

The Fourth Sunday of Easter, 25 April 2010
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR
The Rev'd Rags Ragan, Rector

This past Thursday was the 40th anniversary of the first Earth Day. Some of us remember that day vividly, as a day which changed our society's consciousness forever. For others, that day came and went like any other day. For some, Earth Day became an important annual observance, another major holy day. For others, Earth Day has always been there; born since 1970, they do not know a world without Earth Day. Throughout their lives my parents were both deeply connected to the life of our planet – appreciating it, learning about it, finding ways to help it thrive. So Earth Day came into our lives not as a new revelation, but as a natural extension. For many it was a turning point, a moment of changing awareness. For us it was a time of joining with others to celebrate what we loved and to do what needed to be done.

In my years as a school chaplain we did not find one day nearly sufficient for all that Earth Day means, so each year April was Earth Month. We had one month every year dominated by concern for our planet and its future. We focused on appreciation for the wonders of the natural world and on our responsibility to care for it. In the Lower School we usually chose a specific focus for Earth Month each year, so that everyone was exploring aspects of the same thing: water or whales or whatever. We would kick off Earth Month in chapel with stories and song and prayer. Then the classes would go off to learn. And in their learning they provided items for the chapel to share with others. One year the chapel had spectacular 10 to 20 foot painted paper whales swimming on its antique wood walls. Another year the walls were covered with hundreds of student drawings and statements about how they, like Miss Rumphius the Lupine Lady, would make the world more beautiful.

For many of us the most memorable year was the year the chapel became a rain forest. Every student and class from Kindergarten through 5th grade made animals and plants. We had 12-foot trees in the back, made with the help of our stunningly creative art teacher, and vines that crisscrossed the whole length of the chapel with every sort of rainforest creature perching on it or hanging from it. All during Earth Month our rain forest grew and it was so beautiful that no one wanted to take it down. So our Utah rainforest lasted into June.

That year our Earth Month burrowed into the hearts of students, faculty, and families. It made a difference in how people saw the world around them and how they lived their lives.

Each year the concluding chapel of Earth Month was held outside, the only place the whole school could gather together at the same time. So we learned and prayed and sang and created in our smaller groups and then gathered all together to share our songs and prayers and promises under God's bright blue sky, to receive God's blessing and determine to be a blessing to the beautiful world.

For me Earth Day fits neatly with the focus on shepherds in this week's propers. God has made us the shepherds of creation, and as such, we are responsible to know, appreciate, love, and nurture the spectacular world given into our care. This is part of our religious understanding of reality.

I have found two spectacular recent television series, one on our national parks and the other called simply *Life*, to fit nicely into this understanding. Both provide us with an opportunity to better know and appreciate the wonders of the natural world and both point us toward our responsibility to live as shepherds.

When I was reading the story from Acts, I could not remember the meaning of the woman's name, but I knew there was one. Even though I have studied both Greek and Hebrew, "Tabitha means Dorcas" was no help. It turns out that both mean 'gazelle'. Gazelles are such a wonder, so beautiful, delicate, and fleet. With the window of this marvelous animal, Peter's story can be a metaphor for our calling to save the planet with all of its gazelles and polar bears, pandas and redwoods. Others may give up, say "Dorcas is dead", but we follow Peter, reach out our hands in resurrection hope.

The 23rd Psalm is surely one of the best-known passages in all of Holy Scripture. Its message of hope and help and comfort provides solace to many in times of difficulty, and especially in the face of death. To know that the God who created all things loves and cares for us eternally is a remarkable gift.

But each time we see a comforting image of our own divine shepherd, we also see patterns of our own call to shepherding. We know that being body of Christ means we are the shepherds, the ones with responsibility for all creation; responsibility to know, to care, to nurture and protect. The responsibility is a privilege, but is also daunting.

Throughout this Eastertide we have been given glimpses of the heavenly visions granted to St John the Divine. Last week Deacon Mimi called our attention to the lovely picture of myriads of worshippers around the throne of the Lamb that was slain. This week we hear about the martyrs in that throng whose robes have been washed miraculously white in the blood of the Lamb. They have passed through great struggles, but all tears now wiped away. It is a picture of triumph and rejoicing, but only after great suffering. Christ our shepherd is the lamb that was slain. His shepherding is most evident in laying down his life for us his sheep. Jesus the Crucified is our source of hope and comfort. This image clearly cannot mean that we will have no sorrow or strife, that all will be easy for us. It means that we most certainly will suffer, but that we will come out the other side into a better brighter life. In the context of our own shepherding, it shows us the need for sacrificial love and the promise of new life on the other side of death.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus tells the inquirers that those who hear his voice and acknowledge him as their shepherd can never be cut off from him. This reassurance has been critical to so many who have risked everything in service to the call of God.

A friend of mine used to be fond of describing us priests as ‘sheep in shepherd’s clothing’ – meaning to remind us that we are as much Christ’s sheep, in need of guidance and protection, as any other follower of the Way. That is of course true, and good to remember. But I think it is equally important for all of us faithful to remember that every one of us sheep is well and truly a shepherd, not a sheep in fancy dress, or a sheep living with delusions of grandeur, but a genuine shepherd.

This idea that we are called as individuals, but even more as a community, to live as shepherds in the world is another way of expressing the same idea as the frequent references to us as God’s stewards. The advantage I find in the Shepherd metaphor is that it suggests relationships among living beings, while Steward more often calls to mind inanimate objects. If we see ourselves as shepherds, our community as a shepherds’ guild, it reminds us of our responsibility for the life around us. Our sheep include all of the people we meet, here at church, at home, in our neighborhoods, at work. We are responsible to look out for their well-being always. Our sheep also include the creatures with whom we share the planet, the birds in our yards, the fish in our rivers, the gazelles and pandas far away. Our sheep include the living ecosystems that sustain us all in life: the forests and fields, the oceans and tundra.

The idea that we are shepherds of God’s creation and the idea of Earth Day, a day to recall our necessary care for our planet and its spectacular biosphere, fit neatly together, each strengthening and illuminating the other.

We know that God created the world and gave it into our care. Knowing that is the easy part; the question is, what do we do?

As I understand it, these are our duties as shepherds:

- To be always alert and appreciative, learning to know and to love all that surrounds us.
- To think about what we do and how we do it,
noticing the consequences of our actions for everyone and everything.
- To join with others to sustain and protect what God has made.
- Above all, to live in hope, reaching out to our gazelles with a promise of life.

Amen.