

“Listen to the Land”

A sermon by the Rev. Susie Bjork
Bay Shore Community Congregational Church – April 21, 2024
Earth Day Sunday – Lesson: Job 12:7-12

Creator God, today let us pause in Sabbath rest to take in the beauty of creation and take notice of our place within it. Let us open ourselves to your Spirit that moves where it will through all the universe like a restless wind that animates, inspires, and invigorates all life. Amen.

The Book of Job grapples with many ideas including the complexity of life itself, the character of God as Creator and Sustainer of the universe, and the reality of suffering and mortality. It challenged some of the conventional wisdom of its time – particularly that suffering was somehow the fault of those who suffer. Not so, of course.

As we celebrate Earth Day today, this little piece of Job’s speech in chapter twelve is an interesting one for us to consider: “ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you... In [God’s] hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being.”

God creates, sustains, animates, and holds all life. And all life, all creation, has something to teach, something to proclaim – about life, about this cosmos of which we are a part, about God.

So, what do the animals of the land, the birds of the air, the plants of the earth, the fish of the sea have to say to us? And how shall we listen to this diverse and wondrous land we call home? How shall we listen deeply to the rhythm and voice of creation itself? How do we learn and grow from this deep listening? And how do we respond to the truths they proclaim – the beautiful and the terrible, their joyful choruses as well as their lamentations?

After all, earth’s varied creatures, ecosystems, and habitats experience the fullness of the circle of life, the cycles of birth and death, the joys and successes of daily life, and the challenges of daily survival. Their languages are not our own, but they have stories to share in their own ways. It’s our job to learn their languages and to figure out how to listen.

After all, how we humans have inhabited this planet since the dawn of our species has seriously impacted all non-human life and continues to affect all creation in profound ways. Our stories are tied up with one another. And it is to all our benefit to intentionally bear witness to the stories that nature has to tell and to learn from them.

It dawns on me that in order to listen to nature, we have to spend time with nature. That’s our starting place. I’m sure I’m not alone in noticing that there have been a number of times in my life when I have found myself out in the natural world and experienced moments of awe and wonder at the beauty, power, vastness, complexity, elegance, and persistence of creation. Our planet, our universe, is truly spectacular!

I remember one time at summer camp in Colorado, a group of us slept outside under the stars so we could witness a meteor shower. It was dark and clear and made for a stunning display that didn't disappoint. There were more shooting stars than we could count. And it stirred enough excitement that eventually our counselor had to quiet us down and remind us that we really did need to get some sleep that night. There's nothing quite like a good long look at the night sky to remind us of the expanse of outer space and how tiny we are in comparison.

I found it interesting how excited people got about the recent solar eclipse, many traveling to be in the path of totality. I even heard about a mass eclipse wedding that took place in a park in New Jersey. There's something awe-inspiring about the cycles and activities of the vast cosmos. I think it's right to be excited and moved by such things.

Then there was the time I was out hiking with friends atop a mesa in New Mexico when a thunderstorm rolled in. It was at the end of our hike, and we were sitting around talking when we suddenly noticed that everyone's hair started frizzing out and standing on end because there was so much static electricity in the atmosphere. We scrambled to lower ground as quickly as possible and were lucky that the lightning was still far away. But it was still a little too close for comfort. The lesson I learned that day was of nature's power and my human vulnerability.

I learned that same lesson again when I slammed on my breaks one night while driving home from youth group to avoid a head-on collision with a huge bull elk that was standing in the middle of the road. Fortunately, I stopped with plenty of room to spare. And he just stood there and stared at me blankly. I had to roll down my window and yell at him to get him to move. Maybe he was stunned – a typical deer in the headlights. But I remember thinking his look was more like, “why are you in such a hurry?” That's probably a message I needed to hear too, especially as a teenage driver.

Turns out that New Mexico was kind of a wild place to grow up!

When I was in college, I went on a trip to Alaska for a class called “Wilderness & Spirit.” We camped the entire time and for 24 hours in the middle of the trip, we all spread out across the moss-covered hills and valleys of a stretch of wild tundra for a solo retreat, taking with us only a few necessities. My solo campsite happened to be on the edge of a small pond which, at least for the brief time I was there, was inhabited by one lone duck. That duck and I spent hours together. I sat on the bank and watched it as it swam actively hunting for insects, as it dove down under the surface and I guessed where it would pop back up and shake off its feathers, and as it floated lazily, letting the gentle wind and current carry it where it willed. Just a day in the life of a duck, doing ordinary duck things. But that experience has stuck with me (quite vividly) because it was one of those times when I was intentionally fully present to and fully focused on the life of another creature. And I found great beauty and peace in witnessing it simply going about the business of living. The value of enjoying simplicity and embracing a natural rhythm of activity and rest was one lesson I learned from that duck.

I experienced something similar last summer when I stood on the beach in Kauai and enjoyed watching some snoozing sea turtles. And I was inspired to meet one of their human caretakers who was part of a team of volunteers who were out there every day to place a circle of traffic cones

around the resting turtles to help keep people from encroaching on their territory. She enjoyed talking to people and answering their turtle questions. She knew some of the individual turtles who regularly rested there and could tell who was who by their unique facial scale patterns. I found her devotion to the turtles moving and was reminded again of the value of respecting and embracing the natural rhythms of creation.

Human civilization often tells us produce, produce, produce; consume, consume, consume, which has led us to overproduction and overconsumption. The natural world offers a different approach.

It strikes me that just about everywhere we look there is some creature, some little corner of creation that has something to teach us. We don't have to go very far at all. Our beloved pets, the backyard birds, the flora and fauna that fill our urban ecosphere right here in Long Beach all have stories to tell.

Even the tiniest of microbes can fill us with wonder if we take the time to observe them. When I was in elementary school, I did a science fair project one year entitled, "Can I Grow Microorganisms?" With my dad's help, I filled glass jars with water and plant material and after a few days of decomposition I had several miniature swamps. They probably stunk up the kitchen. But what I remember most is that one tiny drop of homemade pond water revealed a whole protozoa zoo filled with amoebas, paramecia, and more when viewed under a microscope. The answer was yes, I could grow microorganisms – lots of them! And how fascinating it was to take a close look at these miniscule single-celled living creatures.

From microbiology to the furthest reaches of outer space (and everywhere in between), everything that exists has a story to tell and the power to move us to awe and wonder. It is worth our time to take a closer look, to lean in to listen, to step out of our busy lives for a moment and clear our cluttered heads and just observe. We might call this the spiritual discipline of beholding.

Life itself is a miracle and infused with the presence of the Divine. And all creation speaks, and sings, and can teach us about beauty, about survival, about the value of being who we are created to be, about using what we need without taking too much, about slowing down, about the rhythms of work and rest, about the joy of play.

Behold the amoeba, the duck, the thunderstorm, the elk, the sea turtle, any of nature's wonders you've encountered. And when you do, take notice of what it has to say. And give thanks for it.

Our faith proclaims that we are called by our Creator, not to dominate and destroy, but to love, treasure, value, respect, and care for creation. And, as a species, we have to do a better job for the sake of all life on this planet (both human and non-human).

And I think one thing that leads us in the right direction is to make a practice of remembering our interconnectedness and interdependence with all life. We are individuals, yes, but we inhabit a world together and we depend upon one another.

When we ignore this truth, we do so at our own peril. When we ignore our dependence upon the earth itself and its natural resources, we are prone to abuse the earth and exploit and deplete the

very resources upon which we depend. When we ignore our interdependence with all who share this planet with us, we do damage to other people and other creatures and to their homes and habitats (which ultimately harms us too).

We can do better, and we must do better, for the sake of future generations.

I find the theological proclamations of our faith to be sources of inspiration for us in this work.

Our faith proclaims that God is Creator and Sustainer. And our creative, sustaining God is still bringing forth new life as our parent, as a cosmic artist and composer – still creating, still loving, still calling us into deep living and deep relationship. All creation bears God's image and imprint. And all creatures and all creation belong to God.

Our faith proclaims that God is Incarnate. God is embodied in creation itself. God is with us, not removed from this world. God's Spirit is enmeshed and enfleshed in the natural order. And we, God's beloved creatures, bear the love of God to others and share in God's creative power. God is always inviting us into co-creation.

The intimate, covenantal relationship between God our Creator and God's Beloved Creation has always been at the heart of our story of faith. And God is always calling us into deeper relationship with God's very self and with all creation. It's as crucial now as it ever was.

So, let us continue to deepen our relationship with the world around us. Let us practice that spiritual discipline of beholding. And may that which we behold move us to deeper awe, compassion, love, service, and action on behalf of God's beloved creation.

This beautiful, wondrous, and beloved world needs us all to be its ambassadors, advocates, and lovers. It has to be a communal effort. May God guide us where we need to go.

Amen.