

**Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Third of Four Sermons in a Series entitled “Sacred Creation”**

“God as ‘She’ and Earth as ‘Mother’”

The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper

Hebrew Scripture: Genesis 1:24-31

Christian Scripture: Matthew 23:37 - 24:8

Sunday, 12 May 2019



Happy Mothers' Day to all the mothers connected to our faith community. I pray that, if you are able, you express in some way, via a card, letter, telephone card, or goofy emoji, “Happy Mothers' Day” to a special woman who dedicates much of her life to others. There are all kinds of snarky cards out there to send your mother; I sent one to mine. I found a card that included this bit of humour that I believe fits perfectly with our scripture reading, our focus on science, the environment and Mothers' Day.

A little girl asked her mum, “How did the human race appear?” Mum answered, “God made Adam and Eve and they had children, and so was all humankind made ...”. Two days later the girl asked her Dad the same question. Dad answered, “Many years ago there were primates from which the human race evolved.” The confused girl returned to her mum and said, “Mum, how is it possible that you told me the human race was created by God, and Dad said they developed from primates?” The mother answered, “Well, dear, it is very simple. I told you about my side of the family and your father told you about his!”



I do pray all of you have a Happy Mother's Day. At Centre Congregational Church, we will do much to celebrate this day, but we do so realizing that for *most*, rather than just a few, Mothers' Day can be full of mixed feelings and even great melancholy. For many, our mothers have recently died or we have ached for their presence for many years. For others, not having children is especially difficult. I know many very good mothers who for one reason or another are

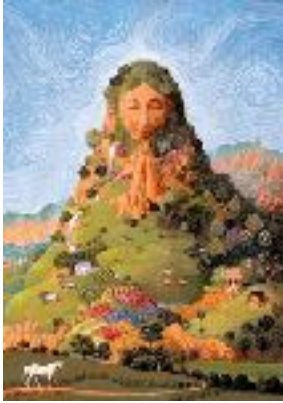
estranged from their children. Still others grieve their motherhood due to their children’s substance abuse, mental illness or vast distances. Whether you have reason to express joy or profound sadness today, I pray that in gospel message and the fellowship of brothers and sisters in Christ joy is affirmed and distress is soothed. Happy Mothers’ Day.

Today, for Mothers’ Day we combine the themes of the environment as a sacred creation and Mothers’ Day by focusing on... What? That’s right! ‘Mother Earth’.



You can see on your bulletin cover there are many clever images that honor Mother Earth. From the commandments we have: “Love your mother”. From politics: “I’m with her”. A common adage: “Respect your mother”. And a Post-It Note: “Clean-Up Your Mess”.

Last week, we examined cosmocentric Christianity (centred on the Earth's salvation) as opposed to anthropocentric Christianity (centered on humans).



As we celebrate Mothers' Day and God's creation, I think the concept of 'Mother Earth' is instructive. While Mother Earth is a Greco-Roman and thus not a Christian concept *per se*, Christianity includes all kinds of wisdom from many faith traditions. For example, elements of Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Gnosticism and Greek thought are all found in Christianity. 'Mother Earth' is the personification, or the anthropomorphization, "of nature that focuses on the life-giving and nurturing aspects of nature by embodying it, in the form of the mother".¹ In short, we call the Earth, Mother Earth, because she gives life. And it is no far stretch to conclude that the commandment to "Honor your mother" includes the Earth.

¹ "Mother Earth", Wikipedia. https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mother_Nature, accessed 12 May 2019.



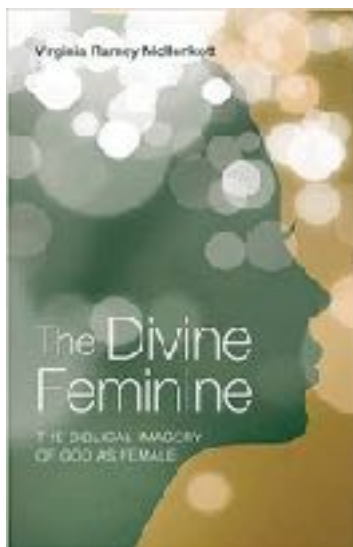
Just as it is logical to understand the Earth as a woman, or a mother, so it is important to understand God as a woman and a mother. Do you think it strange? I do not at all. The concept of God as male can be considered counter-intuitive. I have never borne, nor delivered, life. Nor have I ever sustained life with my own body. I have breasts, but they have never not once, lactated, much to my disappointment. If it is God who bears life and sustains it, it seems to me more appropriate to view God as female than male.



If you think I'm heretical or 'New Age-ee' to suggest this, you would misjudge me. I am a preacher of the Gospel and the gospel I preach is biblical. The concept of God as a female is quite common our scriptures.



In our scripture this morning, God is created in the image of male and female: “...in the divine image, God created them” (Genesis 1:27). In Deuteronomy, God is described as a mother eagle (32:11-12). Also in Deuteronomy, it is God who gives birth (32:18). The prophet Isaiah describes God as a comforting mother (66:13) and a mother who nurses her child (49:15). Perhaps, Isaiah is where Paul engenders last week’s scripture, when God is described as woman who is in labor.



God said: “For a long time I have held my peace, I have kept myself still and restrained myself; now I will cry out like a woman in labour, I will gasp and pant” (42:14). The Psalmist also saw God as a mother who weans him (131:2). In Hosea, God is described as mother: “I

taught Ephraim to walk...I took them up in my arms...I healed them...I led them with bands of love...I was like those who lift infants to their cheeks...and fed them” (11:3-4). These feminine characterizations of God are also in the Christian scriptures, many of them. The scripture Sue read for us envisions God as not just female, but also a chicken (Matthew 23:37 and Luke 13:34). Indeed, Luke understood God to be a woman who is looking for her lost coin (15:8-10).²

Friends, this morning we hear of a feminine God with maternal characteristics and pay homage to Mother Earth. Yet, let’s also pause to contemplate the degree to which we are not honouring our Mother God through our destruction of the Earth and the plundering of her resources for our own insatiable desires.



<https://youtu.be/g7YscULEYcQ>

In a United Church of Christ sponsored webinar on Tuesday that we re-broadcasted on Thursday, we learned that in 1900 (120 years

² Partial itemization was sourced from the Women’s Ordination Conference, A Voice for Women in the Catholic Church.

ago) humans produced 0.5 GtC (Gigga tonne Carbon). Today, we produce 10 GtC (this has not happened before in 100 million years!). During that time, the average global temperature has increased by two degrees. In eighty years, depending on our response in the next ten years, the temperature increase can be from anywhere between 2.6 and 8.5 degrees. We also learned that Co2 concentration in the atmosphere has surpassed 400 parts per million, and the last time this occurred was fifteen million years ago when there wasn't more than seven billion humans producing carbon emissions.³

These statistics reveal that we are devastating the plant, animal and human life on Earth.



A sweeping report assessing the state of the natural world found that humans are having an “unprecedented” and devastating effect on global biodiversity, with about one million animal and plant species now threatened with extinction.

³ Katharine Hayhoe: “People of Faith as Climate Messengers”, <https://youtu.be/g7YscULEYcQ>, accessed 12 May 2019.

“A summary of the report’s findings was released Monday by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, which was established in 2012 by the United Nations Environment Programme and includes representatives from 132 countries. Robert Watson, the panel’s chair and a professor of environmental sciences at the University of East Anglia in the U.K., said evidence collected over the past five decades from roughly 15,000 scientific and government studies paints ‘an ominous picture.’ ‘The health of ecosystems on which we and all other species depend is deteriorating more rapidly than ever,’ he said in a statement. ‘We are eroding the very foundations of our economies, livelihoods, food security, health and quality of life worldwide.’”⁴

I have highlighted only one atmospheric study and one plant and animal biodiversity study, but the scientific evidence is clear - we have little time to act.

⁴ Denise Chow, NBC News, “1 million species under threat of extinction because of humans, biodiversity report finds,” <https://www.nbcnews.com/mach/science/1-million-species-under-threat-extinction-because-humans-report-finds-ncna1002046>, 6 May 2019 (accessed 12 May 2019).



This Mothers' Day, honor those women who, biological or not, have been beautiful maternal figures in our lives. Let us contemplate the degree to which we have not honored Mother Earth. Let us repent and change directions, making the climate and the Earth the foremost issue of our Christian lives. To honor Mother Earth is neither secular, liberal, nor New Age. To respect and honor the planet is profoundly biblical. And if we are to be harbingers of the Gospel, we must act so as to deliver good news to our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren!

This is the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded, "Amen!"