

Natalie W. Bell  
 April 21, 2024  
 Earth Sunday

***Earth Care and Abundant Life***  
***Psalm 23:1-2, John 10:7-10***

***Psalm 23:1-2***

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.*

<sup>2</sup> *He makes me lie down in **green pastures**;  
 he leads me beside **still waters**,  
 He restores my soul*

***John 10:7-10***

*So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. <sup>8</sup> All who came before me<sup>[a]</sup> are thieves and bandits, but the sheep did not listen to them. <sup>9</sup> I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture. <sup>10</sup> The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have **life** and have it **abundantly**.*

***Today is Earth Sunday, the Sunday closest to Earth Day—***  
 which is observed on ***April 22<sup>nd</sup>***.

***Earth Day started in 1970***, when groups across both political parties came together in concern for the planet.

*“Groups that had been fighting individually against oil spills, polluting factories and power plants, toxic dumps, pesticides, freeways, the loss of wilderness and the extinction of wildlife united on Earth Day around these shared common values. Earth Day 1970 achieved a rare political alignment, enlisting support from Republicans and Democrats, rich and poor, urban dwellers and farmers, business and labor leaders”.*

***The power of Earth Day was seen right away.***

*“By the end of 1970, the first Earth Day led to the creation of the United States Environmental Protection Agency and the passage of other first-of-their-kind environmental laws, including the National Environmental Education Act, the Occupational Safety and Health Act, and the Clean Air Act.*

*Two years later congress passed the Clean Water Act.”*

Earth Day grew and expanded not only in this country, but by the 1990s, it had spread around the world.

*Earthday.org* has fascinating stories about the history of this movement.

*Presbyterians were quick to adopt an Earth Sunday* into the life of the church, something that had been in the hearts of faithful Christians for decades before 1970.

*Our friends at Lincroft Presbyterian Church took steps* to become a PCUSA Earth Care congregation several years ago. And, now as we merge our two communities into one, *We want to become a PCUSA Earth Care congregation.*

This involves *projects and activities to protect the earth*, in the areas of worship, education, facilities, and outreach. Every year between Jan 1 and February 15<sup>th</sup>, churches can make this pledge and then start the process outlined by the Presbyterian Mission Agency, to make the *local church an even better steward* of God's amazing creation.

*Hopefully we can do this next year, once we are merged*, and we know we can learn a lot from Lincroft about making it happen. *Some of the activities* include reducing the use of plastic and disposable dishes, replacing lights with LED, doing an energy audit, conserving water, recycling, using fair trade food products like coffee, planting native plants and trees in our outdoor space, and more.

*Our verses today from Psalm 23 and John 10 connect us to Earth Sunday* In a very special way. They are talking about the *ABUNDANT LIFE* that Jesus promises, and the desire of God to give us *GREEN PASTURES and still WATERS* in this awesome place called Earth.

Sometimes these verses are used on Good Shepherd Sunday, but what if we thought of these verses *as CARE for us and all of creation?* What if the abundant life God wants for us includes care of the earth?

The PCUSA gets some of their Earth Sunday resources through a larger multi-denominational resource called *Creation Justice Ministries*.

They put out a different theme for each year's observance of Earth Sunday, and this year the 2024 theme is "*Plastic Jesus: Real Faith in a Synthetic World*".

It's all about the need for Christians and churches to **REDUCE the use of plastic, especially single use plastics, like water bottles.**

Why? Because it can take up to 1000 years it can take for plastic to break down in landfills, the actual amount of plastics that are recycled is low, and plastics often end up in our waterways, even ingested by animals and humans through the water and soil.

***Single-use plastics are one of the biggest environmental threats today.***

And as people of faith, we are called to do more.

We too use disposable water bottles, communion cups, and plastic containers.

And these plastics often damage our earth and the creatures in it.

Our waterways take the brunt of it.

We all learned last year about '**cutting the loop**'

with the Sunday school kids' campaign to stop throwing away

the plastic loops that go around soda cans,

because it so often hurts wildlife.

The truth is, our **ocean wildlife** often see plastic as prey, and **they ingest it.**

Or they get caught up in it and entangled near the shore.

***And microplastics, the little plastic particles under 5 millimeters,***

end up in the ocean, or in farmland, polluting the food supply and water.

Research suggests that most adults ingest some of these particles, which can cause cell damage, inflammation, and illness.

We have all heard of "cancer clusters" near plastic plants, or chemical factories, or refineries, and plastics largely come from the chemicals in fossil fuels.

***Recycling plastic bottles is NOT ENOUGH***

Some suggest that less than 14% is actually recycled,

because it takes time, money and energy to properly separate plastics.

But the truth remains: plastic can take 20-1000 years to decompose, depending on the environment and sun exposure.

Recycling is not enough.

***We have to change our habits.***

*Plastic Jesus: Real Faith in a Synthetic World*, creationjustice.org, pg. 3-4

<https://www.creationjustice.org/plasticjesus.html>

And if we want to think about the issue of earth care theologically, we need to consider our shortcomings.

***We need to look at the SINS of idolatry and greed.***

***IDOLATRY*** is when we put something ahead of God, we worship something or someone else.

And often that something else is ***made by human hands***.

What does this mean for us?

***Well, we are all guilty of wanting more “stuff” than what we have.***

We want the newest, best, latest and greatest---of just about everything, right?

***GREED is also something that we ALL struggle with.***

We are greedy—not just for money, but for things.

And today greed for things means having things that don't last very long.

Most items today are planned to be obsolete in just a few years, so that we have to buy them all over again!

***These are SINS that we all deal with—as individuals, and as a community.***

We want the latest and greatest as a church sometimes, too!

And we give into the temptation to use disposable everything.

It's easier, simpler, and we usually do it without even thinking about it.

***But God has a better way for us to live.***

***The way of ABUNDANT LIFE.***

A way that honors the green pastures and still waters that the Good Shepherd wants us to enjoy.

And one way we enter that abundant life is by coming to believe that what we have is enough.

Enough is enough.

***God has provided enough.***

***And we don't always need more—of anything.***

Isn't it interesting that Psalm 23 begins with

***The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want?***

In other words, because God is my caretaker, I have everything I need!

How is that true in ***YOUR LIFE?***  
 How is it true in the ***life of the church?***

***The Apostle Paul was so good at talking about CONTENTMENT.***

In **Philippians 4:11-13**, from his prison cell, Paul writes:

*for I have learned to be content with whatever I have.*

<sup>12</sup> *I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty.*

*In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need.*

<sup>13</sup> *I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*

***This is a powerful statement if we apply it to the care of creation.***

What if we asked ourselves:

How can I be satisfied with what I have?

How can I choose things that last?

How can I fix what I have, instead of throwing everything away?

Can you imagine the changes we could all make?

***Which leads us the idea of repentance.***

This is what Jesus calls us to do when we realize our sin.

In Greek the word for repentance is ***metanoia***,

a word that means to ***change direction***.

***What if we were to change direction, personally, and communally, so that we could better care for the earth?***

What if we were to put people and planet before our own convenience?

What if we were to hold leaders accountable to put people and planet—before profits?

*Plastic Jesus: Real Faith in a Synthetic World*, creationjustice.org, pg. 6-7

<https://www.creationjustice.org/plasticjesus.html>

Can you imagine those changes?

***It's not enough to just recycle, is it?***

We are also called to ***think about the policies and process*** in our world that lead to the harm of God's creation.

As Christ-followers, we are called to work toward the abundant life.

We are called to care for the green pastures and still waters of this earth.

***You know, as Christians we also care about eternal life.***

We believe that God sent his only Son Jesus Christ, that we might have new and eternal life.

***But what about the almost-eternal life of plastic?***

What if the plastic we use takes nearly 1000 years to decompose?

Is that the kind of life-span we want for our garbage?

Is that the legacy we want to leave on this earth?

*Plastic Jesus: Real Faith in a Synthetic World*, creationjustice.org, pg. 6-7.

<https://www.creationjustice.org/plasticjesus.html>

***Unfortunately, we DON'T THINK about these things very often.***

***In fact, much of our idea of abundance is about having more.***

We have confused ***abundance with excess.***

We have confused abundance with convenience and momentary comfort.

Plastic may be more convenient, but what if it's creation and disposal are making the earth less inhabitable?

Is that the abundant life Jesus wants for people on this planet?

***And what about those green pastures and still waters?***

What if the creation and disposal of plastics are polluting those pastures and waters?

What if the cancer alleys in the United States are actually the valleys of the shadow of death?

How do we care for people affected by pollution and plastic?

***And how much do we need to have untouched pastures and waters to truly restore our souls?***

When was the last time you enjoyed pristine green space or water?

What did it mean for your soul?

That's something to consider, isn't it?

***So, what can we do as individuals and as a church, to honor and protect this great creation?***

We can ***think*** about what we are ***DOING***,

what we are ***USING***,

and what we are ***THROWING*** away.

*We can **REDUCE** overall waste.*

We can **REDUCE** our use of single-use plastic.

We can **RECYCLE** when we do use it.

We can take time to **CLEAN UP** our communities and our beaches and waterways.

We can **URGE our leaders** to support policies that protect the earth.

***ALL of this helps us to enjoy God's green pastures and still waters.***

All of it helps us to understand,

and enjoy the ***abundant life*** that Jesus wants for us.

***Friends, believe the GOOD NEWS of the Gospel today.***

God has given us an amazing creation,  
the gift of this earth, and all that is within it.

***So, how will we care for it?***

May we honor it, as God's own,

May we live in it, as God's beloved children.

And may we be good and wise stewards of all that has been entrusted to us.

For this gift, all God's people said, Amen.