



World Environment Day



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Worship Resource



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‘Only One Earth’

(A reflection for Pentecost Sunday and World Environment Day, June 5, 2022)

Psalm 104: 24-35, Romans 8: 14-25)

Gordon Scantlebury

One of the most beautiful windows into experiencing the Spirit of God is through the life of the natural world all around, of which we are a part.

As the Psalmist sings, “O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.”

(Ps 104: 24)

Now, a window to God’s Spirit may be found in the urban landscape, for sure. Yet it is as we find ourselves in those less modified vistas of the environment: walking a lonely beach, wandering a forest, or in the midst of the desert outback that can be like a ‘coming home’: like a breathing in of life and wonder that is paramount to a breathing in of God’s life-giving spirit. It is as we see the sight of birds in a garden, or the magic of a whale breaching off the coast that can be like a celebration of God’s Spirit of life for our souls.

In truth, the living world is not the only expression of God’s Spirit, yet it is arguably the most profound and basic for us. Here is life itself. Here is breath. Here is our world’s existence that is utterly dependent upon God. As Psalm 104 also states, “When you send forth your spirit they are created and you renew the face of the ground” (v 30). ‘They’ here are the earth’s creatures which includes humanity. God is the one who gives us all life. We are like an ‘out-breathing’ then of God’s Spirit, and through that spirit we relate back to God and to every living thing.

This sense of our relationship with God and to all the creation is also alluded to in Paul’s letter to the Romans. To be fair, Paul does focus here on our *human* interrelationship as God’s ‘children’: a relationship made conscious and enriched through our faith in Christ. Paul tells us we can be reassured of our identity as God’s children and that the connection or substance of this relationship is made possible through God’s Spirit. Beyond simply our belief or faith in God, God also reaches out to us and ‘adopts’ us. God reaches out to embrace us as children and family.

As we read further through this section of Paul's letter, we see that the extent of this relationship reaches out beyond our humanity alone to something much greater. In the verses that follow Paul expresses that there exists a parallel between the relationship of humanity with God, and of the whole living Creation with God. Just as we suffer and groan for the life-giving freedom we hope for in God, so too does the whole living world suffer for the freedom it yearns for. The sense expressed here is that our journey as God's children is intertwined with the journey of the world around us. And the implication is that our suffering and redemption are one and the same.

Elsewhere in scripture a writer asks, "How can you say you love God and at the same time hate your brother or sister?" (1 John 4: 20) By the 'spirit of adoption' God embraces all of life. Surely then all living creatures become my 'brothers and my sisters'. And so beyond our human relationships we could rightly paraphrase this question of the preacher to ask, "How can you say you love God and yet hate the forests you are clearing to mine for more bauxite?" or "How can you say you love God and yet show your hate for the earth's atmosphere and climate by deliberately burning more coal and gas, even when you now know of the damage that is causing?" By God's Spirit the whole living world, including ourselves, is brought into relationship as God's children. By God's Spirit we will either be set free together, or be subjugated to futility together. By God's Spirit we are all one.

Today is the Day of Pentecost and we celebrate the empowering and sheer 'enlivening' of God's Spirit. Rejoice then, for God's Holy Spirit abides among us.

Today is also World Environment Day whose theme this year is 'Only one Earth'. We do not have a 'planet B' to fall back on. There is only one earth and we will either live together with all the wonders of life on this beautiful globe, or tragically we will sow the seeds of great destruction together.

Verifiable evidence, particularly over the last 40 or so years, has revealed to us just how much our collective human activity is damaging the atmosphere and ecosystems of our planet. In recent years we have also witnessed the escalating severity of wild fires, floods, heatwaves, droughts, storms and the loss of food crops. Each year we see more

and more that we no longer simply impact the coral reefs and rhinos and fairy penguins of our world, but we also threaten our global human society and its future. Humanity's and the world's fate is bound together.

And we could look at this situation in a purely empirical fashion, perhaps treating the destruction of the environment as some technological problem to be solved. Or others could say it is only a broad human social issue to be tackled. Yet the Spirit of God who breathes life into all living things tells us this is also and at the same time very much a spiritual catastrophe we are facing. The hurt we are prepared to keep on inflicting on our planet is a hurt we inflict not just on the natural world and ourselves, but simultaneously it is a wounding of our own spirit and of the Spirit of God. Our continued desecration of the earth simultaneously desecrates our sense of identity and meaning and interrelationship. It desecrates our human spirit. I believe it also must make God weep. "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit", it tells us in Ephesians. Well, one of the ways we grieve the Holy Spirit must certainly include our desecration of the life God's Spirit has gifted to us.

And can there be hope? Can our environmental tragedy be redeemed? The Apostle Paul certainly thought so. He saw that despite the struggle and suffering, yet there could be redemption and freedom for all God's children. And in the Psalm it says that God's Spirit not only creates but it also "**renews the face of the ground**". There can be renewal. There can be new life breathed by God's Spirit and by that same spirit abiding within God's children.

The pressures of increasing human population with all its needs and greed and lack of thought is real enough and it is huge. These pressures wrestle against God's creation and our own humanity every second of every day. Yet among us many also work for renewal. For some that is through technological changes where these are needed. Others protest to change attitudes and lifestyles, or work for change at a political level. Lovingly, others also act to preserve the life that we have, or to re-seed or re-plant that life. All of these are more than simply acts of humanity responding to an environmental crisis, but I see them also as God's Spirit breathing through us to renew the face of the earth. Yes, there can be hope.

On this Day of Pentecost we celebrate that God breathes life into all the world. And on this World Environment Day we are reminded that there truly is 'only one earth'. Despite the vastness of the cosmos with all its other possible worlds, yet for the foreseeable future, this is it! Only one earth, yet it is a beautiful world imbued with life and the very Spirit of God. As God's children let us then pray and work for its renewal.

Amen.

Prayers for use on World Environment Day/ Pentecost 2022.

(Note, these prayers have been gathered and in places adapted from a 2014 resource, 'Interfaith Worship Resources on Earth Stewardship' from The Sustainable Sanctuary Coalition)

Call to Worship

Bless the Lord, O my soul.

O Lord my God, I stand in awe at your greatness.

Your being is clothed with honour and majesty and robed in light

**You stretch out the heavens like a tent, making the winds your messengers,
and fire and flame your servants.**

How great are your works, O God!

In your wisdom you created the earth and all that is within it.

In thanksgiving, let us worship and praise the Lord our God

Prayer 1

O God, Holy Spirit, whose breath gives life to the world
and whose voice is heard in the soft breeze,
we need your strength and wisdom.

Come to us and among us;

Come as the wind and cleanse us.

We join with your Creation and with each other

to sing the song of the stars;

to rejoice in the sunlight;

and to refresh the air.

Prayer 2

Almighty God, who has created and is creating, we look around at the beauty of this
earth and are amazed by your works.

Spectacular sunsets, cheerful birds singing, humorous and beloved
pets are all reminders of the wonders of creation.

For all of this, we give you thanks.

Bind us together as a community that we might care for one another, building each
other up in faith. On this Environment Day and Day of Pentecost.

O God, enliven by your Spirit to care for your creation.

Teach us new ways reduce our waste and creative ways to reuse items.

Empower us to be good stewards of this Earth that we love, and which
you have entrusted to us.

We pray all of this in Jesus' holy name. Amen

Prayer of Compassion and Confession

(By St. Basil the Great, 330-379.)

O God, enlarge within us the sense of fellowship with all living things, our brothers the animals to whom you gave the earth as their home in common with us.

We remember with shame that in the past we have exercised the high dominion of humanity with ruthless cruelty so that the voice of the earth, which should have gone up to you in song, has been a groan of travail.

May we realize that the living things of our earth live not for us alone but for themselves and for you, and that they love the sweetness of life.

Intercessory Prayer

(From National Council of Churches)

Creator God, you make all things and weave them together in an intricate tapestry of life. Teach us to respect the fragile balance of life and to care for all the gifts of your creation. Guide by your wisdom those who have power and authority, that, by the decisions they make, life may be cherished and a good and fruitful Earth may continue to show your glory and sing your praises.

Almighty God, you have called us to tend and keep the garden of your creation. Give us wisdom and reverence for all your plants and animals who share this planet with us and whose lives make possible our own. Help us to remember that they too love the sweetness of life and join with us in giving you praise.

Prayer for the Earth

(by Carol Meyer)

Most gracious God, we come before you to pray for the wellbeing of the planet. You alone know the full extent of the destruction we have wrought to your beautiful handiwork, and what needs to be done to remedy it.

We pray for the people around the globe who suffer because of environmental damage.

We pray for the defenceless creatures harmed or made extinct by our selfishness and ignorance.

We pray for the oceans, air, mountains, plants, and soil, that life and health may again pulse in them.

We pray that we humans have a change of heart and stop harming the planet.

Pour out your Holy Spirit on us that we may have the passion and wisdom to work effectively to restore your creation.

Guide us in our personal, congregation, and community efforts.

Give us strength to continue on with this work when it is difficult and requires sacrifice.

Bless the Earth and all its life in every way. Amen

Litany of the Six Directions

(from the Native American Tradition)

Note: people are encouraged to stand and turn in each direction as indicated, to reach up with their arms towards the heavens, or to reach down and touch the earth.

Leader: We turn to the West for a blessing to the Spirit of Shalom, Peace: make us whole, make us holy, help us to love You and one another with our whole heart, our whole mind and our whole being, we pray:

People: ***Empower us, Holy Spirit.***

Leader: We turn to the North for a blessing to the Spirit of Integrity: give us Your strength and the courage to endure all the problems we may face, we pray:

People: ***Empower us, Holy Spirit.***

Leader: We turn to the East for a blessing, to the Spirit of Illumination: open our eyes to the sacredness of every living thing, we pray:

People: ***Empower us, Holy Spirit.***

Leader: We turn to the South for a blessing, to the Spirit of Transformation: help us to grow in wisdom and grace and the goodness of the ages, we pray:

People: ***Empower us, Holy Spirit.***

Leader: We look to the Heavens, to the Spirit of Openness: fill us with a breadth of vision to see that Your love embraces all, we pray:

People: ***Empower us, Holy Spirit.***

Leader: We touch the Earth for a blessing, and thereby touch the Spirit which lives among us and within us: help us to be more human and to praise you through the work of our hands, we pray:

People: ***Empower us, Holy Spirit.***

Leader: Let us go from here blessed and renewed in the Spirit of Peace, in the Spirit of Integrity, in the Spirit of Illumination, in the Spirit of Transformation, with hopes lifted high to the heavens and with hearts loving the earth in the name of our loving, creating, nurturing God.

People: ***Amen!***