

Earth Day and Obligations of Christians

John 20: 19-31; Psalm 148 (2020)

Psalm 148

¹ Praise the LORD.

Praise the LORD from the heavens;

praise him in the heights above.

² Praise him, all his angels;

praise him, all his heavenly hosts.

³ Praise him, sun and moon;

praise him, all you shining stars.

⁴ Praise him, you highest heavens

and you waters above the skies.

⁵ Let them praise the name of the LORD,

for at his command they were created,

⁶ and he established them for ever and ever—

he issued a decree that will never pass away.

⁷ Praise the LORD from the earth,

you great sea creatures and all ocean depths,

⁸ lightning and hail, snow and clouds,

stormy winds that do his bidding,

⁹ you mountains and all hills,

fruit trees and all cedars,

¹⁰ wild animals and all cattle,

small creatures and flying birds,

¹¹ kings of the earth and all nations,

you princes and all rulers on earth,

¹² young men and women,

old men and children.

¹³ Let them praise the name of the LORD,

for his name alone is exalted;

his splendor is above the earth and the heavens.

¹⁴ And he has raised up for his people a horn,

the praise of all his faithful servants,

of Israel, the people close to his heart.

Praise the LORD.

Proper etiquette states there are four things we should not talk about with strangers, including in the workplace. They are: religion, politics, sex and money. We do take it to a deeper level and are careful with what we discuss with close friends and relatives. But we could add climate change, global warming and pollution to this list. Yet Wednesday April 22 is Earth Day. And it's the 50 anniversary of this day.

On the first Earth Day in 1970 was the largest demonstration in US history up to that time. It was five times larger than the 2017 Women's

March. People young and old, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican, came together to demand the government clean up the environment. Why? Because, smog was blanketing cities and waterways were literally burning.

And surprise, the protest worked! One week after Earth Day, the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency was recommended. The following decade gave rise to new protections through 28 U.S. federal environmental laws, including the Clean Water Act & the Endangered Species Act. But today the current administration is cutting away at environmental restrictions in favor of businesses.

Here in Canada there has been a growing awareness that we value the land as we use our natural resources. But we have continuing conflict with First Nations over how land and water is used. The environmental movement seeks to protect the natural world and promote sustainable living. It had its beginnings in Canada in the conservation efforts of the early 1900s, when conservationists aimed to slow the rapid depletion of Canadian resources in favour of more regulated management.

Some bird sanctuaries, national parks and fishing laws were established in the 1800's. In 1909, The Commission of Conservation was set up as a non-partisan, independent government agency to promote the efficient use of natural resources and to make recommendations. It was made up of provincial & federal government representatives with the involvement of experts from universities. It completed over 150 studies on a variety of conservation issues, and made recommendations on smoke stack filters, large-scale composting, and overcutting of forests. But it was abolished by the Conservative government in 1921.

Pollution has become an increasing concern. The Green party was founded in 1983. And concerns about herbicides have been around for years. Today we have a Canadian minister of environment and climate change. However, you may get into hot water by bringing up the Kyoto Protocol, Paris Climate Accord, David Suzuki and the carbon tax in a conversation. Plus just

mention pipelines, blockades, protests and oil sands to get people's blood stirring.

So what do we do as followers of Jesus when it comes to caring for this world we live in? Billy Graham said that God created the earth and Christians should be concerned about the environment. Today we have to ask, Is the coronavirus an act by the earth to let us know – we can't keep mistreating the earth and expect us to prosper? This topic stirs up accusations, debate, misinformation and conflicts.

Yet what about those who do not see the turmoil of Mother Earth? Stronger and more frequent hurricanes, tornados, earthquakes and droughts? Some predict that by 2050 there will be more plastic in the oceans than fish. People still don't believe the ozone layer is decreasing or that we are making it worse by our actions and inactions. We continue to be warned about the importance and fragilness of the bee population. I suspect the topic of ecology triggers a response like the disciple Thomas had after Jesus' resurrection.

Thomas is an intriguing character. His doubt is pretty much all we know about him from the Gospels. It's easy to feel sorry for him. It seemed logical for Thomas to question Jesus' miraculous reappearance and wanting evidence – to not just see but to feel Jesus' wounds. Jesus provided what Thomas needed, but did not condone this request.

Instead, Jesus lifts up the many who will never see him and yet will believe the good news as the disciples started proclaiming it. Jesus said, "Thomas, you have faith because you have seen Me. Blessed are all those who never see Me and yet they still believe." Ouch! That had to hurt!

But isn't Tomas' reaction natural and a little like ecology issues? It's hard to believe some of the things we hear about how we are affecting the earth. Where is the proof? Can we even understand the proof, much less trust those arguing on any side of an ecology issue? We know we can predict research results by who pays for it.

But it's important for everyone to be honest about how Earth Day conversations affect us and the earth directly. Especially if our income relies on some industry like the oil sands. Or farming, mining, or plastics, or you name it. Or our views of how an economy should work, & our politics, much less a treaty that hasn't been honored. Our personal stake in green issues can blind us, like the people we looked at a few weeks ago who were blind about the man born blind but Jesus healed. (John 9) Especially when they get tied into related issues and our own sense of justice.

What do you imagine the wounds from Jesus' crucifixion may have looked like? Did they look gruesome or was there just a scar? When the disciples' eyes fell upon those wounds, did they feel a stab of pain in their own hearts? Regardless of how outwardly gruesome, it could not have been easy to look upon the wounds of Christ, let alone feel them.

When we really look at the impacts of climate change, the images are painful. It's not just drowning polar bears that break our hearts, although no one likes to see that, but also the struggle of our fellow humans. We see the results of powerful fires that set back peoples financial dreams for years. Recycling now involves international relationships as we try to ship our waste to other countries. And so often companies do not repair the damage they do to the earth. There are places on this earth I will not live near because of the poisoned water and the air around chemical plants and some refineries.

Even something as simple as not taking out the underground tanks of a closed gas station, which resulted in polluting the well water of the houses nearby has longer term expensive consequences. This happened to a sister in law. Nothing gets your attention like smelling benzene coming out of your kitchen sink and shower head.

Anyone buying a house today should check out the flood history in the area. It's so often the poor & non whites who are the most affected by what is going on in this earth. One of the facts that drew lots of amusement in the last major flood in Alberta, is that in Calgary, it was the

mansions of the rich, beside the river that were flooded, not the trailer parks up on ridges.

We all know these stories and debate them. But what is our responsibility God has given us to care for the earth? And it's not just locally but how do our habits affect people far away? What is our moral responsibility of love to neighbours near and far, as well as the earth itself?

I do think we must face the fact that climate change is happening and is human caused. Yes there is natural fluctuation in climate. But there's more consensus among scientists that humans have caused or at least make climate change much worse and more rapidly declining, than there is in the medical field that smoking causes cancer. But regarding smoking and vaping, like always, with any issue, we need to consider who is funding the research.

Unlike Thomas with Jesus, this present-day crisis is not a matter of belief. It's an issue that our faith calls us to address because we have a moral responsibility to confront sources of wounds being felt by our human and natural family. How then do we invite in those who are averting their eyes and hearts from this painful reality? Perhaps the issue isn't just doubt, but a reason to be good caretakers, careful users of our environment no matter what we believe.

In some ways the coronavirus is helping us realize how much humans affect the earth. There is simply less noise pollution. We hear fewer planes and vehicles. Seismometers register a sharp decrease in the vibrations produced by human activity. This is especially true in areas of high population densities. Social distancing is helping scientists who have difficulty picking up less than a 5.5 seismic shift in the earth. But now they can pick up the earth shifting from the other side of the world easier because it's less noisy. In some places it seems the birds are chirping louder – but that's not so. It's because we can hear them better without all the noise humans make.

Earth-observing satellites have detected a significant decrease in the concentration of a common air pollutant, nitrogen dioxide, which enters the atmosphere through emissions from cars, trucks, buses, and power plants around the world – timed to the day an area or a country went into staying at home! According to an analysis by Marshall Burke, a professor in Stanford's Earth-system science department, a pandemic-related reduction in particulate matter in the atmosphere—the deadliest form of air pollution—likely saved the lives of 4,000 young children and 73,000 elderly adults in China over two months this year.

The fish might be experiencing the same things we are as there are fewer ships going about their business. Research has shown that ambient noise from maritime traffic can increase stress-hormone levels in marine creatures, which can affect their reproductive success. Whales have even shown they can adapt to the din, pausing their singing when cargo ships are near and resuming when they move away. And nature is taking back Venice since there are no tourists to pollute the air and water.

(Taken from *The Atlantic – The Pandemic Is Turning the Natural World Upside Down*. By Marina Koren, April 2, 2020 and *The Guardian*)

So I think it's ok to doubt about global warming and climate change and so on. Doubt is a gift to us – that calls us to do our home work, research, and make good use of logic and good science, not science that is prompted to promote a view point to support a business. Always – follow the money. After all, the Apostle Paul urges us, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.” (Phil 2:3)

There are many connections in scripture, direct and indirect about people to people and people to the creation. One example is the Noah story where it's quite clear that God's covenant was established not just with people, but with all of creation. God said to Noah and his sons, “I set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the

covenant between me and the Earth.” (Gen. 9:13) Since we have been given the job of being caretakers of the earth – I think, bottom line, we could be doing a better job.

So it’s our responsibility as followers of Jesus to care for the environment – in all its facets. It makes sense to buy less stuff that gets lost in all our stuff. It makes sense to ban products that are harmful. We need to reduce waste that ends up in rivers, ponds, lakes, and the ocean so we can have clean drinking water as well as keep a comfortable environment for fish and creatures who live in the waters. It doesn’t hurt to work for animals going extinct – especially when they are used for our entertainment and pride.

Jesus calls us to love one another. This isn’t just in how we treat each other but in how our habits affect each other, near and far. I believe this also involves how we treat the earth and its creatures. We are given the responsibility to care for the planet. We are inter-dependent with and for each other – as well as with this planet we live on that gives us food and water.

There are many scriptures like Psalm 148 where nature joins in with praising its creator. So this Earth Day, let’s do more than lip service and our little part like recycling. Keep doubting but go get all the facts on ecology. Let’s stop arguing that we are not affecting the earth, but educate ourselves on what is going on. Let’s make it a life habit of being informed by science about global warming and climate change. Let’s find ways to honor and act on the fact that the Bible tells us, “The earth is the LORD’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.” (Ps 24:1)

To conclude: When Thomas saw the risen Christ he fell on his face and worshipped him saying: My Lord and my God. So too may we help each other to see and believe and act in a just way toward our earth. God our Lord gave us this creation. May we join with the whole earth, as Psalm 148 describes, rejoicing and praising together with nature in honoring and worshipping our Creator.

(Some of the content borrowed from various Web sites and sermons like The Church Effect: Making Every Day Earth Day by Jessica Zimmerle.)