

## EARTH DAY SERMON APRIL 22, 2012

On April 5<sup>th</sup> of this year, Mr. McGowan's first grade class went to Carkeek Park.

Each child was carrying a precious cargo: a small container of wild chum salmon fry to be released into the "imprinting bin" at the Piper's Creek Hatchery. Once the young salmon have imprinted the smell of Piper's Creek, they will be released into Puget Sound to begin their journey to the ocean. Three years later they will return to Piper's Creek to spawn and to die; the children will come to collect the eggs, and the cycle will begin again.

This charming true story only tells a fragment of the history involved. Years ago, Piper's Creek was overrun with spawning steelhead, sea-run cutthroat, and coho and chum salmon.

Then the settlers came, and built their houses. The city of Seattle used Piper's Creek as a storm drain. The householders planted their gardens, and their lawns, and the pesticides that they used flowed into Piper's Creek whenever it rained. The railroad put Piper's Creek into a culvert under the railroad tracks. Another culvert lies under a shopping center with a grocery store. By 1927, the last pair of spawning salmon was seen in Piper's Creek. There was a park, with a children's playground, and a picnic area, but no more salmon. Few even knew there had been salmon spawning in the creek.

Some people felt that it wasn't important, anyway; what were a few fish compared to the important task of caring for people. Didn't the Biblical mandate tell us to "fill the earth and subdue it--"?

It was not until 1969 that an incident of environmental destruction drew the attention of a politician. After the disastrous oil spill in the beautiful Santa Barbara Channel, Senator Gaylord Nelson of California was able to mobilize the fragmented environmental movement (disparagingly known as "tree huggers,") to establish the first Earth Day, which we are celebrating today.

Since that first Earth Day, the list of environmental disasters related to industry, air, water, and agriculture has continued to grow, in spite of our rising awareness of the cost. As we deal with climate change, natural disasters, extinctions of plant and animal species, and increasing health issues that may or may not be related to environmental change, it is easy to give in to despair. "The world is dying", Dr. Matthew Sleeth says in the introduction to *The Green Bible*.

What can we do that will make a difference in the face of the overwhelming change that confronts us?

In our scripture reading today, the disciples of Jesus face a desperate situation. Gathered together after the crucifixion, they are dealing with overwhelming feelings of helplessness and despair. A small group of (mostly) poor people, from an insignificant

nation that was under the domination of the mighty Roman Empire, they had seen their leader executed. His death was of no more importance to Rome than was the lynching of some nameless African American in the Deep South a couple of generations ago.

Now the rumors of His resurrection are suddenly confirmed by the appearance of Jesus Himself, and they are terrified. How would you react if your greatly respected uncle Mortimer, who was recently buried “decently and in order,” suddenly showed up in your living room?

Psychology tells us that when you are in the grip of overwhelming emotion, your reasoning ability is gone! The only thing operating in the panicked brain is fight or flight. So if Jesus wants His frightened flock to hear His message, he has to calm them down. “Touch me” He says. “I am a living person.” Does anyone touch him, do you think? The scripture suggests that they are too paralyzed to move, so He tries again. “Have you got anything to eat?” He invokes the Law of Hospitality, a matter of life and death in a desert environment like Palestine----and the call for common courtesy evidently works, because they find something for Him to eat and they watch Him eat it.

Having calmed their fear, He then reminds them that God has a plan for God’s people. Our reading continues that “He opened their minds to understand the scriptures.” That is, he helped them to experience the vision of God’s dream for the earth and the people in it. It didn’t involve legions of angels overcoming the evil ones, or miraculous healers eliminating disease, or even a World Bank issuing monetary credits to eliminate world poverty. All it involved was a commandment that the disciples should share the vision—and when they did, it changed the world.

Gandhi had a vision, and the British let go of India. Martin Luther King had a vision, and the Civil Rights movement began. Pope John the XXIII had a vision and gave Roman Catholics access to the scriptures, and Liberation Theology has caused no end of trouble for Rome ever since. Gaylord Nelson had a vision, and Earth Day was born.

The common element in each of these visions was the same: when the vision was shared, people acted on it. You see, the thing about a vision for a healthy planet is that it doesn’t become real until someone acts on it.

That’s why the process of Green Certification is so important for this parish. In following this two year program which we have already begun through our energy audit, our dishwasher project, and our recycling effort, to name a few, we are living out our mission statement:

First, we are to Develop and Deepen Faith.

Jesus’ disciples, paralyzed by fear, were able to move out of despair and into action by touching and feeding their resurrected Lord. Empowered by the faith that followed their action, they preached, and served, and healed their part of the world. When children see the salmon return to a dead stream, the vision of resurrection becomes real.

Second, to Love and to Serve:

The abundance of fresh produce that we can grow in home and community gardens will enrich the food banks that feed the poor. When we advocate for cleaning up the toxic wastes generated by cut-rate production methods and inefficient fuels, we ease the burden on the poor all over the world, as these are the people most directly affected by our thoughtless pursuit of excess profit. A casual meander through the pages of YES magazine or Sojourners shows us the regeneration of poverty stricken lands around the world, and we are a part of that effort through Episcopal Relief and Development, World Vision, or the Heifer Project. We must remind ourselves that we are making a difference!

And finally, to follow Christ:

By simplifying our lifestyles through commitment to recycling, water conservation, and composting to restore depleted topsoil, we live out the simplicity of our Lord, who restored life wherever He went, shared what foodstuff He had, and gave thanks for the abundance of the well-stewarded gardens.

It's in the acting that the change comes. And science, belatedly, has been able to confirm this fact: transformation occurs when action changes thinking. Thinking doesn't change anything! We are already in action.

On April 5<sup>th</sup>, 23 first graders acted on a shared vision—that salmon should come back to Piper's Creek. And the salmon came. Not the hundreds that used to come—the creek is still polluted, and coho cannot survive there.

But the chum salmon come every year now, fighting their way upstream in the shallow water, their flesh torn and bruised by the journey, fins and tails often split so you wonder how they can find the energy to battle against the flowing water. They come, they lay their eggs, they die, and the magnificent cycle of death and resurrection plays out for us all to see and experience.

Will the children's action change the world? Probably not. But it will change them, as it changes those of us who help them, and that is enough.

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