

A sermon preached at Zion Episcopal Church
Rogation Sunday
May 14, 2023
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In times when life was more connected to the land, Rogation Days were observed by the “beating of the bounds” processions in which priest and congregation walked the perimeter of the parish, blessing the fields before the planting. Rogation Processions were held mid-week each Spring over a period of four days. The Sixth Sunday after Easter and the Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday before Ascension were known as Rogation Days.

The Latin verb ‘rogare,’ from which we get the word rogation, means to ask, referring to that Sunday’s Gospel passage in which was heard, “Ask and ye shall receive.” Or from the modern lectionary, God will give you whatever you ask in my name.” Rogation Days were widely observed in northern Europe since the 5th century as a time to ask for God’s mercy and blessings on the earth. These days, we give God thanks for all creation and ask God’s blessing on all growing things whole and this whole fragile earth, our island home. We also ask God’s forgiveness for our failure to be good stewards of the earth and all creation.

Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk and social activist found inspiration in the natural world. He wrote, “The forms and individual characters of living and growing things, of inanimate beings, of animals and flowers and all nature, constitute their holiness in the sight of God. The pale flowers of the dogwood outside this window are saints. The little flowers that nobody notices on the side of the road are saints -looking up into the face of God. The lakes hidden among the hills are saints, and the sea too is a saint who praises God without interruption in her majestic dance.” We are called to protect these saints, because although the earth is in our care for a little while, it belongs to God.

St. Francis of Assisi did not regard himself as a steward or protector of the natural world. The elements, animals, and plants he encountered were his brothers and sisters. They were valuable, not for what they could provide to humankind, not for any economic value, but because they were of God.

Living this way, in regards to creation, we can truly fulfill what Jesus has asked of us, to love our neighbors as ourselves and to “love one another as I have loved you.” Not just love the neighbors we see, but those neighbors we do not see and those who will live on this planet after we are gone. And not just our human neighbors, but all our fellow creatures, our brothers and sisters of God.

So where does this leave us today? The complexity and enormity of the problems facing our environment can feel overwhelming. It can be easy to feel small and powerless in the face of this issue and be tempted to give in to despair.

Julian of Norwich in the 12 century was amazed at how life can exist at all and wondered at the fragility and resiliency of life. The answer came for her in a vision, which was written down as one of what she called the “showings” from God. Here are her words: “God showed me in my palm a little thing round as a ball about the size of a hazelnut. I looked at it with the eye of my understanding and asked myself, “What is this thing?” And I was answered, “It is everything that is created.” I wondered how it could survive since it seemed so little it could suddenly disintegrate into nothing. The answer came: “It endures and ever will endure because God loves it.” And so everything has being because of God.”

Did you notice? The fragile thing the size of a hazelnut was in HER hand. God has given into our hands the creation, everything that lives and that God loves. What are we to do with all that God loves? We must be Christ’s hands in the world. We hold in our hands the future of this planet. There is much we can do individually and collectively as advocates and stewards of creation. It is in our hands. God is calling us to love all which God loves and has called into existence.

On this Rogation Day, beyond asking God to bless this earth and all creation, Let us remember that we too, are a part of God’s creation, and ask God to bless and transform our hearts, to heal us from the madness of materialism that threatens the world, and to remind us that we have been chosen by God

to go and bear fruit that will last.

I'll close with a prayer adapted from Edward Hays: How glorious, O God, is the universe that you have made. Your ever-creating love encompasses all. You are both far and near. You are as close to us as the air we breathe and the nightingale chanting in the meadow. To reach the nearest star would take several lifetimes, so vast is the distance which separates us. Your act of creation continues as new stars are born amidst a whirl of dust and gases, exploding in an ecstasy of light. Encompass us in your presence as we pray in your holy name. Amen.