

SERMON FOR APRIL 23, 2017

Where do you feel most peaceful, most connected, most aware of the incredible world we live in? Where do you feel the holy, the wonder, the mystery of life? Where do you see the diversity of creation and get in touch with the astounding miracle that we call earth, this world of ours?

Many people's answer is the outdoors. Church people and non-church people meet the sacred on hiking trails, in camp grounds, on canoe trips, at cottages or cabins, in parks and gardens. Believers and non-believers alike find themselves drawn by the beauty of rocks and trees, skies and seas.

Outdoors, we breathe peace and feel as though we are part of the great tapestry of living things. Outdoors, we are tuned to the cycle of life, living and dying, planting and harvesting, insect egg to larva to chrysalis to adult, nestling bird to fledgling, baby squirrel to adult. In this Easter season, we are watching the world come to life, the resurrection of colour, the unfolding of leaf and shoot, the transformation of hiddenness into beauty. It is the season where hope is as plain as the nose on your face.

By way of peace, the outdoors is an Easter experience. It is there, in creation, that we capture peace that is so elusive in the rush and hurry-up of the everyday.

Just as the frightened disciples were reeling from the power of Caesar Augustus, so we spin in our fear of the violence-is-ok emperor of the USA. In my estimation, Caesar seemed to have more of a plan than does Donald Trump, the

emperor of the arbitrary. We spin in our busyness, our worry, and from the struggle to understand this complex and confusing world of 2017. It is not a huge stretch for us to feel at one with the post-Easter disciples, huddled away in their cocoon of terror.

Into their midst comes risenness, their friend Jesus whom they knew for certain had died and whom they did not know for certain had risen to new life. He slowed their anxious minds. He comforted their anxious hearts. He blessed their anxious spirits. Jesus gave his friends the peace that comes from love that is stronger than death.

Now, let's not get stuck on the impossibility of this "Peace be with you" scene. Let's not shake our heads at spirits who walk through walls, or speak, or bless. We hold onto the real gift of this story-that strength finds us, that fear is not the last word, that transformation is possible, and that love abides in the face of death. The story brings the disciples and us peace that the emperors of that world and ours cannot take away. Much as the disciples received peace from Jesus, the word made human, so we receive peace from that other holy word, creation itself.

In practical ways, and in spiritual ways, we depend on the world we live in. The harsh reality that we face is that our source of life and peace is under assault and we are in danger of losing our earth-relationship that gives life. We hear the big pronouncements of doom and they seem far distant and a future worry. Let me share two earth stories that are small, but alive in the right now.

The first concerns Japanese lady bugs. These look similar to our native lady bugs, but they are monsters. About a decade ago, Niagara grape growers imported Japanese lady bugs to eat aphids that infest grape vines. At first, it seemed like a brilliant idea as these Asian lady bugs are voracious. They gobbled up the aphids and the grape growers did not need to use as much chemical pesticide in their graperies.

However, there are no natural predators for Japanese lady bugs in the Niagara region. They multiplied until there were more of these insects than aphids. They started eating the grape vines they were supposed to protect. They infested homes and barns and took up residence in the mouths of farm animals and pets. And, they bite. And they stink. They are the skunks of the insect world, protecting themselves with squirts of a foul smelling secretion.

Because of these imports, the environment is under assault. From my time living in Vineland, I know the amazing gift of a walk in a grapery when the sun is warm on the grapes and the air is redolent with the smell of fruit. There are many places now that reek of lady bug and the smell of concord is gone. When we are making environmental choices in our local lives, we need to think systemically. We need to think of the balance of creation and promote different species co-existing. This is the source of peace for creation.

The second story is the Monarch butterfly story. Every summer, 4 generations of Monarchs are hatched. The first three generations live 4-6 weeks. The last lives 6-7 months. It is this last generation that migrates from Canada and

the USA to the mountains of Mexico where the butterflies hibernate before making the several thousand km trek back. Remarkable.

The Monarchs are in danger. About 14 years ago, there were 27.5 acres of Monarchs hibernating in Mexico. Three years ago, that number was 1.65 acres. Habitat in Mexico is disappearing because of logging and, paradoxically, because of eco-tourism. Canada, the USA, and Mexico have agreed to preserve this woodland habitat. This has been successful partnership worked out through NAFTA.

The other threat to the Monarch is the loss of breeding habitat in Canada and the States. Monarchs lay their eggs exclusively on milkweed plants. When the eggs hatch, the larvae eat the milk weed until they are ready to spin their cocoons. Urbanization is destroying habitat, and the use of herbicides to kill weeds is destroying the insects.

We can plant milkweed in our yards or in our church yard in order to sustain the life cycle of the Monarchs. The great reward is the sight if these beauties sipping nectar in our gardens. David Suzuki often blogs about the butterflies and right now you can support his astonishing work for the environment by purchasing butterfly Mother's Day cards. These are small acts, but they make a difference. If we each acted in a small way on behalf of our earth, change would come. Nature would find its peace, and we would share in it.

We are in the season of Easter and today, we focus on the Easter gift of peace. We extend that gift to creation, where so many of us find our spirits calmed and our spirits lifted. Creation peace, the restoration of balance is our work to do. We bless earth who, in turn, is our blessing.