

Praise God from the Earth
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"Praise God from the Earth" Pilgrim Church UCC, April 24, 2016, (Psalm 148) Fifth Sunday of Easter, Interfaith Power and Light's Faith Climate Action Worship Service

If I had to pick a favorite saint it would be St. Francis of Assisi, hands down/no contest. Saints weren't really on my radar until a chance encounter with St. Francis when I was in high school. Our high school youth group went on a mission trip to Philadelphia and at the soup kitchen where we worked there was a huge painting of St. Francis. For whatever reason, I was struck by this painting. And in the midst of the busyness of preparing the meal and going outside to hand people tickets for the meal, found myself contemplating this man who had a wolf by his side, birds all around, and looked so happy. One of the soup kitchen workers saw me staring at St. Francis and with a look of pure joy on her face said that St. Francis gave her work purpose. After learning more, my admiration grew and he's been a beloved Christian figure in my book ever since. It's strange now to think about my continued work in India with the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross and the Siddi people since the sisters are Franciscan. Their work with a vulnerable population living in extreme poverty and facing terrible prejudice is shaped by their understanding of St. Francis' devotion to the poor.

St. Francis was the founder of the Franciscans and his family was incredibly wealthy with his father making his wealth as a cloth merchant. Though Francis had a change of heart and was drawn increasingly to prayer, pilgrimages, and giving away his wealth. He had a chance encounter with a leper whom he gave money and whose hand he kissed and that encounter made Francis devote his life wholeheartedly to working with social outcasts and the poor. His father wasn't happy with the new direction of his son's life and that conflict came to a head in 1206 when Francis sold valuable cloth from the family store to raise money for the rebuilding of a ruined church. Francis' father brought charges against him and took him to court where Francis returned the money, renounced his family ties, and gave back all his fancy clothes in a dramatic scene in front of the Bishop of Assisi. From there, the movement he ended up founding grew and St. Francis became known for his simple lifestyle and piety, his devotion to the poor, and his love for all of God's creation—including animals. St. Francis was known for preaching to the birds and taming a wolf who was terrorizing a village. To this day St. Francis is one of the most popular saints and he's the patron saint of Italy and the environment.[1]

St. Francis can especially be on our hearts because it was Earth Day on Friday and today is our Interfaith Power and Light Faith Climate Action worship service. St. Francis prayed his Cantic of the Sun (based on Psalm 148) in celebration of God's good creation, a celebration we can continue in our time. It's a long prayer, but part of it goes: "Be praised my lord with all your creatures but especially with Brother Sun because you show us light and day through him and he is lovely glowing with great shine from you my lord: his definition. Be praised my lord for Brother Wind and for the air and cloudy days and bright, and all days else through these you give your creatures sustenance . . . Be praised my lord because our sister Mother Earth sustains and rules us and because she raises food to feed us: colored flowers, grass." [2] It's such a beautiful prayer!

When St. Francis contemplated Psalm 148, he composed his Cantic of the Sun. When we hear Psalm 148, we can also be inspired to praise God for all the beauty we see in our universe. It's unique because it's a hymn of praise calling on all creation to praise God, both animate beings and inanimate objects. Everything and everyone, that certainly means you and me. The Psalmist calls us to praise God from heaven—the sun, moon, bright stars, and heavenly messengers and forces. And to praise God from earth—sea monsters, ocean depths,

all kinds of weather, mountains, trees, animals, and every single person (you who are old together with you who are young.) The Psalmist says: "Let all of these praise the Lord's name because only God's name is high over all. Only God's majesty is over earth and heaven." [3]

Psalm 148 is meant to remind us of Genesis and God's creative work in the world in the beginning. We humans are to recognize that God is in charge and God rules heaven and earth—not us. We are meant to be partners in praising God with the multitude of living beings and inanimate objects like the sun, moon, stars, ocean depths, mountains, and trees. Let all of these praise God.

The question becomes: how do we join all creation in praising God (keeping in mind St. Francis, Psalm 148, and our own inclinations to be grateful for this life)? Well, we can discover ways to help God mend the world. By putting our faith into action—that of course, is one way that we can praise God. When thinking about climate change and protecting our environment it's easy to feel overwhelmed and get depressed. Living in a state on the coast as we do in Massachusetts, many people are worried about the rising sea levels. That's one environmental concern that seems particularly prevalent in our state. After doing some research, one can discover that the sea levels changed very little from year 0-1900. But sea levels began to climb especially in the 20th Century. The major causes of sea levels rising are thermal expansion caused by the oceans getting warmer and the loss of land-based ice (glaciers) due to more melting. Since 1992, the sea levels have been rising .12 inches per year which may not seem like much, but it's a larger rate than the sea-level rise averaged over the last several thousand years. [4]

This is why there are 6-10 island nations around the world (including The Maldives, Kirabati, and The Marshall Islands) who could be wiped out in the not too distant future because of climate change. Some scientists fear that no matter what we do from here on out, we've already condemned some of these island nations to physically disappear as the seas just keep on rising. Michael Mann is a renowned meteorologist at Penn State who said, "It might be that no amount of technology will allow us to prevent inundation of some low-lying island nations. That's a reminder of what I like to call the procrastination penalty, of certain tipping points that we've physically and societally crossed." [5] The truth is, we don't know how this will precisely play out in the future. But contemplating that the sea levels are rising at such a rate that the world will lose entire island nations is really sad.

How do we possibly praise God in the midst of this sadness? Perhaps we focus on those concrete ways that we can help God mend the world. It may be in the form of finding environmental causes that speak to our hearts and donating our money. We could lobby our leaders in government to support environmental legislation or volunteer our time with environmental organizations. Hopefully we can focus on our consumption patterns and how we can reduce, reuse, and recycle every day of our lives.

Today after worship we'll have an opportunity to fill out postcards to be sent to our Massachusetts Senators Elizabeth Warren and Ed Markey asking for them to support President Obama's budget request of \$750 million for the Green Climate Fund. The Green Climate Fund was adopted through the UN with the aim of financing ways to address climate change in developing countries. So those small island nations that are currently dealing with rising sea levels could use the fund to adapt as best they can to the impacts of climate change. The Green Climate Fund could make a huge difference for developing nations that are struggling with the effects of climate change that our entire world has contributed to creating in the first place. For those of us who feel comfortable doing so, your voice can be heard in that political way this morning.

It's also important to know that there have been success stories when it comes to conservation efforts. We'll end by sharing a hopeful story to consider. In the 1950s, the bald eagle population (the very symbol of our own nation) declined from an estimated 300-500,000 eagles to just 412 nesting pairs in the lower 48 states. That's all that remained! But the Bald Eagle Protection Act which banned trapping or killing them got passed and then the pesticide DDT got banned because of its terrible effects on the environment (including animal populations.) Through these conservation measures, the bald eagle was removed from the threatened species list in 2007.

And there's more! The American Bald Eagle Foundation and the state of Alaska created 48,000 acres to preserve the world's largest population of bald eagles (the Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve) and that has helped boost the bald eagle population a great deal. When we look at this specific example of bald eagles, we can see how people can work together through legislation and foundations and scientists and ordinary citizens to protect a species that was on the verge of extinction. It's a rousing success story and the bald eagle is actually just one of several animal species making comebacks. These animals include: swift foxes, peregrine falcons, American alligators, black-footed ferrets, California condors, Florida panthers, and Przewalski's horses.[6]

At the end of the day, we can praise God by helping God mend the world. We can donate, lobby, volunteer, reduce, reuse, recycle, and so much more. We can make a difference, and we can do it side by side. Let all of us praise God's name because only God's name is high over all. Only God's majesty is over earth and heaven. Praise God! Amen.

[1] Richard P. McBrien, *Lives of the Saints: From Mary and St. Francis of Assisi to John XXIII and Mother Teresa*, 404-407.

[2] St. Francis of Assisi in *Earth Prayers From Around the World: 365 Prayers, Poems, and Invocations for Honoring the Earth*, 226-227.

[3] Psalm 148:12-13, Common English Bible.

[4] "Is sea level rising?" National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, <http://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/sealevel.html>

[5] Rachel Nuwer, "What Happens when the Sea Swallows a Country?" BBC, 17 June 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20150616-what-happens-when-the-sea-swallow...>

[6] Brantley Newton, "8 Endangered Species Making Epic Comebacks," *The Dodo*, August 1, 2014, <https://www.thedodo.com/8-endangered-species-making-ep-652564299.html>