

Earth Day, April 26, 2020

Center Church, Hartford

The Rev. Dr. Rochelle A. Stackhouse

Psalm 104

Abbe Pierre, a Catholic theologian, once said “we must always see with both eyes: one focused on the world’s suffering, so that we might fight against it, and one focused on the world’s wondrous beauty, so that we might give thanks for it.” “In addressing the climate crisis as people of faith, it not only helps to see with *new* eyes, it helps to see with *two* eyes: one focused on justice and one focused on gratitude.” *Brooks Berndt*

I begin with an eye on gratitude. One could hardly do better than this Psalm. The English translator uses a word we don’t hear often anymore, “Manifold.” “O Lord, how manifold are your works!” It means diverse, various, assorted, of so many different types that it is hard to get it all in one poem! In this one song, God is praised for light, sky, clouds, wind, fire, earth, water, mountains, valleys, springs, hills, wild animals, birds, streams, grass, cattle, plants, wine, oil, bread, trees, storks, wild goats, rocks, rabbits, moon, seasons, sun, night, forest animals, lions, people, sea, creeping things, sea monsters, and I may have missed something!! Indeed, how manifold! Who else but God

would have thought up the giraffe? The armadillo? The hummingbird?
You?

I'm showing you a picture of a small stone, actually about the size of your index fingernail. I picked it up on Columba's Beach on the Isle of Iona off the coast of Scotland. It's made of Iona greenstone, a kind of stone found only on one beach on this one small island in the whole world. I have another kind of stone called a Petoskey stone, a fossil which is found only on the northern shores of Lake Michigan. In the whole world, only there! It wasn't enough for us to have rocks and stones, but that the earth should produce a prodigious variety of these things we often walk over without noticing.

Are you sitting right now where you can look outside? If not, move to a window if you can. Look out there. Start to make a catalog in your mind, like the Psalmist, of all the pieces of the created world you can see. Maybe even write it down! I'll give you a minute to get started. If you have a child with you, get their help!

In Alice Walker's book *The Color Purple*, the character Shug says to her friend Celie, "I think it [angers God] if you walk by the **color purple** in a field somewhere and don't notice it. People think pleasing **God** is all **God** cares about. But any fool living in the world can see it always trying to please us back." Being grateful is first and foremost about **noticing**. You don't have to be on Iona or in the countryside to

notice. Downtown Hartford is full of trees and birds and flowers and caterpillars and squirrels and stones and even a hawk that visits Center Church!

So, now that you have noticed what's outside your window, take a minute and say, "thank you" to God. Go ahead, say it out loud. As Shug said, any fool can see that God is always trying to please us. Notice. Say thank you. Often. With one eye, gratitude!

Romans 8:10–25

"Creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God....We know that the whole creation has been groaning."

This is about having one eye on justice. Creation is waiting for us to actually act like we were created to act: as those who are one with everything God created and with God, whose job is not to dominate, but to care for the earth on which we live. Creation, without question, is groaning. From mountains slashed for mines to massive deforestation to islands of plastic floating in the Pacific to poison in the water not only of Flint, Michigan, but many other, mostly poor, communities as well. Creation is groaning.

Take a look again out your window. I read a most amazing book this winter called *Underland* by Robert McFarlane. It's about what is under the ground, both human created things like catacombs and nuclear waste sites and natural things like deep caves and the root systems of forests. The chapter on those roots fascinated me as he spoke with botanists and foresters who are only beginning to discover how trees interact with one another and with other plants through their root systems. Scientists have only begun to scratch the surface of this communication system. But they do know that to disrupt it by cutting it apart does damage to more than just the trees cut, but, indeed, to the whole system.

The same thing happens when we disrupt human systems. It impacts us all. Do you know that the majority of toxic waste sites are not off in some uninhabited desert, but in the midst of the most impoverished communities in this country, often communities whose residents are people of color? Wealthier neighborhoods are able to take actions to block efforts to put waste near them. But the UCC in 1987 published a report including a study that showed that “3 out of 5 Black and Hispanic Americans lived in a community that housed with the EPA called an ‘uncontrolled toxic waste site.’” Though much has been done to address these sites since then, we still see, through what has happened in cities like Flint, that these communities continue to be at risk. And what hurts one community hurts all of us, just like the trees,

as Dr. Seuss' Lorax would point out. If this virus has taught us nothing else, we must have learned that!

Speaking of our current situation, have you noticed all sorts of stories, about half of them fake by the way, which tell of nature re-claiming places where human beings no longer gather? Of wild animals in city streets or the air or water clearing enough to allow natural beauty to be seen? These tales often sound post-Apocalyptic in tone: see what the world will look like when human beings disappear altogether.

The writer Amanda Hess, in the April 18 *New York Times*, in an article about these stories, observes: "Most of the people sharing photos of domineering goats and marauding boars are not expressing a latent death wish. The appeal of the coronavirus genre is, in part, its subtle massaging of the human ego. It feeds the fantasy that centuries of environmental abuse can be reversed by an abbreviated period of sacrifice. With a few weeks' supply of shelf-stable foods and...Netflix docuseries, we can save the planet."

If only it were that simple. You know it's not.

Paul writes that creation waits and creation hopes. We are facing now an incredible example of the power of the natural world. This virus is so small that you can't see it without a microscope. But it has

brought normal human existence to a halt throughout the whole earth. No, I don't think God sent this. It's tempting to observe that the earth may have had enough and is trying to take us out once and for all, but this is a pretty inefficient and unsuccessful way to go about that.

It does, however, give us some time to reflect. As our gratitude rises for the natural world, our time for reflection on the urgency of changing our relationship with the natural world becomes critical. Even in these times, we need to be looking to the future, not just mourning the present. The poet whose poem we heard a few minutes ago takes us back to that concept of all things being connected, like the root systems of trees and plants. She envisions that “the bright light of Creation's pain nearly blinds us and grief nearly chokes us. But not quite. Because when there's enough of us stumbling around, trying to make a way, sooner or later we'll begin to connect, and the power of that connection explodes in hope, and a different way can be made, and life can flourish in new and extraordinary ways.”

In order for that to happen, we must see with two eyes; we must think with two minds: gratitude and justice. Who knows what might happen if that kind of vision spread like a virus? Amen.