First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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Trinity Sunday
Psalm 8

Praising God in the Anthropocene

It's been 50 years since Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin were the first humans to walk on the moon. Expect a flurry of news stories next month when the anniversary date rolls around. If you are old enough to remember when it happened, you probably recall the grainy black and white pictures on your television screen, and the classic phrases heard by 600 million people around the world. "Houston, Tranquility Base here. The Eagle has landed." And not long after that, "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind."

Many people reflected afterwards that the moon never again looked the same to them. Knowing that human beings had traveled to it, walked on it, and returned safely home to Earth changed, if not the actual appearance of the moon, their feelings about it. The image of the earth rising on the moon's horizon gave us a new perspective on the size of our planet, and its place in the universe. A new age had dawned.

Recently, two reports about life in the deepest trenches in the Pacific Ocean also spoke of a new age. One had to do with the discovery that plastics have penetrated these deepest waters in the world. Candy wrappers and a plastic bag were recovered from 36,000 feet under the water's surface. Perhaps even more alarming, a study of some small crustaceans called amphipods showed that these abundant scavengers are eating microplastics in the deep waters. Nearly 7 miles under the sea's surface, every amphipod collected had plastic in its gut. And these creatures are at the bottom of the food chain. They are eaten by shrimp and fish and on up the line, and they are the ocean's recyclers when they eat their predators' remains.
(https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2019/02/deepest-ocean-trenches-animals-eat-plastic/583657/)

The second report also was about these important animals. Amphipods also were shown to have a high level of carbon-14 in their bodies. Where did that come from? Well, in the 1960s, the concentration of this radioactive form of carbon in the earth's atmosphere doubled due to nuclear testing. When testing ceased, carbon-14 began to diminish. But over time, it has become concentrated in the bodies of deep-sea amphipods. (https://www.newsweek.com/ radioactive-carbon-found-mariana-trench-1420732) Human activities are affecting the world's most remote biosystems, much more quickly and lastingly than might be expected.

From the heavens above to the darkest depths of the oceans, humans are changing our home. Mt. Everest is littered with debris and the bodies of adventurers. The snow of Antarctica contains Industrial chemicals. Try to think of a place on Earth without human impact. The world and our relationship to it have changed since the psalmist penned his words a few millennia ago. The change is dramatic enough that scientists are debating: should we call the most recent geological age over, and give a new name to this new state of affairs? Is this age appropriately named the "Anthropocene," the age of *Anthropos*, human, impact?

"O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" With awe and wonder, the psalmist gives credit where credit is due. The world is magnificent, and its creator even more so. God's glory is behind, above, over, under, and within the stars and the mountains, forests and deserts, and the jaw-dropping variety of living things on earth. Children can sense it, and they intuitively praise the

maker of all. Thunderstorms which gush rain and hail, fields of flowers which brighten eyes and hearts, tiny insects whose combined body mass far exceeds that of humankind—as John Calvin observed, "Wherever you cast your eyes, there is no spot in the universe wherein you cannot discern at least some sparks of God's glory." (*Institutes of the Christian Religion,* Book 1, Ch. V, para. 1)

And those sparks elicit praise, and spur reflection on the trinity of the divine-human-earth relationship. So the psalmist asks, "What are human beings that you are mindful of us?" and ruminates on that question. Not only does God care for us, not only is the Creator the same one who stepped into history and set the Israelites free, but the ruler of all has given dominion over this marvel-filled world to mere humans, and called us just a little lower than God.

We live in a moment in which "dominion" needs to be examined and defined, or re-defined. This is the second great transformation in the relationship between humans and the earth. The first, known as the agricultural revolution, took place in several places on the globe between 3000 and 1000 B.C.E. In that transformation, humans learned to organize the landscape and its resources to meet the needs of settled society. Our religious tradition and texts arose out of that relationship. Psalm 8 expresses it beautifully. We are the keepers, the managers, the stewards of sheep and oxen, the birds of the air and the fishes of the sea. As farmers, growers and keepers of the earth's bounty, we are given dominion, the rule of God's earth--which is not the same as domination.

But we are in another transformative moment now. The Industrial Revolution, made possible by the stored energy of fossil fuels, allowed us to separate from Earth's rhythms and the needs of nature for regeneration and renewal. We have grown human-built society as if there were no limits. We have thought of nature as a mine, a limitless storehouse of resources for human use. But the signs are all around us, telling us that this pattern of domination has reached its limits. We need a new theology, a new understanding of our relationship to Earth, one which is ecological and builds a new understanding of God's covenantal relationship with us as Earth's keepers. (see Larry Rasmussen, 2013, *Earth-Honoring Faith*, Oxford University Press)

Around the globe, Christian people are working on this, developing language and thinking which speaks to this new age. In 1979 the Episcopal Church, for whom the language of the liturgy is central to church identity, began saying this prayer. Listen for its resonance with Psalm 8.

God of all power, Ruler of the Universe, you are worthy of glory and praise.

Glory to you for ever and ever.

At your command all things came to be:

the vast expanse of interstellar space, galaxies, suns, the planets in their courses, and this fragile earth, our island home.

By your will they were created and have their being.

From the primal elements you brought forth the human race, and blessed us with memory, reason, and skill. You made us the rulers of creation.(https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Page:Book_of_common_prayer_(TEC,_1979).pdf/370)

When I hear this prayer, I hear Psalm 8 sounding in today's world, calling us to repentance and renewal.

Then there's Patriarch Bartholomew, who holds a role something like a pope in the Orthodox Christian world. For decades he has addressed ecological degradation as a spiritual issue, saying things like this:

"As Orthodox Christians, we use the Greek word *kairos* to describe a moment in time, often a brief moment in time, which has eternal significance. For the human race as a whole, there is now a *kairos*, a decisive time in our relationship with God's creation. We will either act in time to protect life on earth from the worst consequences of human folly, or we will fail to act. May God grant us the wisdom to act in time. Amen." (https://www.patriarchate.org/bartholomew-quotes)

And Patriarch Bartholomew has found a kindred spirit in Pope Francis, who issued the encyclical *Laudato si'* in 2015, calling the earth "our common home." Together, these two Christian world leaders call for prayer for the earth, saying:

The earth was entrusted to us as a sublime gift and legacy, for which all of us share responsibility until, "in the end", all things in heaven and on earth will be restored in Christ (cf. Eph. 1:10). Our human dignity and welfare are deeply connected to our care for the whole of creation.

(https://www.patriarchate.org/-/joint-message-on-the-world-day-of-prayer-for-creation)

And these two world leaders are not at all shy about the urgency of this call to change, specifically addressing human impact on the world's climates.

My friends, what are we to make of this? Who are we, that God would ask us to take care of the whole world, all sheep and oxen, the beasts of the field, the birds of the air and the fish of the sea? Individually, the moon and the stars can make us feel small and insignificant. But collectively, we as a human race are having an impact on this fragile earth, our island home. Our collective impact is already harming the world's poor and putting at risk the quality of life of future generations. A relationship of domination is not what God intended. This is the moment when, as the Episcopal prayer indicates, our memory, reason, and skill need to be directed to work in concert with our faith, hope, and love to protect this life-giving common home.

O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! We are so blessed to live in an extraordinarily beautiful landscape, where mountains and rivers, wild beasts and vast forests remind us daily of God's glory. We are blessed by the earth's bounty, the food and water and air which sustain our lives. In this new Anthropocene age, praising God means always respecting and caring for God's good earth. Loving God with all our heart and soul, mind and strength means devoting all our God-given abilities to working with others to restore health where we have desecrated the earth. Loving neighbors means tending the garden God has placed us in so that all have enough. We honor God when we honor God's creation. How will you do that this day?

The psalmist never imagined seeing the earth from the vantage point of the moon as we have done. Yet his words call us to reconsider our place, and our calling, on this precious planet. May we be humble enough, and wise enough, to answer our vocation as earth's grateful keepers. For the glory of God.