

## Celebrating and Sustaining God's Good Creation

It seems fitting, given our emphasis this summer on peace, that we would observe World Peace Day. This United Nations sanctioned holiday was first celebrated in 1981. Two decades later, in 2001, the UN General Assembly unanimously voted to designate the day as a period of non-violence and cease-fire. The day is observed by many nations, political groups, military groups, churches, and individuals. It makes sense for us to join them. But it's too early. World Peace Day isn't until September 21.<sup>1</sup>

But when I received an email from MCC announcing that their Peace Sunday theme this year is Climate Action for Peace I changed my mind. What topic could be more appropriate for one of the three Sundays we're focusing on peace with creation? And so, I decided that we would observe Peace Sunday a month early.

You might wonder how climate change and peace are connected. You don't often see words together.<sup>2</sup> The most common understanding of peace is the absence of war and violence. But the broader definition of peace, the Hebrew vision of shalom, includes health, reconciliation, right relationships, safety, and material well-being. Shalom is a reality where every person can embrace life in its fullness. As MCC and their partners work toward this broader vision of peace, it's clear that climate change is standing in the way.

The effects of climate change are vast, impacting people in communities around the world. Reports from MCC's local partners demonstrate how climate change is making difficult situations even worse. Farmers struggle with scarce resources and extreme weather, leading to conflict in their communities. Families are forced apart as people migrate to earn a living when their crops fail season after season. Disasters like hurricanes and floods are becoming more frequent and more severe, destroying homes and livelihoods and uprooting lives.

As Christians, we have the responsibility to care for creation — today and for future generations. While there are differing opinions on the causes of climate change and the remedies for it, I hope that we can all agree that the whole earth – including the plants, water, creatures, and humans it contains – is worthy of our efforts to celebrate it, care for it, and sustain it.

In my sermon today, I'm drawing heavily from the notes in MCC's Peace Sunday Packet as we reflect on the realities of climate change, but also on the hope of a future where a true and just peace is a reality.

Both creation stories call humans to live constructively, peacefully and in interdependence with the natural world. Genesis 1:28 reads, *God blessed them and said to them, "Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and master it. Take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, and everything crawling on the ground."*<sup>3</sup> And from Genesis 2:15, *The LORD God took the human and settled him in the garden of Eden to farm it and to take care of it.*<sup>4</sup> Humans are meant to be caretakers of the earth as we live on it.

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<sup>1</sup> [International Day of Peace | United Nations](#)

<sup>2</sup> This sermon draws from the Week Eleven Prepare Essay and Sermon Notes written by Joanna Harader, *Current: Seeking Peace Together*, a digital curriculum from MennoMedia, [Current - Menno Media](#); MCC's Peace Sunday Packet, [2023mccpeacesundaypacketdigital.pdf](#); MCC's Climate Action for Peace, [Climate Action for Peace](#); and *Earth Trek: Celebrating and sustaining God's creation*, by Joanne Moyer as adapted by Karla Braun .

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 1:28, *Common English Bible*

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 2:15, *Common English Bible*

Two Christian concepts key to living out this responsibility are humility and reconciliation. Humility is having a proper view of our place in the world. It's not self-debasement but self-understanding within a larger context. Mennonites call this *gelassenheit* — yieldedness — a laying down of our wishes as primary and giving importance to the needs of others, and the call of God as best we understand it. This humility leads us to understand our interdependence, our interconnectedness to each other within the community.

As members of the created order, we're not only connected to one another but to all that God created and called good: the air and the birds that fly in it; the oceans and the fish who live in them; the land and its creatures from the infinitesimal organisms to the majestic animals. They all interact with each other, the air, the water and the land.

Connectedness and interdependence lead to us affecting each other, which leads at times to violence and harm. This calls us to the great ministry of reconciliation that Christ entrusted to us. Scarcity caused by climate change — such as water rationing, air pollution, limited food due to bad harvests — can cause tension for groups of people who are anxious to meet their needs. On an individual basis or a larger community basis, scarcity motivates violent actions against people outside the group in the scramble for enough. Climate change, therefore, results in greater conflicts between people. Conversely, actions to reduce, mitigate and adapt to climate change are opportunities to reconcile.

Wars and militarization are wasteful and destructive to both humans and their environments. This exacerbates and causes both climate change and conflict between people. Creation care, then, is not only a responsibility, but is also a way to work for peace.

God's purpose throughout the biblical story is to restore creation. As God's image bearers: we're called to participate with God in that process, seeking the reconciliation of not only people but also creatures and the earth itself.<sup>5</sup> From creation to fall to redemption to restoration, in the Bible, we read of a story of hope that says beauty and goodness and peace can arise from the ashes of our worst.

We read that Christ's example of reconciling all things is the way of peace that we should follow. Jesus demonstrated this by reconciling with those who had been marginalized by society, reconciling with those who would harm him, and reconciling with the birds of the air and lilies of the field that are be-splendored by God's provision.

All creation points to God. The diverse and abundant creation joins us in praising God. The many passages that cite trees clapping their hands, seas roaring, hills singing are not only poetic in nature, but also tell us that humans are not alone in their awareness of their place within creation.<sup>6</sup> Even the land itself shows reverence to its creator.

From Moses to Jesus to the desert fathers (hermits) of early Christianity to many people today in search of spirituality, the wilderness — the natural world — is a place to seek connection with God. There's something in creation itself that communicates something important about God.

As we humble ourselves in the presence of something so much bigger, we can learn ways to coexist in peace. We can see the abundance that is available if no one takes too much. However, the global climate crisis has come about because some have taken too much — and those "some" include many of us in Canada and the U.S.

God's accusation against Israel in Hosea 4:3 could be describing the world today: *Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing.*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:11-21

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 55:12, Psalm 65:7; Psalm 98:8

<sup>7</sup> Hosea 4:3, *New Revised Standard Version*

Deuteronomy connects the flourishing of the land with the people's obedience to God and its trials with their disobedience. I don't connect disasters with God's punishment of the specific group of people in the location where it happens, but perhaps some form of connection does exist. Rather than pointing to sins we normally associate as individual ethical failings, we could instead ask what collective sins — such as over-consumption and greed, ungratefulness, inequity — may have brought unhealth to the land.

Climate scientist and evangelical Christian Katharine Hayhoe suggests alternative language for global warming: she calls it “global weirding.” While the planet is clearly warming, climate change is also about weather becoming strange! More frequent and more severe storms, weather events previously unheard of in new locations, droughts and floods have been on the rise and increasing in severity for a while. Dr. Sibonokuhle Ncube, theologian and development expert from Zimbabwe, says droughts used to come every ten years, then every five; now they arrive back-to-back.

Many people in Canada and the U.S. are only beginning to experience some of the devastating effects of climate change. Record breaking heat waves, devastating wildfires, and an increasing number of damaging tornadoes and hurricanes are a few examples of the constant stream of severe climate-related events causing loss and even death in North America.

Yet the situation is grossly unbalanced with those least responsible for climate change being most affected. In 2019 figures, Canada generated an average of 15.4 tons of emissions of CO<sub>2</sub> per person per year (ranked 7th in the world). Individuals in the U.S. emitted 14.8 tons per capita (ranked 10th). While Zimbabwe, already far more affected by climate change and less well-resourced to adapt, has a rate of just 0.8 tons per capita.

In the Leviticus passages laying out the Sabbath year and the Year of Jubilee principles, the writer records these words from God: *The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants. Throughout the land that you hold, you shall provide for the redemption of the land.*<sup>8</sup> Indigenous peoples in North America might remind us of this as they reflect on broken treaties and missed cultural understandings: one doesn't own the land but merely tends to it.

This passage further connects the flourishing of the land with people's obedience and promises God will provide if the people follow God's commands to tend both the land and the people on it. Similarly in Luke 4:18 when Jesus stands up to read in the synagogue, he chooses Isaiah 61, proclaiming his mission “to bring good news to the poor.... to set free those who are oppressed.”

From creation to the fall to redemption to restoration. Even in a moment where we appear to be living out our worst, there is hope. Hope that is found in God, the creator, whose handiwork is resilient and living despite the damage we've inflicted. Hope that the God who loves us can equip us — the body of Christ — with the courage and creativity to act in this moment of crisis. Hope that others are already working to restore creation and safeguard vulnerable people.

The seed of change is love. The psalmist declares, *Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds. Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains; your judgments are like the great deep; you save humans and animals alike, O Lord.*<sup>9</sup> The Spirit of God spreads love and compassion for all creatures.

God's saving of humans and animals happens both in this world and the world to come. This-world salvation is a saving from imminent death or destruction, a pressing and current need. But Scripture has several ways of speaking about salvation. Passages from Isaiah stating that “the

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<sup>8</sup> Leviticus 25:23-24, *New Revised Standard Version*

<sup>9</sup> Psalm 36:5-6, *New Revised Standard Version*

wolf and the lamb shall feed together” and from Romans predicting “that the creation itself will be set free from its enslavement to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” describe a salvation that is about the present and future restoration of the earth and its creatures.<sup>10</sup> Shalom will be fully realized. Through Christ’s death and resurrection, the whole universe including “every creature under heaven” is saved, restored, made new.<sup>11</sup> Christ’s incarnation is an affirmation of the goodness and sanctity of the material substance of the earth.

Part of our living out the good news is seeking reconciliation not only with the people around us but also with the created order. Christ, the firstborn of all creation, reconciles “all things” to himself, “whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.”<sup>12</sup> This implies more than human life. Our future hope is not merely to escape this world. It’s bodily resurrection and participation in the new heaven and new earth where shalom has come to fruition. We can begin that work now as we seek reconciliation for how we have harmed the earth.

The translation of Genesis 1:28 that I quoted at the beginning of the sermon likely sounded different than what you’re used to hearing. Instead of “humans taking charge of the earth,” we often hear it stated this way: *God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”*<sup>13</sup> How does the command to have dominion, complete authority, or power over the earth fit with humility, surrendered-ness, connection and reconciliation?

The word translated as “multiply” also refers to growth in the sense of maturing and achieving wisdom. The word translated as “subduing” also refers to applying persistent and artful pressure to bring about greater abundance. Examples of this are kneading a piece of dough or pruning a plant. Part of God’s command to the human inhabitants of the earth is to mature and achieve wisdom in doing what is necessary to bring about greater abundance in the earth. This abundance isn’t for the benefit of one group of humans alone, or even for all of humanity, but also for every living thing that fills the earth. Read in this way, this tricky passage takes on meanings that fit the arc of redemption.

The cycle of creation in Genesis 1 is followed by a time to pause and reflect. At the end of the creation story, God rests. This rest became instituted in Jewish religious tradition as a day of rest every seventh day. Rest is built into the Sabbath year and the Year of Jubilee. For Christians, this traditionally occurs on Sunday. It gives us a chance to slow down and worship. It gives us a chance to connect with God and discover inner peace in a variety of ways — through prayer, human relationships and through the beauty and wonder of nature. Through the majesty of creation, we can find our way back to the arms of our Creator.

As people of peace, we’re invited to explore what it means to be reconciled to God, one another and creation. We’re invited to consider what it means to care for God’s good earth and to care about the welfare of our global neighbors impacted by climate change. Together, we are invited to take climate action for peace. May it be so.

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<sup>10</sup> Isaiah 65:17-25 and Romans 8:18-25

<sup>11</sup> Colossians 1:23

<sup>12</sup> Colossians 1:20

<sup>13</sup> Genesis 1:28, *New Revised Standard Version*