

The Rev. Marguerite Alley
June 29, 2008
“Green Sunday”

Readings: Genesis 2:4b-22, Psalm 139:1-17, Acts 17:22-28, John 3:1-16

Before I begin I want to show you evidence of the way you can change the world with one simple decision that you can make today. This is a Farm Fresh Green Bag and in it I have a fresh tomato and a fresh zucchini. I would also like you to keep a statement from our Eucharistic Prayer C in the front of your mind for the next few minutes. *“This fragile earth our island home”*. I will explain the decision at the end.

“The history of life on earth has been a history of interaction between living things and their surroundings. To a large extent, the physical form and the habits of the earth’s vegetation and its animal life have been molded by the environment. Considering the whole span of earthly time, the opposite effect, in which life actually modifies its surroundings, has been relatively slight. Only within the moment of time represented by our current century has one species—man—acquired significant power to alter the nature of his world. There is still very limited awareness of the nature of the threat to this planet. This is an era of specialists, each of whom sees his own problem and is unaware of or intolerant of the larger frame into which it fits. It is also an era dominated by industry, in which the right to make a dollar at whatever cost is seldom challenged. When the public protests, confronted with some obvious evidence of damaging results, it is fed little tranquilizing pills of half truth. We urgently need an end to these false assurances, to the sugar coating of unpalatable facts. It is the public that being asked to assume the risks. The public must decide whether it wishes to continue on the present road, and it can do so only when in full possession of the facts. The obligation to endure gives us the right to know”.(Carson pg.5,13)

So opens one of the most frightening and pivotal literary works of the 20th century, *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson. Written in 1962, she placed before us some shocking evidence of the damage to the natural world and to ourselves done by the rampant use of pesticides. Twenty years later, most of what Rachel Carson warned us about in *Silent Spring* had been reported in the news somewhere in the world. And yet, the Environmental Protection Agency, the very organization created to “safeguard” us and our greatest resource, would not even acknowledge the source of those catastrophic events and in fact banned further publication of alternative (non-chemical) methods of controlling insect populations. Lets fast- forward now twenty more years to today, June 29 2008. Just this past year we heard in the news of seriously declining bee populations, mutant insect strains, pesticide resistant insects and so forth. But until it hits ME personally, usually in the WALLET we tend to not sit up and take notice. Until we are forced to pay \$3 for a watermelon, compared to 2 for \$1 several years ago, we don’t really seem too concerned. The sad part is we are there....we are forced to pay unreasonable prices for produce, and yet we have done little to curtail those skyrocketing prices. We are forced to pay \$4 a gallon for gas, compared to 26 cents in 1975, and yet what have we done to decrease our dependency on gasoline and oil? We drive even bigger cars! Truthfully, if we were wrecking our planet in order the feed the hungry, to provide clean water to everyone; if we were denuding forrests to help build houses for the homeless or produce life saving medicines, then perhaps we need not worry about our “footprint” upon the planet. If none of these is a true statement, and I dare say none of these is true, then I think we are literally living on borrowed time.

Earlier this week, I heard an interview with Dr. James Hansen of NASA. Back in 1988 he was a lowly government climatologist and was asked to testify before a senate committee in a hearing on the harmful effects of global warming. Very few people attended or even took notice. When his report was “officially” filed in the minutes of the meeting, it was edited. The final file copy bore little resemblance to what he actually said in the hearing. The file copy suggested that there was no way to determine whether global warming was responsible for what is occurring or whether it was or would in the future have any effect on our environment. In his interview on the Diane Rehm show on Tuesday, he stated that it is almost too late for us to reverse the damage of greenhouse gases on our atmosphere. The stunned silence of the show host and the public was deafening. **How long did we think we had to take this seriously?** Is it something that each generation thinks the next will “fix”?

How do we decide what to believe? Here is my litmus test for just about everything I hear or read. Who stands to benefit from the information being out there? So...let's look. First, we have some government climatologist. He is making a salary only slightly more than a teacher or social worker. In 1988 that would have been around \$20,000 a year. He has distinguished himself as a pretty smart guy....but people aren't handing him wads of cash to analyze weather patterns. He is just reporting to the best of his ability, what he sees in his charts and graphs, full of hard data. On the other side of the table are a bunch of elected officials who know next to nothing about climatology, beyond making the decision to carry an umbrella to work. Their campaign to be elected (not mention their vacation plans) was funded heavily by the chemical company who employs lots of folks in their hometown. Who will you believe? In whom will you put your trust?

In 1976 I was assigned a school project for an elective course I was taking called "Literature of Man's Beliefs". That was when I first read Silent Spring. In my project I decided to show evidence of the damage occurring daily to our environment in the name of "industry". At the time I lived next door to the chemical capital of the world. Hopewell welcomes you with a smell, Huffwell, Hopesmell were all nicknames for the city. Hopewell was then home to Allied Chemical, Firestone, ICI, Brown and Williamson Tobacco, and several other small manufacturing companies. Just up the road a piece was Dupont, International Paper and Phillip Morriss. Hopewell was also home to a company called "Life Sciences". You may recall that they dumped a chemical called Kepone into the James River that caused several deaths from eating infected seafood, and caused a long section of the river to be closed for swimming and fishing for more than 20 years. The president of that company, who later committed suicide, was our Boy Scout Troop leader and a member of the parish where I grew up. My mother, ever the dutiful "project parent" drove me to the gates of Allied Chemical on an overcast Saturday morning so I could document my evidence of environmental degradation with my trusty Brownie camera.. We didn't need directions.....just before a rain storm, the wind would always shift and the smell from Hopewell was worse than what we have been dealing with from the forest fires in North Carolina! It was almost as bad as driving through Franklin, Virginia on a hot August afternoon! As I stood at the gates ready to shoot my photo of the ugly, yellowy, greenish black smoke huffing off into the clouds from the Allied smoke stack, two men in uniform started walking from the guardhouse toward the gates. As I brought up the camera to focus, they started running. About that time mother suggested I get back in the car. Nothing ever came of the incident, but we did sweat a few days afterward and I sometimes wonder if I could have made any real difference with my photo.

As a kid, we traveled through Hopewell to pick up Route 5 to Williamsburg and Yorktown to visit our grandparents. My dad always warned us when we were approaching Bailey's Creek, the run off creek for Allied Chemical. The stench from Bailey's was the worst smell on the planet...when I was 8. We would countdown to hold our breath, then hold our breath until dad gave us the all clear sign to exhale. It was a great game for kids in the car, but I wonder now, if my dad didn't worry about what we might breathe. I worried in my nightmares about what creatures would be spawned in the waters of Bailey's Creek. Evidently I wasn't the only one. Some 20 years later, when someone tried to call land along the creek "waterfront" property, testing proved that building there would not be a good idea, and that it would take 10-15 years to clean up the creek.

So, why am I telling you this and what does it have to do with our scripture for today? I am telling you this because we are INSANELY ARROGANT! We read in Genesis that all of creation was given to us as a gift. We were given a beautiful garden to live in, to eat from and to care for. We were given living creatures to keep us company, and for us to care for. And what do we do? We say "Its mine. I will use it." We don't really share it and we have not done a good job at all in caring for it. What we pass on to our children may be broken beyond repair. How long have we known and chosen to ignore what we know? From Psalm 139 we heard:

O Lord. Thou hast searched me and known me. Thou discernest my thoughts from afar. Even before a word is on my tongue O Lord, thou knowest it. I praise thee for thou are fearful and wonderful. Thou knowest me right well.

We are seriously kidding ourselves if we think that God is going to let us off the hook just because we proclaim "But we didn't know"!

In the Gospel reading we heard:

“If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, then how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?”

2 five hundred year floods in the mid-west in the past 15 years, cyclones, typhoons, hurricanes, heat waves and warmer winters are all evidence of a changing climate. None of them alone can point definitively back to the issue of global warming, but all of these “earthly things” can be made 100 times worse by gradually rising temperatures and a damaged atmosphere. What more evidence do we need to “hear” what God is saying to us?

What argument can we give for our conduct in the garden thus far?

Well, we could deny that anything is amiss. That always works well. After all, we know that the whole global warming thing is just a government conspiracy aimed at raising our taxes.

We could blame someone else. This one also works well. We could just proclaim: “The devil made me do it!”

We could pretend that we ARE doing the right thing. After all, Joel Osteen says we have a right to be happy, to be wealthy and to drive monstrously big cars. Jesus wants us to have all that we want. It says so in the Bible!

And Joel has written some books, so he must be on to something!

Or (my personal favorite) we can turn it around and make this depressing situation something we are proud of.

Like a dog sitting with his tail wagging in front of a pile on the carpet! God must surely be proud of us! Look at what our innovation, our technology and our creativity have done for us! Does the cost to the planet matter?

How about the cost to other people or to the wildlife who have also received this gift? “No, we say! It does not matter! God gave us brains and skills, so we must use them”! I am afraid that unlike a Senate committee, God probably won’t fall for any of those. We have backed ourselves into a corner and there is no way out now but to step by step, begin to do the right things; to make decisions based on what is good for the environment, not what is good, comfortable, and convenient for me. The Green Initiative is not going to go away! Let me give you an investment tip folks.....invest now in alternative energy sources, in reforestation efforts, in renewable energy. Think about the bigger picture, not just about what is easiest. Everything we do right now, our descendents will inherit....good or bad.

So, now let me explain my props. Here is the short list of the life saving measures I have taken in one simple decision. I grew this tomato and this zucchini. In so doing:

*I will not use any plastic packaging or plastic bags for carrying it home that will go and sit in a landfill for the next 100 or so years.

*I will not have used any oil to produce the plastic, or any coal from the plastic manufacturing plant.

*When I do buy produce at the grocery store, I will not use plastic bags, thanks to my green cloth bag. And every time I use my green cloth bag, I will save 5 cents.

*I will not have used any gasoline to get to the store and home again or for the tomato to be trucked to Virginia Beach.

*I will not have contributed to the pollution levels in the air from exhaust from my car or trains or trucks or planes.

*I will not have used any electricity to over air condition the grocery store.

*I will have helped clean the air by growing it at my house.

*I will have put nutrients back into the soil so that I may grow again.

*I won’t have to worry about my tomato having some bizarre strain of salmonella.

*I can grow it in my yard and have its flowers attract bees and other insects that help the environment and the growing cycle.

*If I don’t have a yard, I can grow it in a pot on my balcony or patio, and beautify my surroundings as well as clean the air and attract insects.

And best of all, I can enjoy watching it grow and the anticipation of waiting until it is just right to eat!

It is just one simple decision but one that if more people decided to do it, would have a significant and life-saving impact on our dying planet.

I hope you will join me today to learning a lesson from and for our children about the awesome creation that has been given into our care. I pray we will all begin making decisions that reflect our gratitude and our responsibility for **“this fragile earth, our island home”**. (BCP 368)