and narcissism. We are a small part of a much larger, much longer history. Forget that fact and you will end up clutching vainly as the sands of time pass through your fingers. Remember that fact and you will dance and pray and run and walk amid an amazing creation as long as you have breath in your lungs and strength in your legs. For that, thanks be to God.

Next point: The writer Madeleine L'Engle had a wise observation about the difference between something being complete and something being finished. She said: *I cannot understand theologians who assert that when God created the universe it was not only whole and complete, it was finished. [God] had done it and that's that. No change*

allowed. When I looked at and ran my hands over my newborn babies, I checked to see that they were whole, complete, all ten fingers and toes, everything all there. And they were, praise God, magnificently complete creatures. But not finished! Anything but finished! So why should we attempt to limit God to a finished creation? (The Irrational Season, p. 205)

Each of us and the world in which we live is complete yet unfinished. We are alive; this planet is literally alive and ever changing. The astronauts in the SpaceX rocket linked up with the International Space Station yesterday. When they look down at Earth, they see a planet that is alive, moving wind currents and ocean streams, a far different image from the old Apollo photographs of the barren moon or the recent video taken by the Perseverance Rover from the bleak surface of the planet Mars. Our planet is complete in terms of having the building blocks to sustain life—resources of water and oxygen, photosynthesis and DNA -but it is far from finished. So how does our faith guide us to finish the work of this complete, yet unfinished, creation around us?

Part of the answer to that question was reinforced for me when we held a vigil for racial justice at our church this past Friday. The verdict in the George Floyd murder case was gratifying yet partial. One act of judicial accountability does not erase a long history of racist and flawed criminal justice rulings. People from our church, from other Presbyterian churches as well as faith communities, lined up along Penn Avenue on Friday to say George Floyd and other's names, and to recommit ourselves to the ongoing, unfinished work of justice. A couple reporters spoke with Lenore Williams and me about what we can do going forward. I recognize that as a white male in America, I cannot presume to speak for African Americans, Asian Americans and people of color, nor can I claim wisdom on what must be done from my position of white privilege. But the microphones were put in my face and staying silent is no longer an option.

I noted that all justice is relational. We—our community, our system of policing and criminal courts, our Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Native American and other faith communities are interconnected. By listening to and caring for one another, we become people of justice. That is the way of the world – literally. All of life is interdependent. The air you breathe isn't a possession of western Pennsylvania. It's a gift shared by all of us, whether in Pennsylvania, Ohio, or California, Asia or Europe. The water we drink isn't copyright protected just for Allegheny County. It moves from the Canadian highlands to the Mexican peninsula, along the coasts of South America and Africa and flowing between the island nations of the Pacific. Justice, on this Earth Day, foundationally means that we must act as people who share one another's fate and are obligated to promote one another's well-being. That's why caring for creation is one way we can be people of justice as God intended.

Here's a quick story and then I'll draw this message to a close. Mahatma Gandhi was once approached by a mother who was deeply concerned that her son ate too much sugar. She said, "I am worried about his health. He respects you very much. Would you be willing to tell him about its harmful effects and suggest he stop eating it?" After reflecting on the request, Gandhi said he would do so, but asked the woman to bring

her son back in two weeks, no sooner. In two weeks, the boy and mother returned and Gandhi spoke with him, suggesting that he stop eating sugar. When the boy agreed, his mother thanked Gandhi extravagantly—but asked him why he had insisted on the two-week interval. “Because,” he replied, “I needed the two weeks to stop eating sugar myself.” (**Earth in the Balance**, Al Gore, 1992, p. 14)

People sometimes ask “Where is God? Is God in the heavens somewhere? Is God in the church or in the sky or part of the air we breathe?” The problem with those questions is that they turn God into a “thing,” an object we can locate as well as control. So for a moment go back to your nature place. Take a breath again and picture yourself standing alone in a place of God-given beauty and wonder. Now allow one other person to step into that place and stand before you. You choose who it is—a loved one, a friend, a child, a stranger. Let them share that space with you and as you extend your hand to them, know that God is in the space where your hands will touch. God is in-between you before you embrace. God is there between, beside, within and without you as you breathe and take in the wonderful world around you together.

This is the second fundamental truth: God is relationship. Justice is mutuality. The spiritual life is not “out there”; it is literally right between us. The moral and just life is as close as a person whose hand you intentionally hold and whose life you value as you do your own. Why is this important? Because God is relationship and justice is mutuality.

To live guided by these truths takes commitment. Gandhi needed the two weeks to change himself so he could speak with integrity to the young man. We too are complete, yet unfinished—needing to call upon Christ and his grace each day to guide us forward in the work yet to be done. But scripture offers us reassurance—words of comfort calling us to be part of the living vine, companions with a risen Redeemer who is with us always, and to trust in the Maker of Heaven and Earth who set the world in motion and helps us finish the good work already begun. We live with a hope that is as strong as the One in whom we hope. So what have we to fear?

With humility yet with confidence, let us re-engage with creation—the world and all that dwells therein. For have you not known? Have you not heard? We are in this together right now and forevermore. Again, thanks be to God!

Amen