

CONFESSION AND CARE FOR THE EARTH: SACRED ACTIVISM

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Thomas Strauss

Confession, Prayer, and Emergence of more life. These are the components of my sermon this morning.

What do we do about the earth? How do we protect her? How do we put aside our own biases, our own life story and understandings in order to listen to each other fully and understand that we all come with different “stories” and firmly held opinions.

How do we here- in the beautiful country that we love, on a spring day such as this- how do we heal the earth and save it for our children’s children and their children’s children...and all the children of the world?

These may seem like a big questions, but they are not. The earth is but a smallish planet, in a single solar system, in one of countless galaxies. What happens here matters, but To stir us to actions of sacrament, we need a bigger context, a larger and deeper understanding. Listen for a deeper story. Listen for a deeper truth. Listen for a new question.

Having awakened to the truth of climate change, the dying of species, the rise of the oceans, the frequency of violent storms, I have no doubt that both corporate and individual confession is needed.

Confession is more than an apology. It is more than saying we're sorry. Confession is a formal statement admitting one is guilty of a crime. It is from the Latin, "*confiteri*" to *acknowledge*.

Is it an exaggeration to say that how we have treated the earth and her resources is criminal? Is it too much to acknowledge that we are all complicit in polluting her waters, - which were meant to pour down like a mighty stream of justice...are we not all complicit in polluting her air, which is meant to come to us as the breath of God. We are guilty of waste and destruction, guilty of compromising the beauty of the planet, Gaia- our home. It is criminal.

We have much to confess....much to acknowledge. And there is no one but us. As poet Annie Dillard reminds us.

There can be no reconciliation, no forgiveness, no right action, without confession. There can be no way forward without *owning up and accepting both blame and responsibility*.

I call not for guilt, but for sacrament. A sacred activism intends to make our work for saving the earth; holy work. Our care for the earth must come from reverence and love. It is justice work, yes, for poor communities carry a greater burden of the degradation of the earth.

We are all affected, though not equally. We are all implicated. And we must act. We must act for justice from a place of reverence and love....reverence for the earth and love for all the people who suffer from the effects of climate change yesterday, today and tomorrow.

Prayer will help. I have had reason of late to rely on prayer. My mother died this week, my siblings were at her bedside, but I was not. I realized I needed to speak to my mother, to pray with her...for her. And my brother arranged the phone near her ear, she may not have heard my voice...but I prayed and it felt right. At this late stage in my ministry...I have come to deep appreciation for the power of prayer as spiritual practice.

There are, in all religious traditions, two primary forms of prayer – gratitude and petition.

Gratitude is the easier. *“Let us pray”*
“We call upon all that is holy to bless the land upon which we have built our sacred sanctuary. We acknowledge the Native tribes that lived upon this land for thousands of years before European settlers came with their guns and diseases.

We give thanks for the life and beauty of this place that is our church home. We are grateful for all that flowers- all the animals that graze here. In humility we promise to instill reverence for this land in our children.”

Prayers of petition do not come as easily to our lips or hearts.

In the Bible it is written: *“Ask and Ye shall receive”*. Again, my mother was making space for me to learn. It dawned on me one day this week as I was driving to work, that I needed a minister. I needed a minister to pray with and for me. It’s hard for ministers to find a minister, but I have wonderful colleagues who are also friends, I called one of them and asked for what I needed, and he said, “I’ll be right over.” *“Ask and ye shall receive”*.

And so let us pray...

“We call upon the Spirit of Life to bless us and we ask for the courage to accept responsibility for care of the earth. Help us to be steadfast in our commitment to reduce our carbon footprint. Help us to be conscious of our creation of waste. Teach us to be patient with one another and to think beyond our own comfort. We ask for forgiveness for harm we have done to the earth. We ask for wisdom to create healing actions that we might contribute to reconciliation with all of life.”

In our service this morning we explore the intersection of science and religion. Staying current with the sciences of archaeology, genetics, biology, astronomy or physics- is a fool-proof way to keep your mind and heart open to child-like awe and wonder.

Awe and wonder are fool-proof pathways to religious questions, contemplation and prayer.

Both science and religion are avenues to reverence.

And so we come to the third part of my sermon.
Confession, prayer – and *Emergence*.

In his book, “The New Cosmic Story: Inside Our Awakening Universe”, John F. Haught invites us into widening and deepening our context...he encourages us to understand that the story of the earth lives within the story of the Cosmos.

He wants us to think big. To go beyond a closed perspective of materialism or naturalism, which holds that the beauty of nature that we can see, and smell and touch is all there is...and when it's gone, it's gone.

Or the second mode of thought about the earth and suffering and death – the binary approach which teaches...don't worry much about this world, for there is a better world to come, there is a heaven, an Eden to follow your death in this world.

Professor Haught offers a new perspective - the concept of Emergence...‘We can anticipate the emergence of “more life”.

Big History (which includes pre-human history) tells us that life evolves...life emerges in wondrous ways...to look at any point in history is to see that “more life” always comes.

If we only focus on the Montgomery County, or on Maryland, or on the U.S. or on North America, or on the planet earth...we will miss much of life....The further back we step, the more life we will see emerging.

This perspective of more life...that we can't yet see...is also a religious concept – better known as faith.

The Universe is still unfolding. There is much to anticipate. The story of the earth is unfinished. That is the new narrative that Haught posits and his title might be Emergent!

Haught is also suggesting an interior narrative for science and the cosmos. There is an inside story beyond what we can see.

Big History shows that the material world is not the only world, there is an interior world to consider. There is more to life than we can see or feel or touch. When the earth was named Gaia, we began to imagine that trees and butterflies and stars have hidden meaning...a story, a level of participation in life that we did not imagine before we named her.

The universe awakened to life 3.8 billion years ago...and it continues to awaken.

Technological breakthroughs are advancing science in exciting new ways. Consider the picture of the Black Hole M87 captured by an Event Horizon Telescope...created by 10 radio telescopes spread across the planet. Making possible a look into the unknown which brought together scientists and technology experts from across the globe. The interdependent web at its best.

Meanwhile, Bones discovered in a cave in the Philippines might have belonged to an early human species.

Meanwhile, in a fascinating article in this weeks' edition of the New Yorker magazine, author Douglas Preston tells the story of a young paleontologist making the discovery of his life.

In the Hell Creek geological formation in North Dakota, graduate student Robert DePalma has found fossils dating back 66 million years to the time known as KT – the boundary between the Cretaceous period and the Tertiary or Paleogene period...It's a long story...the story of when the earth was devastated by the asteroid strike in Mexico-the moment when the dinosaurs and 99.9% of life on earth ended.

But then Emergence happened. And here we are today. It's a long story, but DePalma's "find" was just yesterday.

Big Science and amazing technology, political and social globalization has opened the world and the universe...the story continues...and we don't know what "more Life" will Emerge. My family and I don't even know what "more life" might emerge following my mother's death. But something will be born that we cannot yet see.

Haught posits a context for science that he calls “Anticipatory” – a stance that rests on human longing, waiting, praying and participating...It is an interior story of life as subject, rather than a material measurable outside story of life as object.

What an exciting and profound time in which to be alive.
The Earth will die someday...just like all life will die...but the earth should have a few billion years left in her yet.

So step back and widen your view of what is and what may yet be.

Practice Confession and prayer....believe in Emergence...in the unfinished narrative...and play your part.

Professor, Lowell Gustafson of Villanova University reviewing Haught’s book writes:

“If we are awed by immensity of the universe and complexity of life, if we strive to leave the world a bit better than we found it, if we seek to help create more complex and sustainable relationship, if we are grateful that we can even try...”

Then what might be possible...what “more life” might emerge?
What might be discovered next? What is your part to play?

Amen/Blessed Be

