THE EARTH IS THE LORD'S

--a message by the Rev. Dr. H. Paul Santmire, Senior Pastor
Trinity Lutheran Church, Akron
Earth Sunday
The Fourth Sunday of Easter
April 20, 1997

Question. Where do you live? If you're like most people, when asked that question you'll think of your house, your neighborhood perhaps, maybe your street address. That's what we teach our young children when we send them off to school. That's where you live.

Another question. With whom do you live? That's more obvious to most of us. I live with my significant other. Maybe you'll think of other family members or friends in your household. Some of you have cats and dogs, too. That's with whom you live.

But if that's what you're thinking, I want to try to convince you that you're suffering from a bad case of hardening of the categories. Call it tunnel vision, if you will. Because this is the truth, according to the Bible: you live on God's good earth with all the other creatures of God's good earth. What's more, God has a calling for you, and for all those who turn to Him in faith, to celebrate the blessings of the good earth and to care for all the creatures of the earth.

These are the biblical categories and that's the biblical vision I want to commend to you today. "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." That's where you live and with whom you live. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God.." That's what you're called to do.

I.

Consider first the heavens above. Actually, just to celebrate *Earth* Day is to miss the magnitude of the vision, from the perspective of the Bible.

That famous popularizer of scientific cosmology, Carl Sagan, made himself famous -- or infamous, depending on your point of view -- by talking about the "billions and billions and billions of galaxies." Now Carl Sagan was an atheist. But atheist or not, he was on to something. "The heavens are telling the glory of God," says the Psalmist (Ps. 19:1).

Christians have nothing to fear from science. On the contrary, we've everything to gain. Consider the heavens above. Consider the billions and billions and billions of galaxies in this universe. Consider the infinite reaches of space, and all the mysteries of the cosmos, from the Big Bang to the first cell of life that appeared on planet earth, and maybe similar cells that have appeared on other planets. Consider how great the Creator and Sustainer of this infinitely vast and varied universe is. Thanks to the findings of modern science, you and I now have opportunities to contemplate the glory of the Creator that are far greater than those that were available to the people of Bible times.

So consider the heavens above. This is where you live. In this awesome and awe-inspiring and sometimes fearful universe of billions and billions of galaxies.

II.

Next, consider the hills and the mountains. "I will lift up my eyes to the hills--from whence cometh my help," says the Psalmist. "My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth." (Psalm 121:1)

You've undoubtedly had the experience. When I was a boy, my family used to go on driving vacations all over this great land. Early on, I learned to stand in awe of the ancient Adironack Mountains and the younger Rocky Mountains and the ageless Grand Tetons, and many more. Call it the experience of the wilderness.

This is the quintessential American experience, from the transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau climbing Mount Katadn in Maine to the naturalist John Muir balancing himself precariously on the crags and the peaks of the Sierra Nevadas in California.

The Bible is rich with this kind of testimony. You heard it in today's first reading from Psalm 104, celebrating the creative power of God in the wilderness: "You set the earth on its foundations.... You cover it with the deep as with a garment; the waters stood above the mountains. At your rebuke they flee; at the sound of your thunder they take to flight. They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the valleys to the place that you appointed for them.... By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches. From your lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work." (Ps. 104:5-13)

According to the Bible, you and I live in the region of the hills and the mountains. You and I live in a world bounded by a glorious wilderness. That's the way God made the earth. That's the way He wants it to be.

III.

So. Consider the heavens above. Consider the hills. *Now also consider the lilies of the field.*

My wife went to a flower show in Cleveland not too long ago, and she bumped into several folks from Trinity. That's a biblical mandate. Consider the lilies of the field.

Do you like to garden? Lots of people do. Enjoying flowers and cultivating flowers, and likewise sowing and caring for and harvesting the fruits of the earth. All that's a holy vocation according to the Bible. That's God's intention, right from the start, according to Holy Scripture. God situates Adam and Eve right in the middle of a beautiful garden, to care for it and to protect it.

Now this is not to say that everything in the wilderness or everything down on the farm or even everything in your own garden is intended by God to suit your comfort and convenience, or mine. In His commentary on the Book of Genesis, Martin Luther once took up the question of mosquitos. He asked whether God originally created mosquitos as part of the Garden of Eden, or whether the Lord just brought them in after the Fall, in order to punish us for our iniquities.

Well, the answer of the Bible's clear on this one, I think. You can read it in the Noah story. God commanded Noah to take *all* the creatures of the earth with him on the ark, the clean and the unclean, the sweet little bunnies and the grizzly, grimy creeping things, the animals of the

wild as well as the animals of the barnyard and the home, the mosquitoes as well as the hummingbirds.

This is the biblical testimony. Consider the lilies of the field. Consider the mosquitos of the night. Consider the great hippopotamuses of the African savannahs. Consider your friendly feline on the pillow by the fire. This is where you live: with a huge and diverse family of creatures here on earth, sometimes beautiful and approachable like a flower show or a petting zoo, sometimes threatening or even repulsive like the mosquitoes or the sharks or the alligators.

IV.

Consider now those creatures most beloved by God: the human family.

Don't be taken in by some of the animal rights activists who'd have you believe that you're on the same scale of value as a chimp or a deer or a rat for that matter. This is the clear teaching of Holy Scripture. You heard it in our Gospel today: "Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" (Mt. 6:26)

Which is to say: the birds *are* of value. They are beloved by God. But you are loved *more.* God creates you according to His own image, and only you, not the other animals. God wants to enter into personal communion with you and share His love with you, so that you can know Him and love Him in return, as no other animal can do, with that kind of personal intensity.

And more. According to the Bible, God creates you and me and every human creature, to gather us into communities for the sake of righteousness and truth and beauty. You may well have had the experience of flying into New York City on a clear night. What a dazzling sight! For all the ills of that city, for all the greed on Wall Street and all the crime on any street, that's the kind of vision the Bible holds before us for our life together as human creatures: the city of God (see Rev. 21:12).

Now, many Americans put a lot of energy into fleeing from the city. But that's not God's will for you or for me or for any human creature. This is where we live, by definition: in or in the vicinity of the city. God creates all of us humans to live in communities of righteousness and truth and beauty. And He wants to gather all our communities together one day into one single great and glorious Community of communities: the eternal city of God.

V.

Consider the heavens above. Consider the hills and the mountains. Consider the lilies of the field. Consider the human finally. Now, finally, and most important of all, *consider Christ Jesus, the Lord of heaven and earth.*

Is Jesus *your* Savior? Of course He is. But I want you to think about this very carefully today. He's not just your Savior. He's not just my Savior. Indeed, He's not just the Savior of humans like you and me. God so loved *the world,* that He gave His only Son, according to John 3:16.

St. Paul teaches us likewise in his letter to the Colossians, the first chapter, the twentieth

verse: "Through [Christ]," says Paul, "God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace through the blood of his Cross." All things! Jesus Christ is the Lord of heaven and earth, not just your Lord, not just my Lord, however much He is profoundly that.

And this then means that you were saved for a purpose. I was saved for a purpose. God is by no means finished with His work of salvation when He saves the likes of you and me .

One of our members nearly died a few weeks ago. Her family and I had given up on her. We had begun to grieve. But it turned out that the Lord had other plans for her. Call it a medical revival of astounding proportions. Call it a miracle of the Lord. Call it whatever you want, but she now knows that she once was all but dead, but now she lives -- and for a purpose. "God must still have something in mind for me," she told me.

Well, God does indeed have something in mind for all of us when He saves us through Christ Jesus. To share that experience with others, for starters. We talk about that a lot here at Trinity. We know that God wants us to welcome the stranger and to comfort the troubled, and to be well-equipped so that we can do both the welcoming and the comforting effectively.

But as a disciple of the Lord Jesus you also have this calling: to celebrate God's good creation and the care for the earth. This much I read by Jesus' mandate to His disciples: "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God." Because God's Kingdom, you see, includes all things, especially the earth and the fullness thereof.

We're doing a lot of celebrating of the good earth today, with our hymns and our choral music: "For the beauty of the earth, For the beauty of the skies, For the love which from our birth Over and around us lies: Christ, our Lord, to you we raise This our sacrifice of praise." Let's keep those praises going every day, not just on Earth Sunday, as eight-year-old Jenna reminds us on the bulletin cover you have before you today. Celebrate the earth everyday!

That I think we *can* do, and we *will* do. I'm more worried about whether you and I are really committed to care for the earth, the way God clearly calls us to do. Because human greed so often gets in the way.

We want *our* lawns to be green and *our* gardens to be productive and *our* air to be clean and *our* water to be pure and *our* streets to be safe and *our* mountains and streams to be sacrosanct and *our* food to be varied and plentiful. But do we really care about the lives of others less fortunate than ourselves?

. What about the other members of the human community whose kids can't always consider the lilies of the field, or even have gardens, because they're blinded by preventable diseases? What about the other human families who can't enjoy the beauties of the earth, because they have to live on garbage dumps in shanty towns, or because they have to live near poisoned rivers or polluting industries?

The biblical challenge of caring for God's good earth, inescapably brings with it the challenge of sharing the goodness of the earth. And that's where the greed-factor so often gets in the way. I don't have any simple answers for all these highly complex problems of caring for the earth and sharing the fruits of the earth.