

To Heal the Earth

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD September 29, 2024

My husband Eric and I were traversing a path in a remote area in Pennsylvania, an overrun and rugged path not often traveled yet filled with wonder and awe. We walked past towering trees, branches reaching to the sky and grasping on to dark green, life-giving leaves. We heard the water bubbling around large rocks in the creek alongside us, the light blue sky filled with cotton-like clouds. Nature is sacred to me, and on this day all that is sacred and holy permeated the trees and the rocks and the clouds, reaching out to me directly. I felt the holy fill my heart and soul as I paused in a moment imbued with God and divine awe. It was one of the most sacred moments I have ever encountered.

Imbued with all that was holy and sacred, along with the raw beauty of the natural world, this trail was idyllic. And yet, through the actions of our fellow human beings, this land – the land of mountains and valleys and forests, which do not simply offer awe and wonder but create and sustains all life – this land is being destroyed and we are spiraling into crisis. We are in a climate crisis. Hurricanes, always destructive, are now growing in strength. We've seen this in the news this very week. Droughts and heat waves disturb survival, especially for those on the outskirts of our world. Wildfires increase in intensity and destruction; growing seasons are thrown into disarray. Burning fossil fuels excessively and in myriad ways – we are tearing the world apart at the seams. Where is God here? That entity of many names? Prayers alongside devastating fires and droughts become desperate acts of petition – save me, save my livelihood, my family, save my world. I believe that God is mourning alongside us, without the power to directly intervene.

What do we gain when we engage deeply with the natural world? How does she enrich our lives and teach us necessary lessons? Water, soft in appearance, teaches patience as we see her slowly yet surely carving rock. Sunsets teach us the importance of finding awe in the seemingly mundane. Flowers teach us that beauty is expressed in myriad ways. Likewise, nature sustains

us. Trees offer us the literal breath of life. Water that flows in tranquil lakes and cascading waterfalls hydrates our very beings. Vegetables, fruits, grains, legumes – this sustenance makes life possible. Trees, water, crops – we need these to survive. And yet we are destroying them. Why?

Let us explore our roots. Our nation was founded on Christianity. While the faith offers profound and much needed morality, love, inspiration, meaning making, and calls towards justice, it can also offer destruction. I quote Genesis 1:26 “Then God said, ‘Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’”¹ I offer an interpretation of this scripture. That it is a divinely sanctioned ownership of all the natural world. That it is a divinely sanctioned superiority that dictates our relationship with the earth today. We believe we own the fish, we own the sea, we own the birds and the cattle and the creeping things. And this has permeated today’s culture. We do not live in reciprocity; we live in a system of supremacy and dominance. The earth becomes easy to destroy because harmony is not part of this narrative. Burning fossil fuels in abundance, engaging in deforestation, practicing unsustainable farming – this becomes our right. We are owners of the natural world, and as such we can utilize it as we please. I note – this destruction is not only prevalent among predominantly Christian nations, nor is this interpretation of this verse shared by all Christian theologians. But I argue it has a direct impact on the people of our culture to this day. I pause in necessary reflection: The earth does not belong to us. We belong to the earth. We are born of the blood that ran through the dinosaurs, the water in which all of life began.

I want to juxtapose ideas of dominion with indigenous ideas of interconnectedness. First Nations peoples, the Inuit, and later Metis people, saw and see the earth as their mother, and as such treat her with respect and reverence. There is that interconnectedness, an intertwining web of stewardship and gratitude. Thank you, sacred mother of all life, for these blessed trees

¹ Genesis 1:26 NRSV

of brown and green and orange. Thank you, great mystery, for the water that sustains us, the fruits that feed us, the flowers of violet and pink and deep, dark yellow that offer joy, the clouds above that stir the imagination. And this is deeply interwoven with stewardship. They are called – it becomes their duty – to tend to this earth, to protect this earth, to sustain this earth and her resources and all the blessed lives of vegetation, mammals, invertebrates, and insects alike. They understand that they are all kindred beings, born of the same great mother – ants, redwoods, spiders– sacred and holy.² What world would we live in today if we were not taught dominion, but stewardship and gratitude? What would it be? What can it be? How can we bring this mindset to those perpetuating the destruction around us, and teach these ideals to future generations? It begins with the small – conversations. Education. Implementation. But ideas can grow and thrive.

In the upper right corner of the door to our church office appeared an intricate and meticulously patterned spider web. While I admit I am terrified of spiders, the beauty of the web intrigued me. I noticed that every strand was needed to support the others. After days of greeting the web each morning, it was inexplicably destroyed. No longer working in harmony, the web ceased to remain a life-give refuge for the spider.

May we think of our own web of life and how this expression of our faith can help heal the world, just as it helps us understand the detriments of the world. We are all interconnected in sacred, blessed ways, just as each strand on that web outside the office door sustained the spider. And we are in a climate crisis, which can disturb and fracture this thread through death and destruction. Each act reverberates through this expansive web, touching those of whom we love dearly and those of whom we will never meet. This inherent connectedness of our faith is apparent on a global level. The abundance of fossil fuels we unnecessarily use creates heat waves well beyond the boundaries of our country, making the homelands for many – primarily the poor and oppressed – uninhabitable. By generating power, we perpetuate vast forest fires that engulf entire towns and cities across the world. Mass manufacturing as well as travel

² “Learning with the Natural World” www.firstnationspedagogy.com

displaces thousands of people spanning the earth as hurricanes destroy life and infrastructure along the coast and overwhelm entire islands. One thing we do affects countless lives around us, even if we are not – yet – directly impacted. Our siblings and our Earth are – in detrimental ways. And yet this is not a death sentence – each act of healing this blessed planet is felt by all as well, making a beautiful earth that sustains and fulfills all life. This is how our web saves us. Promoting sustainable farming, relying on renewable energy. It is not beyond our grasp – if we quickly engage in life-saving actions. Interconnectedness - We help one another and the world heal. The threads of this web weave us together in intimate ways with the generations to come. We do not want to hand subsequent generations a broken, ailing, failing planet – we want to offer them beauty and abundance and imbue them with ideas of life-giving stewardship and gratitude.

I want to guide us towards a place of hope, for hope is not unfounded, but necessary, especially when we are tempted to fall into despair. We, humanity, are resilient and we are resourceful and making change is within our grasp. We, humanity, are responsible and hardworking, and we are inherently good and drawn towards love – a love that can drive us to heal an aching world. And let us not take for granted the strength and perseverance inherent to the natural world – the resiliency of the great mother of all life. So may we weave hope into each of our days. May we weave our love of all natural and living things – of the earth herself – into each of our days. We can eat less meat and we can travel less or use public transit or use electric alternatives. We can use renewable energy or use less energy at home. Likewise, we can work to make structural changes. We can contact politicians and we can vote in every election, choosing candidates who run on platforms of addressing the climate crisis. Jim is guiding us through this. We can teach the children of the world what it means to live with gratitude and stewardship towards the earth and we can truly embody this. Healing is within our grasp – so let us make hope a verb, let us make love a verb, and engage in this sacred and necessary work.

I pray and I meditate that the God of the trees and the streams and the wind touch the souls of each blessed being, each sacred creature, just as I was blessed on that life-altering hike through

the woods. I pray and I meditate that gratitude and stewardship become more powerful than dominion. I pray that despair be met with hope, and that this hope guides us from detriment to healing. I pray and I meditate that prayers of petition for natural crises can lessen as the world recovers. I pray and I meditate that Earth will always remain creator and sustainer of life. I pray and I meditate that we heal. That we change. That our world may flourish once again.

May it be so, and Amen.