Are We Losing Paradise?

Reflecting on Faith and Caring for Creation

February 26 – April 11
O God +
whose laws never change
we thank you for the things we know
that after rain the sun will shine
that after darkness light appears
that winter brings the spring
that after sleep we wake again
that life goes on and love remains
and life and love can never die
in the name of Christ our Lord
Amen
LIZ HELLER 1988
Dear Westminster Community,

It has been a rewarding experience to lead the compilation of the 2020 Lent Book. These entries on our climate crisis are deeply moving and urgently important. They are full of sorrow, lament and hope. You will find poems, prayers, scripture, hymns, calls to action, memories and artistic reflections on the theme of our care and lack of care for God’s creation. In this book, the authors wrestled with these questions:

- Why or how does our Christian faith call us to participate in caring for God’s creation?
- In the face of vast environmental challenges, how and why does our faith call us to hope?
- What has nature taught you about God? How has your experience with the natural world helped you to pray or to communicate with God?
- How can we live out God’s vision for a healed and renewed relationship with Creation?

This book is a window into the hearts, minds, and prayers of individuals who are a part of the Westminster community. The Lenten devotional committee hopes that it will inspire you to consider, contemplate, and prayerfully enter into a community conversation about the mystery of our faith and the earth – and within that conversation, the mystery of life itself.

We invite you to the discipline of Lent. We invite you to the practice of hope that emerges from an honest reckoning with the reality of death. We invite you to unearth the story of your own deep connection to the suffering of the land, the sea, the sky.

I am grateful to the Prayer Ministry team for inviting me to help in this sacred project, to David Shinn for being our pastoral advisor, Sarah Brouwer for her editorial help, Brigitte Parenteau for the design, Kathleen Campbell for compiling the quotes and Bible verses, Dr. Rodney Allen Schwartz for helping choose art from the Westminster collection and to the bright and thoughtful editorial team who worked on the project. A profound thank you to the community members who contributed the sensitive, spiritual, and beautifully-written meditations.

Grace and Peace,
Heather Heefner

**Lent Book 2020 Editorial Team**

Kathleen Campbell    Susan Dray
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DUST TO DUST

On Ash Wednesday we receive ashes on our foreheads to remind us of our own mortality, that someday these bodies will fail, our loved ones will gather to celebrate our lives, and we will be laid to rest with the cloud of witnesses. From the earth we are made and to the earth we shall return.

Throughout the life and ministry of Jesus we are reminded that death is not merely the cessation of mortal life, but also a power that weaves itself into the living of our days. Lent invites us into a season where we consider the spaces and places in our lives that are dead; to examine the most intimate places of our heart and reignite the fire that has turned into glowing embers; to examine our world and see where the power of Gospel is needed the most; to see how our consumption of the earth’s resources lead us into a place of crisis.

It’s painful to acknowledge the ways in which parts of us have died, especially when we spend our days denying death altogether. To see these dead places within us can break our hearts. But Psalm 51 says that this very condition of heartbrokenness is exactly the place where we are greeted by God: “The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

In those spaces that have become dead, there is potential for life. This season invites us to stop and ponder. We recognize that the joys of this earth may be fleeting: the laughter of a small child exploring the woods, the waves crashing on the sandy beaches as happy dogs fetch, the clean water for drinking and swimming. These precious experiences make life rich, meaningful, and worthy of conservation for future generations.

Matt Lewellyn-Otten
THE BIBLE REMINDS US THAT KNOWLEDGE OF GOD AND GOD’S WORK CAN BE FOUND IN A CONTEMPLATION OF PLANTS AND ANIMALS AND THE DELICATE WEB OF LIFE ON EARTH.

“But ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds of the air, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish of the sea inform you. Which of all these does not know the hand of the LORD has done this? In the Lord’s hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all humankind.” —Job 12:7-10

For contemplation for the reader: What does nature teach us about God? How has your own experience with the natural world helped you to pray or communicate with God?
ALL THINGS BRIGHT AND BEAUTIFUL
BY CECIL FRANCES ALEXANDER

All things bright and beautiful,
All creatures great and small,
All things wise and wonderful,
The Lord God made them all.

I find God in the woods. From my weeks at summer camp in Northern Minnesota, I am no stranger to the textured bark of the pine trees and the damp, dense moss that grows at the base of their trunks. My counselors worked to teach me how to coexist and live sustainably with nature while camping. It makes me proud to teach the eight-year-olds of today how to do the same. Leave-no-trace camping is powerful. These experiences teach individuals to balance their impact with the previously existing nature all around them. I think that most importantly, value-driven actions in the outdoors teach humans that we are passing through, guests in the space that nature continually inhabits. While hiking, canoeing, or journaling at a campsite, I feel at peace, close to God’s creation.

My mother has a fondness for the poetry of Robert Frost, and I remember as a child reading “The Road Not Taken”: “Two roads diverged in a wood, and I — / I took the one less traveled by, / And that has made all the difference.”

I believe that as fear and alarm from the climate crisis grows, more of us need to take the road less traveled, where we work to reestablish a balance with the natural world. This path may be presently shrouded in curious beauty and reverence because of its rarity, but by honoring all of God’s creation, we honor God. By so doing, the now well-traveled road becomes even more beautiful for the mainstream balance and sustainability that it must come to represent.

Caroline Hardy
HUMANS HAVE BEEN IGNORING WISDOM ABOUT OUR PLACE IN GOD’S NATURAL WORLD FOR A VERY LONG TIME. NEVERTHELESS, SOURCES OF SUCH WISDOM CAN BE FOUND IN MANY CULTURES AND ACROSS MILLENNIA.

“Do not damage the earth, or the sea, or the trees.” — Revelations 7:3

“The planting of one tree is worth the prayers of a whole year.” — Turkish proverb

“Dig the well before you are thirsty.” — Chinese proverb

Contemplation for the reader: How do you feel personally called to participate in caring for God’s creation?

Sunday, March 1

"All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Isaiah 53:6 RSV

The Lost Sheep, by Joan Bohlig, etching
NURTURED BY NATURE

As a young girl, my secret place to play was inside a tall evergreen anchoring the corner of our yard. I was small enough to fit into the hidden entrance, which I discovered as an adult was a space between closely planted spruce trees.

In this space, I pretended to store berries and nuts for the long, harsh winter ahead. A soft bed of needles provided a comfortable sanctuary to sit and think. I felt safe and nurtured by the arms of my giant fortress. The air was fresh. I could see out; no one could see in. And the calming space was all mine. I was one of six children.

Other majestic trees on our Maryland property were my deeply treasured friends. I learned to spend time under them when I needed solitude and centering from a stressful day. The trees didn’t judge me or gossip or decide they liked someone better. They were dependable, always there with outstretched, comforting branches.

In my nursing career I’ve tried to emulate those dependable trees, reaching out to offer comfort with no judgment. In adult oncology, I’d sit quietly at 3am listening to an emotional patient share his decision to stop treatment, then fulfill his request for a hug. Others were cradled in my arms as they spent their last breaths; my heartbeat accompanied them home.

Nature teaches me to be fully present, an anchor in a turbulent world, the eyes, ears, hands and feet of Christ, and an instrument of healing and peace. While my childhood refuge has been replaced by a townhome nestled in the woods, it is in the stillness of nature I continue to receive God’s grace. In this sanctuary my soul is nurtured, and I am refreshed to do God’s work.

Jane Ellen Nielsen
THE BIBLE INCLUDES FRIGHTENING, DYSTOPIAN PREDICTIONS ABOUT WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF HUMANS DISOBEY THEIR COVENANT WITH GOD AND DEFILE THE EARTH.

“The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers, the exalted of the earth languish. The earth is defiled by its people; they have disobeyed the laws, violated the statutes, and broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse consumes the earth; its people must bear their guilt. Therefore earth’s inhabitants are burned up and very few are left.” — Isaiah 24:4-6

“I brought you into a fertile land to eat its fruit and rich produce. But you came and defiled my land and made my inheritance detestable.” — Jeremiah 2:7

Contemplation for the reader: How does our Christian faith call us to participate in caring for God’s creation?
HIDDEN CREATION

When I was 13 years old my family traveled to Oregon to visit relatives. They had a cabin situated on the Little North Santiam River – secluded, gravel road, bubbling river flowing past the stoop. One morning, with nothing to do but read, I decided to go for a walk and proceeded down a promising path that took me deep into the forest. I remember to this day the clearing I found, the stillness, the quiet majesty of towering pines, and the dead tree stump beckoning me to rest. I remember thinking that this is what the Bible means when it mentions hallowed ground. I could have sworn I heard “Put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing (or in my case sitting) is holy ground!”

Suddenly, in that sacred space, I could hear the sound of water running somewhere, washing and sloshing, nearby but hidden. I grew up on a lake and knew well the sound of waves lapping the shore and slapping the dock – but this was different. It was unseen, invisible, hidden from my view but steady and constant. I tried to follow the sound but to no avail – alas, it was not to be. How could it be so near to me yet so elusive? It remains clearly in my memory these many years later.

Such miracles in creation are everywhere – often unseen yet present, and now, ever so humbly do I feel the presence of the Unseen Hand that has ferried me across the brooks and rivers of my lifetime, reminding me that all creation is a gift of such enormity it cannot be destroyed. It is simply hallowed ground and must be tended. Thanks be to that Guiding Hand – thanks be to God.

Mary Johnson
“SEE, I AM OF SMALL ACCOUNT, WHAT SHALL I ANSWER YOU?
I LAY MY HAND ON MY MOUTH.” — JOB 40:4

The focus on the environment is truly a reflection of what Lent is supposed to be for us - a season of discontent, fasting, examination and re-orientation. It is holy to spend forty days considering that we are not the center of things. Jesus went without in the wilderness for forty days, and the people of Israel wandered for forty years, and we too trudge through Lent trying to be open to the difficult things God calls us to. The way we treat God’s creation should reflect a wider worldview, one that puts our personal comforts in last place, particularly as we see the least among us suffer the greatest effects of climate change. We should exist on this planet as though there were many who came before us, and so many more who should have the opportunity to come after us. Lent insists that we pause and strip our lives down to what is essential in order to pay attention to where God is, which is always in those places of injustice.

This Lent, I will be praying about and taking action on the careless convenience of my consumption, when I am typically “too busy” to make better choices or worry about the future. If you’re wondering where I am, I’ll be trying to find my reusable grocery bags, or checking out Tare Market (zero waste groceries), or keeping the heat at 65, or turning off lights, or walking instead of driving, or trying a deodorant bar that isn’t wrapped in plastic, or hitting up some thrift stores (only if I really need something, but let’s be honest, I don’t), all for Jesus’ sake, and for the Gospel, and for every other person on this planet - and everyone to come - who is not me.

Maybe this Lent I, and we, can be a small part of resurrecting creation as we make our way to Easter.

Sarah Brouwer
BIRDS, GRASS, AND SUNSET

From the moment my younger son Kyle could talk, he loved birds—specifically raptors. We visited the University of Minnesota Raptor Center. We ventured to Hawk Ridge in Duluth and Red Wing to watch bald eagles as they winter. At first, I was mostly a parental participant in these endeavors. But then I started to really pay attention. My favorite thing to do now is to look for red-tailed hawks sitting on light polls, or a raptor diving along the road to find food, or a bald eagle catching a thermal.

My older son Evan has a passion for the outdoors. He’s an Eagle Scout, a camper, and hiker. He knows cool things about the weather, and soil and seeds and grass. When he hikes he sees and describes all sorts of things that I wouldn’t normally see. Sometimes I take the long way just to drive by wetlands or I walk around a lake and think about what Evan’s shared with me about how to keep them healthy and thriving. I see buckthorn as the invasive species it is. His awareness and teaching alters my awareness and mindset about God’s creation.

And then there are the sunrises and sunsets. I grew up in New Mexico. New Mexico has THE BEST sunsets. Minnesota sunrises and sunsets are more subtle, but beautiful. And because my husband Jason now frequently photographs both the beginning and the end of the day, I’ve begun to have more awareness of the changes of the sun and the changes in the weather. In the winter, I look to the horizon for how the sun is ending its day. And in the summer I look to the horizon knowing I have many hours before sunset.

Ann Rainhart
“AH, LORD GOD! IT IS YOU WHO HAVE MADE THE HEAVENS AND THE EARTH BY YOUR GREAT POWER AND BY YOUR OUTSTRETCHED ARM! NOTHING IS TOO HARD FOR YOU.” — JEREMIAH 32:17

Some years ago the City of Minneapolis dug up half my boulevard to do necessary work underground. The dark, peaty soil was taken away; the work was completed, and thin soil with sand and small rocks was brought in and partially filled the area. When I saw the “new” dirt that now was on my boulevard, I thought, “Nothing is going to grow in that,” and I was bit upset. I mentioned my ire to a neighbor who said, “Why don’t you try to lasagna garden?” She then went home and brought me a Lasagna Gardening Book. It said that even a hard, packed down parking lot can be easily turned into good, loamy soil. So I lay down wet newspaper over the rocky, barren area, then a layer of peat moss, then a layer of compost from my compost bin, and repeated the steps. Next I planted. By midsummer flowers bloomed and by fall this woebegone area flourished. The earth worms and microbes had moved in and performed their magic.

Like a wound healed without a trace of damage my boulevard was whole, filled with life.

God has given us what we need to put it back together again. I saw this in my little patch of earth. As Louis Armstrong sang, “What a Wonderful World”.

Prayer: Creating and recreating God, you have given us the tools. Please help us to listen, to learn, and to pay attention to the wonderful and surprising gift of this world you have given us. Help us be protectors and healers of this precious gift.

Amen

Toni Pendergrast
Trees Planted by Water, by Joan Bohlig, etching
ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM

We can all agree that climate change is real and it impacts every human being, every plant, and every creature on this planet. However, the impact is not equally felt by everyone.

Study after study has shown that people of color and people in impoverished contexts face disproportionate risks from pollution and climate change related destitution. In fact, many pollution producing factories are located in the middle of their communities. In our own country, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) just released a finding that people in poverty are exposed to more fine particulate matters than people living above poverty. According to the study’s authors, results for national, state, and county scales all indicate that non-whites tend to be burdened disproportionately to whites. People of color are more likely to drink polluted water, breathe polluted air, and live in polluted environments. They have much higher exposure to toxic pollutants. For example, Hispanics face a rate of chlorine exposure that is more than double the rate for whites. Chronic chlorine inhalation is known for degrading cardiac function. The authors found that black people are exposed to about 1.5 times more particulate matter than white people, and that Hispanics had about 1.2 times the exposure of non-Hispanic whites. People in poverty had about 1.3 times more exposure than people above poverty.

The impacts are multi-dimensional on physical health, mental well-being, and prospects for the future. This is called environmental racism. Just as climate change is real, so is environmental racism.

On this day of our Lenten journey, let us pray for openness to see and understand the complexity of racism and environmental impacts. Let us use our privilege to stand up against the system of injustice that perpetuates blindness and harmful acts. Let us work together to reverse this trend and restore health and well-being for God’s people and God’s creation.

David Shinn
OH, EARTH, WAIT FOR ME
BY PABLO NERUDA

Return me oh sun,
to my wild destiny,
rain of the ancient wood,
bring me back to the aroma and the swords
that fall from the sky,
the solitary peace of pasture and rock,
the damp at the river-margins,
the smell of the larch tree,
the wind alive like a heart
beating in the crowded restlessness
of the towering araucaria.

Earth, give me back your pure gifts,
the towers of silence which rose
from the solemnity of their roots.
I want to go back to being what I have not been,
and learn to go back from such deeps
that amongst all natural things
I could live or not live; it does not matter
to be one stone more, the dark stone,
the pure stone which the river bears away.
AS WE STRUGGLE WITH THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS, LET US LOOK TO GOD TO GUIDE US AND TO INSPIRE HOPE AND RENEWAL.

“For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.” — Isaiah 55:12

Contemplation for the reader: In the face of vast environmental changes, how and why does our Christian faith call us to hope?
Lent Day 14 | Thursday, March 12

**OH LORD, HOW MANIFOLD ARE YOUR WORKS! IN WISDOM YOU HAVE MADE THEM ALL; THE EARTH IS FULL OF YOUR CREATURES.**
—PSALM 104:24

Observing honeybees in our backyard apiary leaves me awestruck with wonder at the bees’ daily work. Indeed, honeybees reveal, as the psalmist exclaims, the creative wisdom of God.

The ultimate team players, honeybees exist to serve the good of the hive, selflessly performing specialized roles in a complex and organized colony. The queen lays eggs. Drones contribute genetic diversity. Workers do everything else: nurses tend to the brood, undertakers clear dead from the hive, defenders protect against predators, and the HVAC crew regulates hive temperature.

A forager visiting flowers collects nectar for honey, a product of relentless effort that matures long after the forager expires. By instinct she toils for the next generation as her ancestors toiled for hers. God’s creative wisdom! The hive is a model of selfless service across generations for nothing less than the survival of a species.

*How can we reconcile this creative wisdom of God with our own turbulent relationship with Creation?*

While humans are inextricably bound—interdependent—with a great diversity of life on Earth,

While we rely on life-supporting systems that God has ordained for all,

While, simply put, our very survival depends on our planet’s good health,

We continue to live in destructive ways, unsustainable to the earth, environmentally unjust to so many, and incongruent to the glorification of God.

*Oh Lord, Creator and Sustainer, we pray that our human family awakens to your creative wisdom and discerns a collective call to care for and sustain your gifts of creation to the benefit of all in this generation and those to follow.*

**Jeffrey Gram**
BAHA’I PRAYER
BY Baha ‘U’llah

Blessed is the spot and the house, and the place, and the city,
   and the heart, and the mountain, and the refuge, and the cave,
   and the valley, and the land, and the sea, and the island,
   and the meadow where mention of God hath been made,
   and His praise glorified.
During peak color this fall, I was struck by a string of words penned by poet Katharine Lee Bates. From a larger poem that ruminates on our tiny blue home and its place in the Universe, Bates puts these three words together:

“...Beauty ineffable, Immanuel?”

Beauty so overwhelming, it leaves you speechless. Could this be God with us?

I recently started noticing the beauty of the earth in complete stillness around me.

Living with intention and practicing mindfulness puts the earth into perspective in a way I never thought of before. There is immense beauty in the delicate balance we live in every day when we realize that our bodies and minds are just as much God’s creation as any tree, mountain, or lake. And it is sobering when we become fully aware of the damage we cause to the only home we’ll ever know. Convenience and instant gratification seem to have made us numb.

When you believe God is with us during every sunrise, how do you pray?

When you believe God is with us in the hush of fresh snowfall, how do you worship?

When you believe that you are made up of the same atoms and particles as the planets and the countless stars in God’s universe, how do you honor your home?

**Samuel Green**
Sunday, March 15

What Does the Lord Require of You? by Joan Bohlig, etching
THE IMPACT HUMAN CIVILIZATION HAS ON ANIMALS

As scientists have learned more and more about animal behavior, emotions, and problem-solving capabilities, it has become increasingly difficult to ignore the impact that human civilization has on animals. Watching news coverage of the fire catastrophe in Australia, which has caused millions of birds and animals to perish, has been excruciating.

In this passage from Ezekiel, “shepherd” may be a metaphor for leaders who do not take care of their people, but it applies equally well to the need for taking responsibility for the welfare of animals.

“Prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the sovereign Lord says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with wool, and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back. The strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally.’” — Ezekiel 34:2-4

Contemplation for the reader: Why and how does our faith call us to respond?
THE NATURAL WORLD PROVIDES AN ENDLESS SOURCE OF METAPHORS TO HELP US UNDERSTAND OUR RELATIONSHIP TO OURSELVES, TO EACH OTHER, AND TO GOD.

I am the one whose praise echoes on high.
I adorn all the earth.
I am the breeze that nurtures all things green
I encourage blossoms to flourish with ripening fruits.
I am led by the spirit to feed the purest streams.
I am the rain coming from the dew
That causes the grasses to laugh with the joy of life.
I am the yearning for good.

Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179)
Now I see the secret of the making of the best person: it is to grow in the open air, and to eat and sleep with the earth. —Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

I first learned this quote when I was in late elementary school, long before I knew who Walt Whitman was or anything about his influence or his character. This shared secret was something of a watchword at the camp I attended and where I eventually worked and spent fourteen summers, from age 10 until I went to seminary. There, nestled on the sand dunes of Lake Michigan, I slept in a windowless cabin, with no electricity or running water. Except for eating in the dining hall for meals, I spent the entire summer outside. The rustle of the wind through the trees or the soft harmony of the rain lulled us to sleep. We learned early about the potential for erosion of the dunes, and the importance of not disrupting the precious grass that held together these delicate behemoths. It was imparted to us that generations of future campers should be able to lie back on the dunes and see the heavens stretched out like a tent, sensing that the vast lake was like God’s watery garment. As we ate and slept with the earth, we remembered the words of the Psalmist, that God set creation in its foundations and made the moon to mark the seasons. All summer we would sing and live out our praise to the wonder of the Creator, as we were being made into persons who had responsibility for caring for the ground, water, and sky all around us. Praise, wonder, and holy obligation were intertwined with the gift of growing in the open air, and for that I will always give thanks.

*Meghan Gage-Finn*
CALL OF THE LOON

Today was the last day of our canoe trip through the Boundary Waters Canoe Area. Off in the distance I heard the cry of the loons. I looked up and could see them through the mist, floating out on the lake in the morning’s first golden rays of sunlight. I put down what I was doing in order to pay more attention to my surroundings.

I walked down to the lake to watch the loons. Through the sparkling water they came. Three big, black, sleek, shining loons paddled up to me at the water’s edge. Loons are shy creatures. They usually avoid human contact and live only on remote wilderness lakes. Something special was happening.

When they called out again, I was overwhelmed. I had to sit down. I could understand what these loons were saying. It brought tears to my eyes. It still does to this day. These loons knew I was leaving the Boundary Waters. Their haunting call was asking me to join them, to stay with them on the lake. They had come searching for me, their lost mate, to complete their foursome. They didn’t want me to leave. They missed me. I could feel it with my entire being.

I told these loons that I loved them and missed them too, and that I would be back. Every plant, rock, and animal is part of creation with us and has something to say about creation, sharing their message in order to teach us about the love with which we are created. All we have to do is stop and listen; open our hearts and really listen; clear our minds and truly see.

The opening of this connection was a powerful gift from the universe. It changed my life. I took a moment to reflect and give thanks for receiving this special blessing. What would have happened if I had been too busy to stop and listen? How many potential blessings do we miss sealed up inside our homes behind closed doors and windows where we can’t hear the messenger? How does the universe feel when we turn our backs and choose not to listen? Loons are among 55 species likely to disappear from Minnesota by 2080 due to climate change.

Dear God, help us to listen.

Doug Van Valkenburg
Creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning.
— Romans 8:21-22

With many others I see the stories of Creation, Paradise, and Fall in Genesis 1-3 as stories more in the nature of myth than history or science. I believe they tell great truths about God and all creation, including humankind.

One truth I see is this: nature is, as John Calvin put it, “the theatre of God’s glory.” Lucy and I visited Bryce Canyon National Park a couple of summers ago. We gasped in awe as we looked out over the spires carved by wind and water. The spires rise up hundreds of feet from the valley floor below. Created thousands of years before any humans set foot there, the site has evoked attitudes of worship for thousands upon thousands of visitors.

Another truth I see in the creation stories is one Paul expresses passionately in his letter to the Romans. Human sin, he suggests, has caused deep wounds to creation, to paradise. “Creation has been groaning,” he cries out; it longs to be set free from the bondage to decay and destruction we humans have imposed upon it. Rather than acting as stewards of creation, as Genesis 1: 26-28 directs us, we have abused creation. Can’t we hear creation groaning as sheets of ice break off the Antarctic ice shelf? As earthquakes multiply the fault lines created by fracking? As cattle are poisoned by waste dumped from the manufacture of Teflon?

And yet, Paul insists, there is hope. Creation will be set free, he declares, to share “the glorious liberty of the children of God.” Let it be so. Amen.

Chad Quaintance
BLESSED CHILD OF THE EARTH

You are One with All of Creation. Connected by Love and Grace – You Belong to a Wild and Precious Web of Life.

Moving Organically, You are Liberated – feeling the Wisdom of Holy Soils teeming beneath Your Feet.

Walking Humbly, You are Guided - following the Call of Remote Woods and Nearby Streams.

Listening Carefully, You are Welcomed – heeding the Voices of All Our Relations resounding through Your Ears.

Learning Newly, You are Invited – joining the Vibrancy of Prairie Pollinators and Backyard Bandits.

Seeing Truly, You are Revealed – witnessing the Smallest of Seeds growing up to the Tallest of Trees before Your Eyes.

Breathing Fully, You are Grounded – summoning the Courage of Steep Mountains and Deep Roots.

Grieving Honestly, You are Healed – soothing the Pain of Human Devastation residing in Your Heart.

Caring Justly, You are Redeemed – regenerating the Whole of this World.

Chesney Engquist
Sunday, March 22

The Peaceable Kingdom, by Jakiss workshop, embroidery, Pakistan
WHAT NATURE TEACHES ME ABOUT GOD

My father was exceptionally attuned to animals, and his behavior toward and love of animals shaped my own. I even like snakes.

A favorite memory is of my father kneeling beside the bathtub, sudsing up one of our cats while talking to her quietly. Cats hate water, and unlike dogs do not view being given a bath as a welcome form of attention from a loved human. But Tiger trusted my father and in the midst of her fear and discomfort she honored him with her stoic tolerance.

Humans are now in the excruciating position of simultaneously learning more and more about animals’ intelligence and complexity while witnessing hundreds of species become diminished in numbers or extinct due to our actions or our negligence. Examples abound of scientists’ recent observations. Family dogs are not just obsequious and attentive because we are on the other end of the food dish; they actually love us. Animals exhibit altruistic behavior. Animals of different species not only cooperate with each other, they can become loyal, reassuring companions. Animals have emotions. A dying chimpanzee matriarch who had formed a bond years earlier with a biologist reaches up to embrace him, smiles hugely, and pats his head and neck reassuringly. A pair of albatrosses, mated for life, take off separately from a beach in New Zealand and meet there exactly one year later to nest once again. Elephants mourn the loss of their relatives and herd mates. Chickens love to be stroked. Don’t get me started on hummingbirds.

How much more proof do we need that God loves us than that God created these amazing animals for us to love, be fascinated by, and yes, connect us to God.

Kathleen Campbell
THE EARTH AND ALL THE LIVING THINGS ON IT ARE A GIFT FROM GOD, AND GOD LOVES WHAT GOD MADE. LET OUR KNOWLEDGE OF THIS INSPIRE US AND MOVE US FORWARD IN OUR EFFORTS AGAINST CLIMATE CHANGE.

“There is the sea, vast and spacious teeming with creatures beyond number—living things both large and small. There the ships go to and fro, and the leviathan, which you formed to frolic there. These all look to you to give them their food at the proper time when you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things. When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust. When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth.” — Psalms 104: 25-30

“For by God all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible... all things were created by God and for God...and in God all things hold together.” — Colossians 1: 16-17

Contemplation for the reader: Reflecting on Genesis 1:1-2:3, how does scripture call for us to care for God’s creation?
Most of my life I’ve taken clean water for granted – until my experience in Matanzas, Cuba. The Yumuri River flows near Westminster’s partner congregation and directly below our hill-top seminary partner. The river is polluted.

A well located next to the Yumuri has supplied the seminary’s water since 1948. A Westminster team tested the well; the sample immediately turned dark, the worst possible result. A year later we helped install a clean water system at the seminary.

Shortly after the installation, I asked people about the clean water. A student told me his toddler was the healthiest he’d ever been since the family began using it. As he said this, community members were lining up to fill containers. Then a seminary professor – an older gentleman – said with a smile, “For the first time in 90 years I don’t have diarrhea!”

I pray I will never again take for granted a natural resource like water, and I am committed to protecting water wherever and whenever I can. That’s part of the reason why I have changed the Benediction I offer at Westminster Sunday after Sunday.

All my ministry I have quoted words from the newer testament to conclude the worship service. Many people in the pews know them by memory after so many years. Not too long ago I added a line, following the phrase, “honor all people.” The addition is also biblical: it comes from Genesis: “steward the creation.”

Steward the creation. Count me in – especially after seeing the difference clean water can make. We have work to do!

**Tim Hart-Andersen**
When I was a child, the Babbling Brook called me, and the Rushing River invigorated me. I loved wandering through the woods on my family farm - the Wapsipinicon River passed by us on the North, and a bubbling brook ran through the farm. When I was in the woods, I felt the trees embrace me and enjoyed the music of the fluttering leaves, rustling grass, and scurrying creatures. What thrilled me most was the light filtering through the trees, electrifying my spirit from head to toe.

The health benefits of wandering in the woods are now recognized by many. Unfortunately, this is being threatened by climate change caused by carbon and methane emissions. The livelihood of farmers and fishermen is challenged as the snow caps and glaciers melt. Violent storms and fires are destroying homes and forests and displacing people. Biblically and morally, we are challenged not to spoil this magnificent creation. It is time to act.

I am now almost eighty, and I often go to my childhood woods and stream in my meditations, the light filtering through the trees is still electrifying my spirit from head to toe. I want my grandchildren and their children to know of babbling brooks and rushing rivers the way I do – for the health of their bodies and souls. It is time to act. We must act.

Betty Heefner
FRIGHTENING FACTS

• In Minnesota the average December-February temperature has been rising since 1894, and since 1970 the trend has accelerated.
• 15% of the carbon output is from cars. Half of all our car trips are within 3 miles of the destination – a one-hour walk.
• 40 percent of Minnesota rivers and lakes have been found to be impaired by farm runoff, bacteria, mercury or other pollutants
• Americans dump 16 tons of sewage into their waters every minute.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” — Matthew 5:4

I mourn. I mourn for Lake Bde Maka Ska, where I have swum for 40 years. Her waters feel different now, thicker and more grainy on my skin. I mourn for Wirth Woods, where I walk daily. The sound of her rustling leaves is lost in the noisy rush of Highway 394. I mourn for the ice on Bassett Creek, by whose shores I ski. Over time the creek has lost her rhythm of freezing and thawing. I mourn for the Indigo Bunting pair that I have greeted for years by the Bur Oak tree that is its home. Seemingly confused by climate shift, the birds come earlier now.

I mourn for my children. They are afraid; when will this earth no longer support us? They are mad; what have we done? They are uncertain; my 23-year old daughter and her peers wonder aloud if they should have children, fearing what will be here for them. Polluted waters? Smog-filled air? Arid lands, where water is like gold?

I do not feel blessed. I feel afraid. My fear is turning to anger. Gandhi saw controlled anger as the fuel for change. Jesus was angry at the Pharisees and he used this anger to create change. It is time to turn our mourning into a righteous anger of action – to save our planet, our home, our sacred space – for our grandchildren who want to be.

I carry this mourning and anger in my bones. My bones long for deep, Minnesota cold. My bones rebel against the new Minnesota that can be 102 degrees hot. I mourn, and find no comfort. I am angry, and want to act.

I stand in the woods with my hands raised beseechingly, O God. I swim in the lake, and each stroke is a prayer, each breath an amen. Please, help me know what to do.

Heather Heefner
Dear Earth,

I’m sorry that we have abused you.

We mindlessly cut down trees for our own greed.

We daily pollute the water, and we don’t really care because all we want is power.

We frack the grounds and hurt the earth just so people in power can grow their financial worth.

I’m sorry that we have stripped you of your richness while we mind our own daily business.

We consume fast fashion and don’t care about the effects of air pollution.

We buy big cars for our own needs but don’t care about the carbon emission it leaves.

We use one-use plastic and don’t care about its environmental impact.

For all these things - I am sorry.

Bethany Heefner Dart
Sunday, March 29

*Holdfast*, by Benjamin Watson, linocut
THE EARTH IS THE LORD’S

We are constantly awed and inspired by God’s creation—our bountiful lakes and forests, mountains and prairies, seas and shorelands, the natural wonders. But we are increasingly troubled about rapid ecological degradation due to climate change. Lakes and rivers are more polluted; forests are burning and being rapidly depleted; glaciers melting and sea levels rising; droughts, floods and storms intensifying; thousands of species are nearing extinction.

Presbyterian Church (USA) Stated Clerk Rev. Dr. J. Herbert Nelson calls upon all Presbyterians to aggressively act. His “The earth is the Lord’s” statement from Psalm 24:1-2 issued after the 2018 General Assembly encourages all “…congregations and Presbyterians to lead by our example of making energy choices with integrity… and to express profound concern about the destructive effects of climate change on all God’s creation, including disproportionate impact on those living in poverty and in the least developed countries…” PCUSA supports carbon fee and dividend legislation currently in Congress.

Westminster is responding by purchasing 100% of its electricity from a solar garden, retrofitting lighting and recommissioning heating and cooling systems. At home Barb and I have done the same, upgraded windows and insulation, and reprogrammed thermostats.

My personal calling for 40 years has been in environmental and energy management. I have been active on Westminster’s EcoJustice Ministry Team since the 1990s, coordinating our Presbyterians for Earth Care membership and the Presbytery-wide Earth Care Congregations group.

The faith community is mobilizing to protect God’s creation. How do we respond to the bleak signs of climate change all around us? Follow the lead of our youth in addressing the greatest generational challenge threatening their future. In this Earth Day 50th Anniversary year, let us join Rev. Nelson’s admonishment to Presbyterians. We must not pass the burden onto our children and grandchildren.

Rick Person
THROUGH THE EYES OF A LITTLE HOUSE

How many of you have noticed the sign on Westminster’s fence along Twelfth Street? *Justice is what love looks like in public* — Cornel West.

As we focus on the environment during this Lenten season, I challenge you to think about this statement in terms of *justice for our planet*.

A wonderful children’s book called *The Little House* (Virginia Lee Burton), published in 1942, tells a story through the eyes of a house on a hill in the country. As time goes by, the distant city slowly advances toward the house. Bulldozers devour habitat rich with plants and wildlife, and soon the landscape is covered with houses, asphalt, and lawns. Insects and birds disappear. Ponds and rivers are hemmed in by concrete. Skyscrapers and industrial pollution crowd out the sun. At the end of the book, a great-great granddaughter rediscovers the Little House and moves it back to the country, where it again experiences birds singing, trees in blossom, and clear blue skies. A happy ending?

Not really. Even as a little girl, I recognized that the happy ending was fleeting: *the bulldozers are never very far away*. Today wildlife habitat is disappearing at an accelerating rate, and countless species are in danger of going extinct as a result. In October 2019, we learned that North America has lost more than one in four birds in the last 50 years. Burton’s book, unfortunately, was prescient.

*With the hubris of humans, we have been treating the earth unjustly. WE NEED TO STOP.*

In 1949, conservationist and writer Aldo Leopold encapsulated this as the ‘land ethic’: When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect. *Sand County Almanac* (available in Westminster’s Library)

We must seek justice for ALL beings that live here, all 8.7 million species that together share this little blue dot.

*Sandy Wolfe Wood*
EXCERPT FROM *THE SOUL OF THE WORLD*
BY HENRY DAVID THOREAU

“When I would recreate myself, I seek the darkest wood, the thickest and most interminable, and to the citizen, most dismal swamp. I enter the swamp as a sacred place—a sanctum sanctorum. There is the strength, the marrow of Nature.”

**Contemplation for the reader:** *How do your experiences with nature help you to encounter God?*
I was raised in Clinton, Iowa, a town on the Mississippi River in Eastern Iowa. Clinton grew out of the logging industry that used the river to transport logs from the northern forests to the local lumber industry. Clinton was also a center for the processing of basic food products from the productive grain and livestock farms in the region. It was a pleasant town, pretty much out of the main stream of the growing radical and anti-war tensions developing in the more metropolitan areas of the country.

When folks in Clinton dreamed of “finding paradise’ they were mostly thinking of heading north to the lakes and forests of Minnesota. They loved fishing and boating on the 10,000 lakes and hunting in our native wilderness regions. Getting away for a week or so from the open prairies to come to the Land of Lakes felt like finding paradise.

Many of us who now consider ourselves Minnesotans look forward to heading north to enjoy the wonders of God’s creation. Regrettably, in recent years it has become clear that we are slowly but surely losing the paradise we enjoyed to the past? We have not been good stewards of the earth.

This is especially true as it relates to the invasion of many harmful species into Minnesota’s ecosystems. Today, more than sixty terrestrial plant and animal species and 25 aquatic plant and animal species have been identified as invasive species that have invaded the paradise of Minnesota’s forests, lakes and prairies. This invasion is causing great harm to God’s creation. Economists estimate the invasive species in the U.S. cost the economy in excess of $138 billion dollars annually.

My journey from Clinton, Iowa to Minnesota has resulted in my knowing that I am called to be a steward of God’s Creation and we are all charged with the responsibility of taking care of the world.

Gary Beil
IN A ROUND WORLD

In a round world, no corners to hide in
All life connected, part of the whole.
God made but one earth which needs protecting
We face this challenge, we claim this goal.

From space one sees a lovely blue marble,
A floating speck in the star-filled sky.
This was the insight told by the psalmist
We are but dust yet seen by God’s eye.

Gone are the days when we could be masters
Using earth’s gifts for our selfish ends.
Our role today is that of God’s stewards
To be a church that speaks and defends.

Only our God can create a species
Can we preserve what God has designed?
When we destroy life, we change the balance
In ways not thought of, with ends not seen.

It’s time we alter our basic outlook
Renounce dominion, give up our pride.
Working with God, restoring creation
In a round world with nowhere to hide.

Manley Olson
AS WE ADDRESS THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS, WHAT MIGHT BE GOD’S ROLE?

“The wise man in the storm prays to God, not for safety from danger, but for deliverance from fear.” —Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882).

“Call on God for help, but row away from the rocks.” —Indian proverb

“'The words 'if only' do not build a house.” —Arabic proverb

Contemplation for the reader: How can we live out God’s vision for a healed and renewed relationship with God’s creation?

Sunday, April 5

Le Christ marchant sur la mer (Christ Walking on the Sea), by Jacques Richard Sassandra, woodcut, France
THINGS WE CARRY ON THE SEA

We carry tears in our eyes: good-bye father, good-bye mother
We carry soil in small bags: may home never fade in our hearts
We carry names, stories, memories of our villages, fields, boats
We carry scars from proxy wars of greed
We carry carnage of mining, droughts, floods, genocides
We carry dust of our families and neighbors incinerated in mushroom clouds

We carry our islands sinking under the sea
We carry our hands, feet, bones, hearts and best minds for a new life
We carry diplomas: medicine, engineer, nurse, education, math, poetry, even if they mean nothing to the other shore
We carry railroads, plantations, laundromats, bodegas, taco trucks, farms, factories, nursing homes, hospitals, schools, temples...built on our ancestors’ backs
We carry old homes along our spines, new dreams in our chests
We carry yesterday, today and tomorrow
We're orphans of the wars forced upon us
We're refugees of the sea rising from industrial wastes

And we carry our mother tongues
爱 (ai), نبض (hubb), ליבי (libe), amor, love
平安 (ping’an), ماسام (salaam), shalom, paz, peace
希望 (xi’wang), امل (’amal), hoffnung, esperanza, hope, hope, hope

As we drift...in our rubber boats...from shore...to shore...to shore...

Ping Wang
PRAYER OF A GUILTY CHILD

God, you gave us dominion over the earth - but not carte blanche to wreck it. Yet that is what we have done.

We have acted as willful children - ready to destroy, grabbing all the resources we can for ourselves, cruelly hurting others to guard our own spoils, doing whatever we feel is necessary to enrich ourselves, taking and never giving, hoarding in our selfishness, Yet all the while, asking for Your blessing and forgiveness.

How dare we?! How dare I?

If we were parents with such a willful child, what would we do?

I wonder if You, our Parent God, are sorry You ever gave us this power and this charge? In moments of reflection and prayer, I can feel Your pain over what we are doing, and know in my heart that we must change. That "I" must change.

Yet, even as I try, I still cling to these ways and find it hard to relinquish what I know I must -

First and foremost, my sense of privilege and entitlement.
And my feeling that my way in the world is the one right one,
And my ravenous appetite for things,
And my willingness to take from others,
And my blatant disregard for the needs of others,
And my willful ignorance,
And my blindness to needs and injustice.

Dearest God, Maker of All, remake my heart, open my eyes, pry open my hands, and give me the strength to do what I know needs to be done, even in the face of my own disobedience. And please, God, forgive me.

Susan Dray
THIS SACRED PLACE

When we were young, we learned that as Christians we are people of the Word, people guided by the Word. And we soon understood that the Word is embodied in the books of the Bible, “The Word of the Lord,” as we heard it called in church each Sunday.

We also came to understand that the Word is embodied in the life and teachings of Jesus, “The Word become Flesh.” God making Godself known to humankind through the life and death of Jesus, as declared in the familiar and powerful opening words of John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . ” We had readily available to us all, two—reliable, accessible, explorable—sources of the Word.

In more recent years, we have come to see that there is also a third—equally available—source of the Word, that the Creator is present in all parts of Creation, that the Godself can be strongly sensed (if not intellectually perceived) in all parts of the universe: in all their unique intricacies and underlying orderliness, in all their intertwined connectedness and Oneness, in all their beauty.

Like the Desert Mothers and Fathers before them, Celtic Christians believed this deeply, that nature is infused with the divine presence, and that there are thin places . . . times and places where the boundary between the sacred and the everyday feels thin, when God’s presence is more strongly felt. Over the years, many have shared different thin place experiences with us: a substantial majority of them took place in nature.

Sigurd Olson, an early environmentalist, also shared thin place experiences in many of his books. In *The Singing Wilderness* he recalled his sunset climb to a great ridge called Robinson Peak. He remembered sitting there at the top, looking out over the lakes and rivers and rugged hills of the Quetico-Superior, watching the sun set, listening to the soft sound of the thrushes and of his own breathing:

“The sun was trembling now on the edge of the ridge. It was alive, almost fluid and pulsating, and as I watched it sink I thought that I could feel the earth turning from it, actually feel its rotation. Overall was the silence of the wilderness, that sense of oneness which comes only when there are no distraction sights or sounds, when we listen with inward ears and see with inward eyes, when we feel and are aware with our entire beings rather than our senses.”
I thought as I sat there of the ancient admonition, ‘Be still and know that I am God,’ and knew that without stillness there can be no knowing, without stepping back from outside influences, we cannot know what spirit means. . . . ”

How can we not, as People of the Word and People of the World, . . . treasure and protect . . . This Sacred Place?

Marilyn and Alan Youel
EXCERPT FROM BLACK ELK SPEAKS

Then I was standing on the highest mountain of them all, and round about beneath me was the whole hoop of the world. And while I stood there, I saw more than I can tell and I understood more than I saw; for I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all shapes as they must live together like one being. And I saw the sacred hoop of my people was one of the many hoops that made one circle, wide as daylight and as starlight, and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father. And I saw that it was holy...

But anywhere is the center of the world.

Contemplation for the reader: If all humans had a stronger and more conscious connection to the cosmos, would they—we—have harmed the earth?

EXCERPT FROM THE EDGE OF THE SEA
BY RACHEL CARSON

The shore is an ancient world, for as long as there has been an earth and a sea there has been this place of the meeting of land and water. Yet it is a world that keeps alive the sense of continuing creation and of the relentless drive of life. Each time that I enter it, I gain some new awareness of its beauty and its deeper meanings, sensing that intricate fabric of life by which one creature is linked with another, and each with its surroundings...

There is a common thread that links these scenes and memories—the spectacle of life in all its varied manifestations as it has appeared, evolved, and sometimes died out. Underlying the beauty of the spectacle there is meaning and significance. It is the elusiveness of that meaning that haunts us, that sends us again and again into the natural world where the key to the riddle is hidden. It sends us back to the edge of the sea, where the drama of life played its first scene of earth and perhaps even its prelude; where the forces of evolution are at work today, as they have been since the appearance of what we know as life; and where the spectacle of living creatures faced by the cosmic realities of their world is crystal clear.

**Contemplation for the reader:** *How do your experiences with nature help you to encounter God?*


Rachel Carson, American biologist (1907-1964), was an early conservationist who sounded the alarm about the lethal effect of insecticides on birds with her 1962 book, *Silent Spring*. 
MOONRISE
BY D.H. LAWRENCE
And who has seen the moon, who has not seen
Her rise from out the chamber of the deep,
Flushed and grand and naked, as from the chamber
Of finished bridegroom, seen her rise and throw
Confession of delight upon the wave,
Littering the waves with her own superscription
Of bliss, till all her lambent beauty shales toward us
Spread out and known at last, and we are sure
That beauty is a thing beyond the grave,
That perfect, bright experience never falls
To nothingness and tie will dim the moon
Sooner than our full consummation here
In this odd life will tarnish or pass away.

Contemplation for the reader: Oh God, please help us to not take the extraordinary beauty of this earth for granted.