

On Monday, a headline caught my eye. “Point of No Return: New Orleans Relocation Must Start Now.” The article was about a study that said New Orleans is not going to be a functioning city in two to three generations from now. It will be mostly underwater, uninhabitable. Insurance companies are already abandoning the city in terms of coverage, and they say that the salty, sea water could actually push inland in the swampy state over 50 miles from the current coastline – destroying the ecosystem.

It’s not a matter anymore of if the city can use engineering skills, levees, pumps, sea walls. New Orleans is, to use a medical term, now on hospice and residents are advised to relocate, now.

Other cities are at risk, too. Hoboken, Boston, Houston, Miami, Charleston, South Carolina. They’re all at risk. And not just from average sea levels, but from saltwater infiltrating the porous limestone underground, seeping its way into the water supply for tens of millions of people.

That article made me wonder about Rhode Island’s projected sea level impacts, and I found the following on Senator Whitehouse’s website. He writes, “A baby girl born today [at South County]. . . will see these changes in her expected lifetime [because of rising sea levels].

Western Newport becomes a new island. The end of Point Judith and the tip of Little Compton break off from land, to become new small islands. Nonquit Pond is permanently absorbed into the ocean. Warwick Neck becomes Warwick Neck Island. Warren and Bristol become a new island.” And everyone who owns property – commercial or residential, in low-lying coastal areas, sees their property value washed away by the tides – un-insurable, un-mortgageable, un-sellable.

What this means is that there will be a migration of millions of Americans inland in this century. The housing crisis, already “underwater” in financial terms with too few houses and prices that young adults cannot afford, will exponentially escalate.

The more I thought about the environment and the increasing strength and frequency of natural disasters, and the rising cost of insurance, and the rising cost of energy, the more emotional and hopeless I felt.

And I realized that there was a theological responsibility we have as Christians in this environmental crisis we're in.

I don't know about you, but for most of my life, when I have thought about our role in creation from a Biblical perspective, I have focused on the stories of Genesis. There are two stories. They start with "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" . . . and God made thing after thing after thing, and it was good. And then God made humans. And it says that God "gave" everything to us. We have dominion over animals and ownership over plants. God "gave" it to us.

And, friends, we've taken that as a blank check, a license to literally kill, a get out of jail free card for polluting. For thousands of years, we've thought of ourselves as the apex of the food chain. The kings of the hill. The central character in the narrative. The authoritarian rulers whose needs are more important than those of others.

And in this theological interpretation of: God made the earth, God made us, God told us we were in charge, and God stepped back; we have overstepped our bounds. Particularly in the last 200 years, as we have industrialized, we have plundered the earth to obtain energy sources for machines and it's nearly impossible to deny that the environment has changed because of it.

But there is *another* story of creation in the Bible - Psalm 104. It is a song of God's power and majesty. A song of God's creativity. It has a similar order of events. First, there was nothing, then there was a ball of earth covered in water. Then the waters were told to recede and dry land became visible. Mountains and valleys were sculpted. Streams fed plant life. Birds and animals and humans lived together. Oh! And in this song, God has a pet sea monster. It is an incredible song of God's creation, and one that makes me laugh and smile. Similar to Genesis but unique.

This song paints an incredibly beautiful picture. The middle verses say, “From your lofty abode you water the mountains;  
the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.

<sup>14</sup>You cause the grass to grow for the cattle  
and plants for people to cultivate,  
to bring forth food from the earth

<sup>15</sup> and wine to gladden the human heart,  
oil to make the face shine  
and bread to strengthen the human heart.

<sup>16</sup>The trees of the field are watered abundantly,  
the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.

<sup>17</sup>In them the birds build their nests;  
the stork has its home in the fir trees.

<sup>18</sup>The high mountains are for the wild goats;  
the rocks are a refuge for the coney.

<sup>19</sup>You have made the moon to mark the seasons;  
the sun knows its time for setting.

<sup>20</sup>You make darkness, and it is night,  
when all the animals of the forest come creeping out.

<sup>21</sup>The young lions roar for their prey,  
seeking their food from God.

<sup>22</sup>When the sun rises, they withdraw  
and lie down in their dens.

<sup>23</sup>People go out to their work  
and to their labor until the evening.

<sup>27</sup>These all look to you  
to give them their food in due season;

<sup>28</sup>when you give to them, they gather it up;  
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.

<sup>30</sup>When you send forth your spirit, they are created,  
and you renew the face of the ground.

This is the word of the Lord.           **Thanks be to God.**

One of the things I love about this psalm is how all of creation is so perfectly balanced. Humans are not masters of the earth, they are a piece of it – symbiotically designed to balance with the other pieces of creation. Everything is in harmony with one another.

Unlike our interpretation of the Genesis stories, in Psalm 104, we humans are not the lords of creation, the Lord is. In this text, it is God who created and continues to create. God made the waters and provides food and breath itself and continues to provide generation after generation. We are not in charge in Psalm 104. We are in awe.

In fact, the psalm ends with absolute wonder. It says, “<sup>33</sup>I will sing to the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being.

<sup>34</sup>May my meditation be pleasing to him,  
for I rejoice in the Lord.

Bless the Lord, O my soul.

Praise the Lord!

This is also the word of the Lord.           **Thanks be to God.**

Praise the Lord! This is significant, friends! Psalm 104 is the first time in the Bible that we get the phrase, “Praise the Lord!” And in the original Hebrew, it says, “Hallelujah!” “Hallel” meaning “praise,” and “yah” meaning “Yahweh” or “praise the name of the Lord” – hallelujah. When the psalmist sang a song about creation, about what God has made and is still making, they found themselves in such amazement that they had to come up with a new word - a new expressions of awe and wonder. Hallelujah. Praise the Lord! Until it appeared in Psalm 104, it was not in the Bible. We use it in church all the time now, but its origin is right here, in this song about how perfectly wonderful creation is!

The psalmist sings about creation not as raw materials for us to use, but as relationships. Mountains and valleys, birds and cattle, humans and lions — all living things drink the same water, share the same breath, and have the same dependence on the Creator. We all have a rhythm of work and rest, seasons of growth and harvest, birth and death. We're all in it together.

This is not accidental. This is theological.

The psalmist is teaching us that creation is not a backdrop for human life which gets center stage. Rather, it is a communion of creatures, each one beloved by God. The world is not a warehouse for our consumption; it is a sanctuary of God's presence.

When we talk about environmental care at church, we are not talking about a political issue or a hobby for people who like hiking. We are talking about honoring the relationships God has woven into the world. We are talking about living in a way that reflects the truth Psalm 104 proclaims: that the earth is the Lord's, not ours, and we are one species among millions within it, not the supreme beings. That protecting creation is about living in harmonious, humble relationships with not just our neighbor humans but our neighbor species.

Last summer, a group of six people – representing the deacons, the elders, the trustees, the building and grounds committee, and the mission committee got together and learned about what it would mean to become an Earth Care Congregation. Earth Care Congregations, or ECCs for short, are churches in our denomination that are intentionally committed to stewarding the earth and proclaiming our interconnectedness with our environment.

We were asked to look at four areas of our church's life – our worship, our education, our building and grounds, and our missions. Do we show care for our environment in our worship? Yes. Nothing says it better than the Chapel in the Pines. We worship outside in the summer and have invested in a restoration of the chapel for generations to come. Do we show care for our environment in our education? Yes. For example, this year's Vacation Bible School is themed around water, so we'll be talking about clean, life-giving water all

week! Do we show care for our environment in our building and grounds? Yes. One of the members of the team arranged for an energy audit of the church and the auditor was very pleased with our efficiency and also suggested to us that we install a device which manages our HVAC system and is saving the church about \$2000 a year on electricity costs! And do we show care for our environment in our missions? Yes. If you were at the beach yesterday for the cleanup, would you raise your hand?

The team of six, with the unanimous support of the session, applied to the Presbyterian Church (USA) and got back an enthusiastic yes. We qualified. And not only did we qualify. We are the first congregation in in Southern New England to qualify. The first in Connecticut, Massachusetts, or Rhode Island. And that is something to be proud of.

This status didn't cost us a thing. In fact, it has already saved us money.

It's easy to get overwhelmed by the weight of environmental challenges. It's true that most of the heavy lifting to address global warming and pollution must be done on an international government level and involve Fortune 500 companies. We don't have a seat at those tables, but when I get discouraged, I remember one of the most important writers I discovered in seminary - Wendell Berry.

In his 1989 essay, *Word and Flesh* he writes, "The question that *must* be addressed, therefore, is not how to care for the planet, but how to care for each of the planet's millions of human and natural neighborhoods, each of its millions of small pieces and parcels of land, each one of which is in some precious way different from all the others. Our understandable wish to preserve the planet must somehow be reduced to the scale of our competence – that is, to the wish to preserve all of its humble households and neighborhoods, [and I would add, houses of worship].

What can accomplish this reduction? [he asks] I will say again, . . . that only love can do it. Only love can bring intelligence out of the institutions and organizations, where it [glorifies] itself, into the presence of the work that must be done."

Love is never abstract, he said, love is particular. You can love the planet but what you really love is the stretch of Westerly's Town Beach you walk on, or the dahlias and hydrangeas that bloom in your front yard, or the colors of the trees you drive by in the fall, or the shadows and light that dance as we worship in the Chapel in the Pines.

We love this community. It is our home. We share it with sea gulls and seals and coyotes and white-tailed deer and gray squirrels and blue jays. We share it with beach grass and milkweed, maples and pines. It is not ours to control. It is not ours to manipulate and subdue. It is God's creation, and we are a part of it. When its beauty amazes us, we say, "Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!"

Friends, if we love our environment, if we realize our interdependence with it, if we want to give our grandchildren and great-grandchildren a fighting chance to know it as we know it, we'll take better care of it. Amen.