

## **Earth's Care in Human Hands**

*Script for New Year's Day Sermon by the Rev. Douglas Clark, January 1, 2017  
First Congregational Church of Haddam, 10:30 a.m. Communion by Intinction*

### **Scripture Reading: *Psalm 8 (NRSV)***

O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.

Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger.

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established;

what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?

Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.

You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet,

all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,

the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

### **Scripture Reading: *Psalm 8 (revised & adapted by Douglas Clark)***

O HOLY ONE, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!...

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established;

who are we human beings that you are mindful of us, mortals that you care for us?

Yet you have made us in your image and likeness, and crowned us with intelligence and conscience.

You have given us stewardship over the works of your hands; you have set us here to till your garden and keep it,

to care for all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,

the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

O HOLY ONE, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!



Fifty years ago, in a widely read essay, historian Lynn White Jr. argued that “Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt” for the environmental crisis. He claimed in this 1967 essay that the biblical mandate for human beings to “fill the earth and subdue it,” to exercise “dominion” over all creation, became a license for Western colonial powers to exploit the natural world and plunder its resources.

Many Christians in the past half-century have become increasingly aware of the damage to Planet Earth caused by unrestrained dominion over the resources of the natural world. Many Christians are returning to a proverb that originated in times of scarcity: Use it up, wear it out, make it do, do without. Congregations and individual Christians are looking to lead greener lives.

Fifty years later, we face another environmental crisis, for which at least some forms of Christianity bear a heavy burden of guilt. It's called climate change denial, and it's popular among self-identified evangelical Christians.

There is an overwhelming scientific consensus that global warming is real. There is an overwhelming scientific consensus that global warming is caused by human activity (mostly the extraction and transportation and refining and burning of fossil fuels). There is an overwhelming scientific consensus that anthropogenic climate change poses a serious threat to the current and future well-being of Planet Earth. [Katharine Hayhoe](#), who is an evangelical Christian and a climate scientist, is working hard to change the hearts and minds of her fellow Christians, to convince them that human beings are responsible for global warming, and that we still have time to do something about it.

And yet, in spite of the work of Katharine Hayhoe and other Christian scientists, many evangelical Christians continue to deny this overwhelming scientific consensus. The incoming presidential administration, along with its allies in Congress, seems to have rejected this overwhelming scientific consensus. In our post-truth world, a senator from Oklahoma, after a major snowstorm in the nation's capital, could take the floor of the Senate holding a snowball as “proof” that global warming is a hoax.

Among many Christians, there is a theological consensus that views our human place in creation, not through the lenses of domination and exploitation, but through the lenses of conservation and cultivation. We have come to understand that earth's care is in human hands. We human beings are to serve as caretakers of creation, not as conquerors or exploiters of creation. Here are some thoughts about this theological consensus, and how we can be more actively involved in this consensus.

It has been said, particularly in Celtic spirituality, that God reveals Godself to us through two “books” which we need to read lovingly and carefully: the book of scripture and the book of nature. The poet Emily Dickinson was well-schooled in scripture and indoor religious ritual as a child and an adolescent. But as she matured, she found her spirituality much more in the book of nature than in the book of scripture. Here’s one example, from about 1862:

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church --  
I keep it, staying at Home --  
With a Bobolink for a Chorister --  
And an Orchard, for a Dome --

Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice --  
I just wear my Wings --  
And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,  
Our little Sexton -- sings.

God preaches, a noted Clergyman --  
And the sermon is never long,  
So instead of getting to Heaven, at last --  
I'm going, all along.

Wendell Berry is a poet, essayist, and farmer. Here's [his perspective](#) on the complementarity of the books of scripture and nature. He writes: “I don't think it is enough appreciated how much an outdoor book the Bible is. It is a hypaethral book, such as Thoreau talked about--a book open to the sky. It is best read and understood outdoors, and the farther outdoors the better. Or that has been my experience of it. Passages that within walls seem improbable or incredible, outdoors seem merely natural. That is because outdoors we are confronted everywhere with wonders; we see that the miraculous is not extraordinary, but the common mode of existence. It is our daily bread.

“Whoever really has considered the lilies of the field or the birds of the air, and pondered the improbability of their existence in this warm world within the cold and empty stellar distances, will hardly balk at the [turning] of water into wine--which was, after all, a very small miracle. We forget the greater and still continuing miracle by which water (with soil and sunlight) is [turned] into grapes.”

To read the book of nature as a sacred text is to be open to the possibility of experiencing profound “religious affections” or emotions, such as awe, wonder, dependence, gratitude, humility. This is especially so if we understand our complex humanness as part of nature, not separate from nature.

Whether we read the book of scripture or the book of nature, one thing we're looking for is a sense of our place in the great scheme of things. As persons of faith, our question is like that of the psalmist: Who are we, O God, that you are mindful of us? Who are we, O God, that you should care for us? Have you put us on this earth so that we can exercise dominion over all living things? Have you put us on this earth as in a garden, to till it and to keep it?

Emily Dickinson and Wendell Berry and many others have suggested that when we read the book of scripture and the book of nature in companionship with each other, we have a different view of our human place in God's creation: we come to understand that God is the maker and owner of the garden, and we are the caretakers of this amazing garden. With the aid of technology we can see the Earth, our home planet, from a distance of 23,000 miles. How can we not be humbled and grateful that God has put us on this Earth, this beautiful shining jewel in the bleak emptiness of space, to till it and to keep it?

As I read the book of scripture in one hand and the book of nature in the other hand, I am persuaded, along with Wendell Berry, that maple trees are miraculous. I am persuaded that, yes, we humans are made of humus, of earth and breath, and when it comes to our place in nature, God has given us both the privilege and the responsibility of caring for our home planet. As caretakers of this shining jewel, we are called to lifestyles of cultivation and conservation. To cultivate the garden so that all are fed. To set aside and preserve the wilderness, for "in wildness is the preservation of the world."

I do not know—none of us knows—what our stewardship of creation will look like fifty years from now. I am concerned about the influence of climate change denying evangelical Christians on public policy. I am troubled about what our stewardship of creation will look like in the next four years.

It's not all doom and gloom, however. [Consider this](#): "the conservative Texas city of Georgetown, in the heart of oil country, has become one of the largest cities in America to receive 100 percent of its energy from renewable sources. Thanks to renewable energy projects like the one in Georgetown, 2016 will also be remembered as the year greenhouse gas emissions plateaued—even as global economic output continued to grow."

Through a renewed contemplation of creation, we Christians can discern God's loving paths for us in the midst of our deep anxieties about our economic and environmental well-being. In the words of the renowned American conservationist Aldo Leopold, "When we see [Earth] as a community to which we belong, [rather than as a commodity belonging to us], we may begin to [care for] it with love and respect." Earth's care is indeed in our human hands.

The courageous Native Americans and their allies who stood their ground at Standing Rock have shown us that land and water are not commodities that belong to us, but rather essential elements of a global community to which we all belong. When we see land and water as resources to be used with care and safeguarded for future generations, we will rediscover our true place in the great scheme of things. In the sacred setting of nature, as Emily Dickinson realized,

God preaches, a noted Clergywoman—  
And the sermon is never long,  
So instead of getting to heaven, at last—  
We're going, all along.