

SEASON OF EPIPHANY
“Companions in the Wild”
Sermon by Karen Hilfman Millson
St. Paul’s United Church, Orillia
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There is something that happens
 deep within us
when we connect with nature –
 whether its through a sunset,
 a thunderstorm,
the beauty of the colours of the parrot,
 or the deep penetrating stare of a cat
 – large or small –
 – something stirs within
– and we remember our connection to all of life.

When I write poetry –
it is often filled with images of nature...
 like this one:

*The wind echoes
the song of my heart*

*crashing waves reflect
the energy of my soul*

*sunlight sparkling on the birch
returns my vision
to what is important*

*Trees saying and dancing
leaves fluttering
...create awareness
of how tiny actions
add to the beauty
and make a difference*

In ancient readings
and in the poetry of soul
we hear of the beauty,
 the wisdom
 and the wonder
of connection to nature.

We see it
in James Cameron's movie Avatar –
a world where every being,
every part of creation,
knows itself to be connected
to all other parts of creation –
to the divine energy
that pulses life through all that is.

And yet –
though ancient texts
and the wisdom within us –
knows of this profound connection to nature
... in the spring of 1984 –
when I
took my first course on preaching,
my professor
(who was maybe only 10 years older than me) –
told us
that we are not to use images of nature in our sermons.
I was so shocked
I didn't even ask why.
Then,
this week during our Adult Enquiry Class
when we were watching a clip
from the DVD series
“Living the Questions,”
I heard
an explanation around our disconnection to nature
that has been part of our liberal Protestantism...
that has caused a multitude of problems.

The theologian
being interviewed is Dr. John Cobb.
“Dr. Cobb –
you've been an outspoken advocate
for environmentalism –
where do you see the church
having impact on this in the future?”

Dr. Cobb answers:
“The environmentalist critics
of the church
have spoken truthfully about us ...
and if we're not honest about our past –

we're not going to be able
to do what we need to do in the future.
(Their criticism is especially true)
about liberal Protestantism
(where we've created)
an extreme dualism
between nature and history
(where we'd argued)
that
any attention to the natural world was pagan
and that Christians
were to be interested only in history.
(Cobb goes on and suggests that)
The concept
that the dominance of history
over nature
constitutes the very heart of our faith –
(has been what we've been taught for over 400 years).
(And so) –
we do share responsibility
for having directed attention –
away from nature
and,
celebrated human's conquer of nature.

Cobb goes on
and talks about the need
for repentance
and how the church can model that
for other institutions
like the government and the universities –
repentance being an acknowledgement
of what we need to turn away from doing ...
Cobb acknowledges
that local congregations
(led by the World Council of Churches and others)
have begun
to repent of the way we have treated nature ..
and began
to take appropriate steps
to celebrate nature on Earth Day
once a year ...
but he goes on to say that
“our anthropocentrism –
our human centered focus”
has such very deep roots –

that on the other 51 Sundays of the year –
you would hardly know
that we had repented
(of our anti-nature perspective).

There is a hunger in our soul
for this connection to nature –
to the trees and the animals,
the waters and the stars.
There is a hunger in our soul
to acknowledge
and live as ones
who know ourselves to not be alone
– but to know ourselves
to be connected to each other ...
and to nature
and to that source
that pulses through all of life –
that energy that power that is eternal.

Our disconnect from nature
has allowed us
to see the world
as a resource for progress.
Rainforests
(from Rainforest Action Network),
for example
“are the richest,
oldest, most productive
and complex land ecosystems on our planet.
They cover only 7% of the earth’s land surface,
yet they are home
to approximately 50% of all life forms.
Sadly,
however,
we are destroying this glorious celebration of life
with (seemingly) wanton abandon,
and demonstrating a frightening lack of foresight.”

Globally –
deforestation is happening
at a rate of an area equivalent
to New York City – every day.

Just this week I read
that to publish the New York Times Sunday edition –
it takes 75,000 trees.

And as the habitat of many species are being destroyed –
species are going extinct
at a rate of 137 species per day.

Such statistics can be so overwhelming
so filled with lament and grief,
that we want to deaden ourselves to the pain...
Buddhist teacher Thick Not Han
reminds us we need to focus
on how we used to be
“inter-be”
we need other people
but also sunshine and trees,
birds and elephants –
we have to inter-be
with everything and everyone.

Though our heritage
of liberal Protestantism
may have taught us to disconnect from nature –
we now live in a time
when we see how destructive that can be
and so we are beginning
to again celebrate
and reclaim the beauty of the earth ...
and honour the earth
as part of the living organism
that we are part of.

There is still much work to do ...
but changes are happening.

A clip
from the Awakening the Dreamer, Changing the Dream
– symposium –
talks about
a different world view
other than progress –
that more and more is being lived.

(Video clip - Another Worldview)

Another clip
from Awakening the Dreamer, Changing the Dream –
the end one of the symposium –
asks the question
of some of the people
who have shared the details
of why we need to wake
from our northern trance
we call progress and modern living ...
“where do you see hope...
in light of all the statistics
that are so overwhelming
about what we have done to the earth?”

(Video clip – Finale – Hope)

And so as we go forth into our week –
I invite us all to notice
the things that you are already doing
that express our celebration of the earth

The cloth bags at the grocery stores
Using tap water in reusable water bottles
Composting
Turn off the lights
Buying more and more foods
with less and less plastic containers
Choosing to walk instead of driving
Coming this Wednesday at 7:30 p.m.
“Waste Not, Want Not” –
learn more

And I invite us to pause
and intentionally notice the wondrous gifts of nature –
in the trees and the birds,
the animals that greet us
with abundant joy,
the sunrise and sunset.

Falling in love with the earth ...
and knowing ourselves
to be profoundly connected to all that lives. ..
that love will give birth
to the wisdom
that will lead us as to what we will
each due to celebrate
and honour our companion in the wild.