

Haydenville Congregational Church

The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian

April 26, 2009

Genesis 9:8-17

“Earth Stewardship Sunday Message”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

I called the National Park Service in Alaska this week. I called to ask them, “Is it still there? Is the “Hanging Glacier,” so famous for so long on Mt. McKinley still hanging there or is it gone?”

You see twenty-six years ago I climbed Mt. McKinley in Alaska (as many of you know, you have seen the slides). After a decade of high altitude mountaineering, I joined an expedition of 19 members in the summer of 1983 and climbed McKinley. On the lower part of the mountain we climbed up the Muldrow Glacier. It is like a big river of ice between two steep canyon walls.

At one point on the Muldrow—between Camps II and III—the glacier becomes so crevassed that climbers have to pull way over to the canyon wall to avoid the huge crevasses ahead. When you pull over to hike alongside the canyon wall there is a spot—a quite famous spot—where you look up and the enormous “Hanging Glacier” is there literally hanging off the top of the canyon wall above your head...hanging there over the Muldrow Glacier...hanging there over the spot climbers must travel below.

It was at that point, before we hiked under the Hanging Glacier, that each of us in turn unclipped from our four-person rope team and one by one literally ran under the blue ice of the hanging glacier. One at a time we ran hoping that the Hanging Glacier would not give way and drop at that precise moment and crush us.

As I prepared to deliver the Sermon this morning in our Earth Stewardship Service, I was thinking about and praying on God’s good green earth and I thought again, as I have before, of that impressive Hanging Glacier. I wondered again if after years of global warming the Hanging Glacier was still there—had it let go and collapsed OR did it retreat and is no longer hanging over the canyon wall?

Because McKinley is part of the Denali (its Indian name) National Park, I called the Park Service office in Fairbanks, Alaska. A polite young man listened to my question and said, “Gee, I really don’t know. No one in this office has been on the Muldrow in years. When we’re on McKinley, we are always on the west side; we tend to climb on the West Buttress. I sure know about the Hanging Glacier, but I don’t know if it is still hanging.”

The Hanging Glacier had been there for decades. It was such a permanent feature that it appears on maps of Mt. McKinley. But there is a good chance that it is no longer there. There is a good chance that the Hanging Glacier fell from the canyon wall onto the Muldrow Glacier below, or it melted, receded and quietly disappeared. Its disappearance would be a great loss. That enormous hunk of blue ice suspended over the canyon wall was for me an awe-inspiring reminder of God’s greatness and might.

There is a chance that the Hanging Glacier is no longer a hanging glacier because the human imprint on the natural world is now so profound that we have altered and are currently altering our environment in dramatic and alarming ways. Global warming has changed the size and shape of glaciers in the Arctic—we have seen footage of ice sheets shearing off and collapsing with thunderous crashes. We have changed the water level in the Pacific Ocean so that the small island of Tuvalu is slowly being engulfed, its inhabitants air lifted off the island. We have changed the tree line and bird habitation in the Appalachian Mountains because winters are shorter and spring comes earlier and bird migration and the mating season have been affected.

All these examples are real, worrisome and serious and we must look at them without blinking. But my message today is not that everything is dire and we are responsible for the degradation of the environment—we have failed to protect and preserve God’s good earth! That is not my message.

My message is that there is still hope: mother earth, our precious home, is in crisis but we can help.

My message is that as people of faith we are called to care and to act. And we’re good at both those things.

It is our job as people of faith to care about the environment, to speak about our love for this earth, and to act to protect, preserve, love and honor this planet.

My message today is let’s commit again, let’s gather together, strengthen our resolve and commit again to doing what we do well: caring and acting on behalf of this earth that we love.

I have, at home in my Study, two bookshelves filled with nothing but Bibles. I have many translations of the Bible and I have about a dozen “special” Bibles. I brought a few of them with me today. Here’s *The Women’s Devotional Bible*, and *The Jefferson Bible*, *The Pagan Bible*, *The Inspirational Study Bible*, *The Poverty and Justice Bible*. And here, my new favorite, is the **GREEN BIBLE**.

The Green Bible is modeled after the red-letter Bible...some of you may have those. “Red-letter Bibles”—I have one here—have Jesus’ words printed in red. So your eye can immediately see Jesus’ direct statements.

The GREEN BIBLE took the same principle and printed in green (I am quoting from the Preface) “the rich and varied ways the books of the Bible speak directly to how we should think and act as we confront the environmental crisis facing our planet.” The Preface continues: “Great care was taken in selecting the highlighted passages. Many more passages could easily have been chosen, but the strongest and most direct passages were selected based on how well they demonstrate:

- how God and Jesus interact with, care for, and are intimately involved with all of creation
- how all the elements of creation—land, water air, plants, animals, humans—are interdependent
- how nature responds to God
- how we are called to care for creation.

I am grateful for the Green Bible because it puts another tool right in our hands and shows us with graphic detail—hundreds of Biblical passages are printed in green—what the Bible says about God, nature, creation and stewardship of the earth.

I remember the first Earth Day, it was April 1970 and I was finishing my first year at Oberlin College in Ohio. Although I had been attending a Church in the small town of Oberlin all year with my college boyfriend, I don’t remember one word being said in Church as Earth Day approached. The campus was plastered with posters heralding the upcoming celebration of Earth Day that would be held on Tappan Green RAIN OR SHINE the posters all blasted forth. But the Church, at least the one I attended in that small Midwestern town, said not a peep about the upcoming Earth Day.

And then for years after the first Earth Day, organized religion was quiet about environmental sustainability and the care of God’s good earth. The Church was surprisingly quiet. But in the last couple of decades people of faith have woken up

and today many leaders in the environmental movement, like Bill McKibben, Brian McLaren and N.T. Wright, are prominent people of faith. The Green Bible, published last year, is another wake-up call for the religious community telling us that environmental issues are our issues, earth day is our day, and earth stewardship is a calling to which we must respond. A calling to which we must respond with passionate concern and involvement.

Although Christians may have been slow to embrace the environmental movement as our movement, people of faith have written about care of the earth and our responsibility to God's creation for a very long time. As far back as 1100 CE, Hildegard of Bingen wrote, "We shall awaken from our dullness and rise vigorously toward justice. If we fall in love with creation deeper and deeper, we will respond to its endangerment with passion."

We can and should respond to the endangerment of the earth with passion. We can and should be passionate because we are my dear brothers and sisters God's agent's of renewal. The earth is in trouble, global warming is real and progressing, the environment is endangered, and we are stealing the future from our children. But we are each one of us walking messengers of hope because we are God's agents of renewal. We were made in the image of God. But bearing God's image does not just mean caring for our own bodies and our own needs, it means reflecting the image of God into the care of all creation in wise stewardship—being a part of the renewal of all life on the planet. We are called to search out how the present, groaning creation can be set free from its bondage to decay and experience the freedom that comes when the children of God dedicate themselves to the work of resurrection of the earth.

I am not filled with worry and fear. I believe that people have faith have woken from a deep slumber and are now at the forefront of a movement that is global, powerful, unstoppable and bound to succeed—a movement that says this earth and all life is sacred and we are entrusted to love and care for it as we love and care for our parents and our children. I believe people of faith have found their voices in the environmental movement, are raising their voices in the town square, and lifting their voices to God for direction and guidance.

I believe we are ready, able, willing, prepared, equipped and primed to take our place in the increasingly religious conversation about the crisis this planet faces and to do what we do so well...to care and to act. We recognize that the ecological crisis we now face is a moral issue and the Church has always been on the forefront of moral issues—throughout time. This moral issue is no different and so

we are standing up to be counted saying we bring what we know: how to care and how to act. And we will speak in the language we know: about God and creation and resurrection. And we will take hands with those we know: and make an impact together that we could not make alone.

So what must we do? How must we act? Our ultimate purpose is to honor God as creator in such a way that Christian environmental stewardship is part of everything we do. Our goal is to make tending the garden of creation, in all its aspects, an unquestioned and all-pervasive part of our service to each other, to our community, to God's world.

According to the Green Bible, the framework for our response can follow three steps:

Awareness

In a time when so much clamors for our attention—international politics, local affairs, work, school, family, Church, and so much busyness—we can overlook or barely notice the natural and environmental aspects of creation in our surroundings. We must make ourselves aware of what is happening in God's creation. Awareness involves seeing, naming, identifying and locating different parts of God's creation with specificity. It means resisting the blinders that society puts on us to keep us focused on self and our individual needs, wants and pursuits. Cultivating awareness means providing ourselves with enough quiet, reflection and learning time that we can notice and identify a tree or mountain a bird or a river.

Appreciation

From awareness comes appreciation: we cannot appreciate something we are unaware of. Appreciation involves respect. We may respect a large bear but can also develop respect for a lowly worm as we learn of its critical importance in the web of creation. We can move from respect to valuing. The earth and everything in it has value because God made it so. The earth is a truly and literally a vast web of interdependence and interconnected beauty. As we appreciate more and more the order of creation, we will see and experience God valuing all of God's works.

Stewardship

Appreciation leads to stewardship. Stewardship takes us beyond appreciation to restoration. We work for the restoration of what has been degraded in the past. Beyond restoration, stewardship means serving. As we understand that God through creation is in so many ways serving us, we grow to willingly return this service with our own. This service includes loving, caring, and keeping what God

has given us to hold in trust. Our service in creation will eventually involve entrusting to others what we have served, kept, and restored.

Awareness. Appreciation. Stewardship. It's a good trinity to remember for our actions and our prayers on behalf of the earth.

And I return to the Hanging Glacier that hung in all its glory over the Muldrow Glacier on Mt. McKinley. I recall the words of Martin Luther, who around 1520 wrote, "God writes the Gospel not in the Bible alone, but also on trees, and in the flowers and clouds and stars."

For me, God wrote the Gospel on a massive chunk of blue ice I once gapped at hanging off a canyon wall in the Alaska Range. May the image and memory of that huge, powerful, beautiful, awe-inspiring Hanging Glacier remind me to be the faithful Christian steward of God's creation that I know I am called to be.

May we all be aware, be appreciative, and be good stewards of this fragile planet that is our home, our children's future, and God's extraordinary gift to us.

Bless you in your all efforts to protect and preserve this earth.

Bless your prayers for this planet...may they rise from your mouths to God's ears.

Bless you for all you have done, for all you are doing, and for all you will do in the years to come to love and restore this earth, our mother, our home.

Amen.