

Sermon: Our Weight Upon the Earth
Scripture: Rev. 21:1-6; John 13:31-35
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
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One morning a couple of years ago when we were living in the parsonage of the church I used to serve in Vermont, I looked out of our front windows, down the grassy hill to Church Hill Rd. and there on the side was a large deer lying in our lawn. On closer inspection, I realized it was dead, having been hit by a car at some point during the night, and experienced a violent death. I was amazed that we hadn't heard it from our house. But what struck me as I stood there looking down at her twisted neck and empty eyes, is how heavily and frenetically we human beings tread upon this earth and how dangerous and deadly we can be to everything around us as a result. Each day we get into these 2000 pound metal containers that hurtle across the ground at 20, 60, sometimes 80 miles an hour. And even if we are the most peace-loving people, nonviolent in all our ways, if anything – human or creaturely - were to step suddenly into our path it would be terribly and violently destroyed. I can't think about that much until something like a mangled deer on the front lawn forces me to become fully conscious. Then I'm reminded of how heavily we humans move upon this earth.

The other time this comes to mind for me these days in Winchester is at the "transfer station", otherwise known as the dump. I do appreciate the recycling, composting and sharing that goes on there, but as I hoist these bulging plastic bags and dump containers of plastics, cardboard and glass into the various dumpsters, I mean, "transference repositories", I'm struck that although we are one little family of 5 people we produce an astounding amount of garbage. Even with all the recycling and composting we do, we throw away so much stuff I can't even imagine where it all comes from... and I certainly can't ponder for long at least where it all goes, cause it is a burdensome thought. As the trash bags slam to the bottom of the dumpster and the conveyor belt moves my trash along with all my neighbors' trash to who knows where on this land eventually, outta sight outta mind, I get back into my machine that burns fossil fuels formed for millions of years deep in the earth to whisk me to my next errand and I am convicted of heart by how heavily we live and move upon this earth.

And then if I'm in that state of mind it is not a good time to go to the grocery store, cause I there is a disturbing collection of processed and transported food and food-like items, the production of which weighs very heavily upon the earth. Take something as simple and innocent as strawberries which I like to eat all year long and you gotta keep just this side of unconscious about what is involved in bringing me those little gems. It would be interesting and likely disturbing, wouldn't it, if along with that little table that tells us the calories and health information on a product there was a table that indicated the ecological footprint of various foods that we eat? Kathleen and Health Ministries will be downstairs in Chidley Hall after the service with some of that information, but suffice it to say that it can be a disturbing practice to consider, really consider, how heavily we live and move and have our being upon this earth.

I'm not trying to make you feel guilty... Ok, I guess I am trying to make you feel guilty, cause traditionally that has been our starting place for Christian theology, our human guilt. At the center of our religious faith is the cross, which is not a symbol of the Roman Empire's guilt or the guilt of the Jewish leaders who crucified Jesus, as much as that has been an interpretation of it over the years, but the cross is a symbol of human guilt generally and because we are human and participate in human systems, it is a symbol of our own guilt specifically. If we cannot consider our own guilt, our own participation in systems of sin, evil and violence then we cannot do Christian theology. If we are always and only pointing out there to the evil others – be they the Jews or the Muslims or the terrorists or the immigrants – as the problem then we are forsaking our commitment to the Christian Gospel, for the Christian Gospel requires that we all start on the same page of our own individual and corporate guilt in the sins of the world. And in this day and age, in our current ecological crisis, that starting point for Christian theology suddenly takes on a new and renewed relevance for our earth community.

We are still within the Easter season here and our scriptures continue to hold before our weekly worship, the resurrection of Jesus and the beginning of the renewal of all creation. John of Patmos has God say in the last book of our Bible, Revelation, “see, I will make all things new. I will wipe away every tear and there will be no more death, mourning or pain for the old order of things will pass away.” And this is the culmination, the denouement, of the entire story that began in Genesis with the mythical account of the beginning of creation, where as it is told, something pretty quickly went awry. That

something is described as a sort of human disobedience or rebellion against God that had consequences for all creation. And while it is not necessary or appropriate to accept the creation story in Genesis as scientifically factual, it is hard to deny that the writers of it were plugged into the truth nonetheless. Here we are all these millennia later suffering the consequences of this separation of the human being from the earth's natural processes and balances. We are the earth ourselves with the special gift of consciousness and yet we tragically have come to see ourselves as aliens here, set upon the earth but separate from the earth and destined for somewhere else.

This, the book of Genesis captures in the little story of Adam and Eve eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which is how they depict this human predicament of feeling not a part of the earth but alienated from it and at odds against it. We went from the lightness of living organically and naturally within the flow of the earth's eco-system in the Garden of Eden, to the heaviness of toiling upon the earth, and by the sweat of our brow, struggling for survival.

And the whole journey through our scriptures, is one long journey to come BACK into *natural* relationship with God and therefore with the earth and our *natural* place therein. This is what all the strangely detailed laws within the Hebrew scripture are fundamentally about. The laws of Leviticus and Deuteronomy offered very clear restrictions, boundaries and regulations, from what to eat and what to wear to how to organize your work days and interact with one another and all sorts of other details in between. But all the laws were about getting the human back on track since the relationship with God, one another and the natural world had become so skewed. Sometimes the Judeo-Christian tradition gets a bad rap for provoking a domination-over-nature mentality but to read the Hebrew scripture accurately is to find just the opposite. It wasn't until the Jewish tradition and the Jewish followers of the Jewish Christ met Rome in all its triumphalism and Greek philosophy that taught the corrupt nature of matter and the pure nature of spirit that you could say the Judeo-Christian tradition became tainted with a domination mentality which has then led us into a relationship with the natural world that thousands of years later has reached a crisis point.

Jewish law actually sought to maintain stop-gaps around the human tendency towards domination of the earth and it centered around the sacred number 7. So for instance there was a requirement for a resting period every 7th day. This Sabbath day was

to be a rest not only for workers of the land and beasts of burden that helped work the land but also for the land itself. And then every 7 years the law required that the land was to lay fallow and that after every 49 years there was to be a jubilee when all land was to be returned to the original owner. These measures kept the Jews from over-producing and burning out the land and it made it impossible for one person or family to amass too much land and wealth leaving others destitute. Really it was a remarkable system that also made the building of an empire next to impossible and left the Jews vulnerable to being dominated by the massive empires around them who had no such laws of balance and respect in relation to the earth.

As the story goes along though we witness the Jews having varying degrees of success with sticking to the program, otherwise known as “the covenant” with God. And so there came a time when prophets, who were the ones constantly calling the Jews towards better, more honest and faithful relationship with God, each other and the earth, proclaimed that God was going to have to take another dramatic step in order to encourage us human beings back into right relationships. This step, it was proclaimed, would involve a Messiah figure who would so convict the human heart and write the laws of God and of right living into the very flesh of the human being so that once again, as naturally as it occurred in the Garden of Eden, the human would live in right relationship with all things. The Jews are still waiting for this Messiah to come but we Christians say that he came at the turn of the first millennia in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. We believe that his teachings, his death, his resurrection, and the sending of his Holy Spirit, was what began a process that will eventually bring the human being back into that right relationships that are centered NOT upon exploitation and domination but loving attentiveness and care. Jesus says in the Gospel of John not “go forth and dominate the world, conquer nations, take what is yours, consume all the resources you want upon this earth... but rather, quite simply: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

The human fall and the undoing of creation began with a tree in the Garden of Eden and the eating of the fruit that gave KNOWLEDGE and it reaches its heaviest nadir at another tree in the desert garden of Golgotha, where the fruit of that cross-tree was LOVE. And it was from that point that the rising and redoing of creation began. The

weight of the cross gives way to the lightness of the resurrection. Jesus the first born of the new creation, is not spirit alone as we often mistakenly conceive, but renewed glorified materiality and he begins God's project of the renewal.

That's salvation history in a nutshell, right there. And so how do we enter into it and make it impactful, meaningful, for our own lives? Well, as I explained at the beginning, we (1) begin by confession, by acknowledging our own complicity with how skewed and knocked asunder things are. Then we (2) recognize and admit how we cannot save ourselves and how often our attempts to do so create even greater problems and we (3) repent which means we turn away from ourselves and our needs as the focal point of our lives and we turn towards the Creator and the needs of the world as the focal point for what we do. That turning, from a Christian perspective, is facilitated best by an intimate and personal relationship with the forgiving victim, Jesus Christ. It is through him that we come most fully and deeply into this transformative relationship with the Creator. From a Winchesterian perspective, we might say that the church is our Transfer Station where we come with our sin and the heaviness with which we live upon this earth and in relationship to one another, and we receive the forgiveness and love of Jesus and our load is lightened and ideally we are empowered to alter our life-scape and in altering our life-scape we necessarily alter the land-scale around us as well, not out of guilt and shame but out of love, love for our Creator and gratitude for the love we have received. And let us not limit our love of neighbor to only the human ones but also see our earth as a mother to love, the animals around us as sisters and brothers, the atmosphere that sustains us as our relative, even the rocks as our neighbors. In the days to come, let us simply slow down and lighten up upon this earth and live with a renewed intention and a renewed gratitude for this remarkable creation of which we are a part in Jesus name, Amen.

May you go forth under the strength of heaven, under the light of sun and the radiance of moon; may you go forth with the splendor of fire and the fertility of earth; go with the lightness of wind and the depth of the sea, go forth with the stability of rock and the unfolding of all life and may you be surrounded and encircled with the presence of God today and forever, amen.