

WE CHOOSE HOPE: HOPE FOR THE EARTH

Genesis 1

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God saw how good it was. How good it was to have earth and sky, light and darkness. Plants yielding seeds and fruit trees bearing fruit – God saw how good it was. The great sea animals and all the winged birds. Every kind of wild life. Every kind of livestock. God saw how good it was. God saw everything that had been made, and it was supremely good.

For seven years, from the time I was 6 until the time I was 13, I lived in a small town in southeast Kansas. Most summer vacations, we would drive west to Colorado. If you've ever driven across Kansas, you can picture it. A never-ending checkerboard pattern, corn fields and wheat fields. There's a beauty to the farmland, especially when the wind catches the grain, and it looks as if the wheat is performing a choreographed dance. It's mostly flat, but occasionally you drive over a swell and you feel as if you can see the whole state spread out in front of you. But the best was still to come. After we crossed the border from Kansas into Colorado, my eyes would not leave the window. I wanted to be the first one to spot the foothills. To me, the mountains were magical, spiritual really. They still are. That place touched me in ways I yet do not understand.

When I was 13, we moved to Indianapolis and we started going different places on summer vacation. I wouldn't see the Rocky Mountains again until I backpacked there with friends when I was 18, but every spring, I would have a

dream that I was on my way, that I was looking for the foothills, that I was hiking in the mountains.

I'm sure there are places like that for you. I hope there are. Places where you feel close to God, places that speak to you deep within your soul. Some people are drawn to the ocean, to the sound of the waves, to walks on the beach. Maybe you have a place you've gone to for years, or for decades. A cabin in the woods or a beach house. Or maybe it's your own back yard with bird feeders and flowers carefully tended.

It is these places in nature that inspire us to want to care for the earth. Not only these places, but the stories...the evidence...the statistics about global warming, the incidents of natural disasters, more devastating and more frequent. The stories come at us fast and furious – the Amazon is burning, species are becoming extinct. These stories tug at us.

But perhaps nothing motivates us to action more than thinking of the next generation, and the one after that. When I sit at my desk in the morning, praying and writing, I sometimes wonder -- I think we all have these thoughts from time to time – what will future generations have to say about us? Are we taking seriously the environmental threats and doing everything within our power to make a difference for good? Or are we living as we always have and just hoping for the best?

Our choir sings an anthem with these words, “May all who come behind us find us faithful.”

If we wanted to talk about all of the problems plaguing God's beautiful earth, we could be here until next Sunday. If we wanted to point fingers and find people to blame, if we wanted to decide which country is the worst polluter, if we wanted to debate political solutions, we could turn the peace of this sanctuary into a shouting match.

But we are here to talk about hope. It is important to say what hope is not: it is not the belief that everything was, is or will be fine. Hope takes seriously the challenges in front of us but then, hope says, "The future is unknown and in that uncertainty there is room to act."

The biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann, who has preached from this pulpit, reminds us that "memory produces hope." We remember the great movements towards justice that have created change. We remember all of the ways in which life has improved, because people have cared enough to get involved.

If we allow ourselves to believe that the earth is too far gone, that nothing we do will have a positive impact, we will sink into either despair or apathy. Frankly, that's not a choice followers of Jesus are allowed to make. Nor is it any way to live. Even Bill McKibben, one of the foremost climate change scholars, finds reasons for hope. He says that climate change cannot be stopped, but it can be slowed and its most disastrous effects can be mitigated.

So here are some signs of hope:

According to NASA researchers and satellite photographs, the world is literally a greener place than it was 20 years ago, largely because China has made

an effort to conserve and expand forests. We know that as trees grow, they help stop climate change by removing carbon dioxide from the air, storing carbon in the trees and soil, and releasing oxygen into the atmosphere. On July 29 of this year, citizens of Ethiopia planted 350 million trees in 12 hours. They chose hope.

Renewable energy is thriving. Clean energy technologies have now become so cost effective that they will replace fossil fuels as the main source of energy within the next 20 years. Already, five states—California, Nevada, Hawaii, Massachusetts, and Vermont—generate 10 percent or more of their energy from solar energy. More than 100 cities and counties across the country have committed to transitioning to 100 percent clean energy. Germany produced enough renewable energy in the first half of 2018 to power every household in the country for a year. In many places, it's now cheaper to build and run new wind and solar farms than to run existing coal plants.

These signs of hope are human-made. They are the direct result of people deciding to make changes NOW to lessen the effects of climate change.

What can each of us do to make a difference?

Here are some simple and recommended ideas:

(Show infographic:

<https://aamboceanservice.blob.core.windows.net/oceanservice-prod/ocean/earthday-infographic.pdf>)

If we believe we can make a difference, why wouldn't we do everything possible to leave the world better for the next generation? Small changes, one

by one, in our daily lifestyle make a difference. Our behavior can positively affect the behavior of the people around us.

Here's how one person puts it: "You can argue all day about whether one person not using straws or eating less meat makes a global difference. The point is the mindset. We need to change our thinking from this idea that the earth is a bottomless pit of resources and start acting like what we do matters. Changing the philosophy of cultures and societies starts with individuals changing their own hearts and minds. That's the importance of grassroots action. It's not that my composting will empty landfills, but rather: my changed mind and heart may influence others, and that could spread and change the world."

How can we say we love God and not love the gift God has given us?

Debie Thomas works in a church in California, but her parents and grandparents are from India. While I was going on summer vacation to Colorado, she was going to South India. Both of her grandfathers were farmers as well as preachers. During her childhood visits, she'd follow her grandparents around as they worked with their crops and animals. She saw them preaching and sowing, praying and harvesting, stewarding creation with one hand as they fed God's flock with the other. Working gently with the soil, water, trees and animals held no political meaning for them. Stewardship of the earth was the holy air they breathed.

From them, she learned that the earth is a sacred place. She writes this, "Isn't the earth given to us to teach us what home is?" "God is everywhere in God's good creation...whether I am wading in a lake or hiking in a forest or ad-

miring a thousand-year-old redwood tree, I remember that I am on holy ground, glimpsing the face of God.”

Many of us experience our deepest sense of communion when we are in those places most special to us. In the creation story in Genesis, we are given the job of serving as stewards - caretakers of all that God has created. So every time we choose to live in a way that helps rather than harms the earth, we are engaging in a spiritual practice. Every small act - carrying your own reusable bags, refusing to use a plastic straw, combining all your errands into one instead of driving your car five times — each small act adds up. Your example is noticed by other people. The more you do, the more you want to do. When you intentionally choose to act in ways that lessen the damage we’re doing to this precious planet, it shapes who you are.

This summer, I read the novel entitled, Overstory. It won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction this year and it is a book about trees, about the spiritual impact trees have on human beings, and about the damage human beings are doing to trees. I was so inspired by the book that I immediately made a donation to the Nature Conservancy. C.J. and I are planning an adult field trip sometime this year to the Holden Arboretum and we are considering inviting everyone in the church to plant a tree as part of our upcoming 125th anniversary celebration.

For God saw how good it all was...

Let us pray. Holy God, everywhere is holy ground, for your fingerprints are on all that has been created. Help us to act with both love and urgency. For the sake of all that you are. Amen.