

St. John's Church, Clayton, CA
Fourth Sunday of Easter

April 13, 2008
Pastor Jim Stickney

Almighty and everlasting God, you made the universe with all its marvelous order, its atoms, worlds, and galaxies, and the infinite complexity of living creatures: Grant that, as we probe the mysteries of your creation, we may come to know you more truly, and more surely fulfill our role in your eternal purpose; in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. [Collect #40, For Knowledge of God's Creation, BCP p. 827]

Four times in the church year I preach on stewardship. Shortly after New Year's Day it's a good time to consider our stewardship of our time and how we use it. On the Sunday in the Labor Day weekend we think about stewardship of our work. The most familiar use of the word "stewardship" in church circles might be the fall pledge campaign, when the pastor speaks of the stewardship of our money.

But today, shortly after Easter and the vernal equinox, and in anticipation of the new celebration called Earth Day, I want to reflect with you on how we might be better stewards of God's beautiful creation, which enters our prayers (in Eucharistic Prayer C) as "this fragile earth, our island home" If you worshipped here on Ash Wednesday, among the sins your repented was: our waste and pollution of [God's] creation, and our lack of concern for those who come after us. Consider that these prayers were composed in 1976!

Our church was among the first to provide a contrasting Christian voice against a shallow apocalypticism and its view that since the world was ending soon there really wasn't any need for Christians to concern themselves with a wicked world which was doomed to destruction anyway. But has our church done enough?

I recall a professor of theology cautioning us seminarians about that famous verse in the first creation story; "Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it." The world-view of such a verse is not of a Garden of Eden (the second creation story) but instead of a hostile wilderness in opposition to humanity, needing taming. He pointed out that some religious traditions made it rather clearer that the world was sacred; there would be a prayer of thanksgiving for the life of an animal whose flesh would be consumed to sustain the conscious life of a believer, and the sense that our own physical body would one day return to the earth.

Like many of you, I've seen a remarkable change in the Christian attitude to creation. More and more Christians these days have put this "conquer the earth" view behind them, and we talk much more openly about being good stewards of the earth. And what is a steward, after all, but one who takes care of another's goods: in this case both the creation of God and the inheritance of succeeding generations.

The April issue of Episcopal Life brings home this renewed awareness. The cover story is "Green education: Episcopal schools move toward sustainability." My reflections in this sermon are (admittedly) general, but this article tells of very specific ways in which young people are deepening their care for creation.

Two days ago I tackled a cycling road that I had known of for many years: the climb up Mount Diablo. When I was called here to serve as your interim, every day I saw Mount Diablo looming above me like a challenge. So last Friday I started up the ascent. At first there were more cyclists than cars, and even the cars were going slow, enjoying the spring wildflowers and the ever-expansive views. As a cyclist, I have more stamina than speed. And since I was climbing slowly, I really took my time to enjoy the spring day! After a couple of hours and plenty of altitude breaks, I did make it to the top, and I thought, I'm coming out here again soon to worship God in creation!

In our Gospel today Jesus speaks of himself both as the gate of the sheep and also as the good shepherd of the sheep. It's not a difficult task of the imagination to picture a green pasture (to pick up on the imagery of the 23rd Psalm) and the shepherd with a staff to keep away any predators. There's an intentional mixing of metaphors here: the gate of the sheep opens up into a community sheepfold, where all kinds of sheep are kept safe. When it's daylight, each shepherd calls forth those members of his own flock. How do shepherd and sheep know each other? Partially by sight, and even more, by voice. But a seminary buddy of mine from Montana told us that it's even more earthy: the shepherd smells like the sheep!

For nearly two years, St. John's has been praying for the discernment of a shepherd "who will equip us for our ministries." Are you and Peter Champion going to work so closely together that, in some sense, you will smell like each other? Whether or not it's literally true, you will certainly learn to read the tones of each others voices, and to pick up on what might be unsaid as well as spoken. For me, it's been quite enjoyable to meet with him and share my perspectives on this unique gathering of Christians in Clayton Valley that call St. John's home!

The Book of Common Prayer includes a section, "Prayers for the Natural Order." In one of these prayers, the word "dominion" from the Genesis story has been modified from its hostile context and reworked into sharing God's work, as if the work of the sixth day of creation is still ongoing and evolving.

Let's share this prayer together — it's prayer #41 on page 827:

Almighty God, in giving us dominion over things on earth, you made us fellow workers in your creation: Give us wisdom and reverence so to use the resources of nature, that no one may suffer from our abuse of them, and that generations yet to come may continue to praise you for your bounty; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.