

Awakening to Consider Nature

A sermon in the Easter-Pentecost series “Spring Awakenings”

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- [Matthew 6:28b-29 \(KJV\)](#) “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: ²⁹ And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.”
- [Romans 13:11b](#) The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.
- [Sermon-in-a-sentence](#): As we “consider” God’s creation we will grow in appreciation and respect for the beauty and value of the natural world.

Every day of the year has some sort of special designation. There’s not a day of the year that doesn’t have bragging rights for this cause, that organization, or some historical commemoration.

- The United Nations declares some of them, like June 15th, which marks World Elder Abuse Awareness Day each year, or March 20th which is the UN’s International Day of Happiness.
- Pi Day is a fairly recent holiday, inaugurated in 1988 by physicist Larry Shaw of the Exploratorium, a children’s science museum in San Francisco. As every math student knows, Pi is the name of the mathematical constant 3.14 (ad infinitum) symbolized by the Greek letter π (“pi”). Pi Day is observed, of course, on March 14 (that is, the date 3/14).
- How many of you observed National Grilled Cheese Sandwich Day back on April 12?
- One of my favorite special days is September 19, which is International Talk Like a Pirate Day.¹

This past Friday (April 22nd) marked another international designation, appropriately called Earth Day. Earth Day, considered the birth of the modern environmental movement, is not quite fifty years old. How did it come about? Here’s how Los Angeles Times writer Miles Corwin recently reflected back on that time.

[To this day,] from a large crack [in the surface] on the bottom of the Santa Barbara Channel, about 5 miles off the [California] coastline, a few barrels of oil bubble to the surface each day. The slick and the nearby Unocal Corp. drilling platform Alpha are the last visible vestiges of the worst oil spill in the nation’s history [up until then].

...On January 28, 1969, a “blowout” erupted below the platform and, before it was plugged, more than 3 million gallons of crude oil spewed from drilling-induced cracks in the channel floor. [As massive as this spill was, for comparison, the size of the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010 was more than forty times greater than this.] For weeks national attention was focused on the [Santa Barbara] spill’s disturbing, dramatic images. Oil-soaked birds, unable to fly, slowly dying on the sand. Waves so thick with crude oil that they broke on shore with an eerie silence. Thirty miles of sandy beaches coated with thick sludge. Hundreds of miles of ocean covered with an oily black sheen. But the spill’s impact went far beyond

¹ Information gleaned from “Special Days of the Year: from Sober to Silly” by Sheryl Ubelacker, The Canadian Press, posted: 12/27/2012 3:08 pm EST at http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2012/12/27/special-days-of-the-year_n_2371728.html, accessed 4/20/2016

the fouled beaches. The disaster is considered to be a major factor in the birth of the modern-day environmental movement.

Moved by the scope of the ecological damage caused by the Santa Barbara spill, a United States senator from Wisconsin felt compelled to raise the country's awareness that humankind was impacting the natural environment in many ways that were negative, and in some ways that were irreversible. From that, Earth Day was born. Like many of you, I'm old enough to remember the first time Earth Day was observed in 1970. An historian recalls that

At the time, Americans were slurping leaded gas through massive V8 sedans. Industry belched out smoke and sludge with little fear of legal consequences or bad press. Air pollution was commonly accepted as the smell of prosperity. "Environment" was a word that appeared more often in spelling bees than on the evening news.²

Of course, Cleveland had a hand in the beginning of Earth Day, too. Not six months after the Santa Barbara spill, our own Cuyahoga River caught fire. On June 20, 1969 an oil slick on our heavily polluted river was ignited probably by the sparks of a passing train. But that didn't make much news until a month later when Time Magazine published a photo of the Cuyahoga River on fire. Little known fact: the photo that Time published *was* of the Cuyahoga, but "from a much more serious fire in November 1952. No picture of the '69 river fire is known to exist."³ Like most rivers in the industrialized world, the Cuyahoga had caught fire numerous times.

It's as though we had misread God's instruction to Adam as presented in Genesis. While God charged the man to have dominion, authority, over the natural world, the industrialized world has acted as though we were told to dominate – to force our will upon – nature.

How did it come about – this antagonistic relationship between humankind and the natural world? It happened as humankind slowly became increasingly separated from nature. The bulletin cover photograph depicts the deer I found at the end of my driveway one morning last year when I went to pick up the newspaper. That image simply reminds us that the animals we live among give no thought to roads or houses or cars or driveways – they see them simply as obstacles along the way to finding food and water and a place to procreate.

A British Christian environmentalist points out that ...modern urban dwellers are largely cocooned from the environment. We live in solid centrally heated houses supplied by well organised utility companies, depend on machines for transport, food and clothing production, and never feel threatened by other kinds of life except perhaps bacteria and viruses. Whereas in ancient times people lived in daily contact with the natural world, Westerners today only encounter it through TV or tourism or in vestigial form such as pets and gardening. But these are mere hobbies, optional extras not vital activities for human survival as they once were for nearly everyone.⁴

Don't get me wrong: I am very thankful for the conveniences and comforts I enjoy.

- I appreciate an air-conditioned bedroom on a sweltering night, and the magical car seat heaters on a frosty morning.

² EarthDay.org "The History of Earth Day" at <http://www.earthday.org/about/the-history-of-earth-day/> accessed 4/19/2016

³ "Cuyahoga River Fire" by Michael Rotman, Cleveland Historical Society at http://clevelandhistorical.org/items/show/63#.Vxy_WvkrIMw, accessed 4/24/2016

⁴ "The Bible and the Environment" from the John Ray Initiative Connecting Environment, Science and Christianity. http://www.jri.org.uk/resource/bible_wenham.htm accessed 4/19/2016.

- I'm thankful that I don't have to walk to the river every morning to fetch the water I'll be using that day the way millions of people around the world still have to do.
- I enjoy the fact that I can sleep securely at night without threat to property or person by wild animals invading my campsite (with the possible exception of Parker the Dog).

Our lives are safer and more comfortable because of the way we've been able to shape and control the natural world for our benefit. That safety and comfort comes at a cost. The cost of urbanization and suburbanization has been the destruction of natural habitats, the pollution of habitats that haven't been destroyed, and displacement or suppression of various plants and animals. Our separation and isolation — our "cocooning" — from the natural world has come at a cost.

In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus tried to assuage peoples' worries — worries about providing for their daily needs. In the ancient world, providing for daily needs was full-time work. Of course you worked to draw and carry water. Of course you farmed or fished or trapped or hunted for food. There was no clothing store down the street; you had to grow the plants and harvest the fibers for spinning into yarn that you'd then weave into cloth from which you'd make your clothing. And if you *didn't* do all that, you'd be working equally hard at something else so you could trade or barter for the clothing you needed. In those rustic times you bet people worried about their daily needs, what they'd eat or drink or wear.

When Jesus encouraged them to place their trust in God (who already knows what we need), Jesus illustrated what he meant by citing examples from the world of nature:

- God feeds the birds who don't plant or harvest;
- God graces the wild lilies of the field with sustenance that doesn't come from a gardener's hand but from God.

And as much as we get what Jesus was trying to say, those folks on that hillside understood even more because birds and wildflowers were part of everyday life, not precious rarities reserved for zoo aviaries and botanical gardens.

In my "Spring Awakenings" sermon series from Easter to Pentecost we're being invited to explore how our faith calls us to awaken to new possibilities. In Romans Chapter 13 the apostle Paul urged us to adopt a new urgency in living into the consequences of our faith. He wrote, "The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed."⁵ In light of the recent Earth Day observance I wondered how our faith might call us to "wake up from our slumber" about our responsibility as caretakers — stewards — of the natural creation... the Creation of God.

Here's how today's message came about. A Bible verse came to my mind. It wasn't a whole verse; it was just a fragment of the passage I referred to earlier. The good ol' King James translation of the Bible quotes Jesus as saying, "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: ²⁹And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these."⁶

"...Consider the lilies of the field...." That was it! "Consider...!" That's a first step. How might we awaken to the possibility of becoming more responsible in our engagement with the natural world? The first thing we can do is "consider." A dictionary will tell you that the word "consider" has a Latin origin meaning "looking at closely" or "observing." If we *consider*, we are "thinking about something in order to understand it or to make a decision about it."

⁵ Romans 13:11b New International Version

⁶ Matthew 6:28b-29 King James Version

“Considering” is the first step in understanding, and appreciating, and maybe even resolving to change.

Our Office Administrator Crystal Duffield saw something last week that caused her to wish a woman had given some effort to considering the environment. After a mother dropped off her child at our preschool, the mom stopped her car by the church’s music wing entrance, got out, pulled out the car floor mat, dumped its trash and brushed its debris onto our parking lot, got back in and drove off. The limits of her environmental awareness ended at the handle of her car door; it didn’t include the grounds of our church. If only she considered the impact of her action....

Our church’s Priscilla Circle is working on a plan to encourage each one of us to consider something: water. For nearly a year the circle has been engaged with the Presbyterian Women national Bible study, which this year is focused on the theme of water. The members of Priscilla Circle have become more conscious of the preciousness of water – a preciousness that is not easy for us to appreciate since we live next to one of our planet’s largest sources of fresh water. At some point later this year the Priscilla Circle hopes to be able to spur us to “consider” water – to think about it so we can better understand its preciousness and make decisions about what each of us personally might do to be more responsible in our use of it.

That’s the power of “considering”: we begin by becoming more mindful of something. The tested and faithful Old Testament figure Job appreciated how all parts of the natural creation spoke praise for God their creator. Job told his friend Zophar

⁷“But ask the animals, and they will teach you;

the birds of the air, and they will tell you;

⁸ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you;

and the fish of the sea will declare to you.

⁹Who among all these does not know

that the hand of the Lord has done this?

¹⁰In his hand is the life of every living thing

and the breath of every human being.⁷

In *Awakening to Consider Nature*, we accept our responsibility as caretakers selected and empowered by God. As we notice and appreciate the rich, varied and interdependent dimensions of this world in which our lives unfold, we are better able to respect and protect, responsibly preserve and responsibly use the gift of God’s natural creation.

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⁷ Job 12:7-10 New Revised Standard Version