

FAITHFULNESS TO OUR COVENANT WITH EARTH

Rev. Kit Ketcham, March 25, 2007

It had been a long, hot, wet day in the Grand Canyon. My foot was hurting badly where I'd stepped on a fire ant or some other stinging desert creature. I was tired and cranky and thinking bad thoughts about my marriage, about my life, about the task of making supper out of the boxes of canned and dried food we had stowed on one of the boats.

We companions on the river---six of us, in three oar-powered rubber rafts---were lounging around on the sandy shore, talking over our day on the river. A sixpack of Coors beer was cooling in a burlap bag in the water nearby.

We'd run some big whitewater that day. Entering the Granite Gorge below Phantom Ranch, we'd run Horn Creek and Granite rapids easily, pausing only briefly to scout them. But the water had risen during the day, the result of a release from Glen Canyon Dam, and we expected rapids downstream to be bigger than usual.

We'd run the Grand the summer before, so I was familiar with the terrain and knew the relative risks of each big drop. I knew that a series of three rapids coming up the next few days (Crystal, Upset, and Lava Falls) was really treacherous. And I wasn't sure I trusted the man at the oars of my boat. I was riding with my husband and our marriage was in trouble.

After several years of marital ups and downs, I knew we were on the brink of separating. He seemed not to understand how desperate I felt; he had taken to anesthetizing himself with various substances and we rarely talked any more. He was a good boatman, but I was uneasy at the amount of beer he was putting away.

We had stopped at a pullout place to scout one of the biggest rapids of that day, Hermit Rapid, a series of huge rollercoaster waves, building one after another, until the sixth wave was an almost unbelievable climb up one side and a steep plunge down the other. We had been the first to row out into the river and aim ourselves downstream, as directly into the V of the current as possible.

As we entered the vee, Larry lifted the oars out of the water, yelled “hang on”, and we headed into the waves. The first wave or two were exhilarating, but suddenly the catch of an oar set us slightly sideways, and we headed into the biggest waves at an angle, taking on water, and barely correcting in time for the number 6 wave, biggest of all. When we hit the crest of the wave, I was sure we were going over backwards, but we managed to stay upright and once through the rapid, though unnerved by our near miss, we pulled ashore to watch the other boats go through.

The second boat had no trouble with the heavy waves, but the third boat flipped on that big wave, sending oarsman and passenger into the churning water, along with some of our food supplies which were inadequately secured. We leaped into our boat and went to rescue our companions in the chilly water. Downstream we managed to bring the raft and the boaters ashore, but we were shaken by the upset, the loss of supplies, and the water conditions.

Now, in our river camp, we were hashing it all over again, reliving the excitement, the danger, and the fear. Lost in my own thoughts, I wandered up the beach, away from the campsite, away from people, away from everything but the river, the rocks, the sagebrush and yucca.

I needed to be alone. I needed to figure out what my next steps in life might be. I was angry, I was scared, I was afraid for our son who was only seven years old and visiting Grandma while we were on the river. But I felt like I was drowning in a river I couldn't control, the river of my life. I was being drawn into currents I didn't like, currents that were pulling me away from my ethical and moral core.

My husband wasn't a bad man but he too was in the grip of something powerful and it was pulling him away from his best self. The river seemed like an apt metaphor, there on the sand deep in the canyon.

I remembered the advice given to novice river runners---if you fall out of the boat, depend on your life jacket, (assuming it is tightly fastened) for it will bear you up; find something to hang onto; keep your feet out in front of you to bounce you off the rocks; steer with your arms and hands toward an eddy; the river will carry you toward the shore.

I looked again toward the muddy water rolling by and watched a piece of driftwood about a foot long sail by, a dry leaf perched on top, and knew that the river had offered me a lesson. I felt at one with the river at that moment, with the slender piece of driftwood, with the leaf; I felt a degree of peace I had not had for a long time.

Now if I were speaking to a congregation of river runners, I'd have a wealth of watery metaphors to preach on for weeks----falling out of the boat as a metaphor for crisis, a life jacket of moral and ethical strength, an active way to protect oneself from crashing into the rocks headfirst and achieve a certain amount of direction, and always, the reminder, if you act in accordance with the natural way of things, the river will carry you

toward the shore. But not today. There is another direction I want to go.

You know how it is when you wake up in the morning with a new idea? When you feel compelled to go straight to the tools of your trade to start expressing it? When the need to create begins to press at your breastbone and insists on expression?

In the push to write and preach several sermons in a row during this month's time, I had wondered if my creative well was going to dry up, as I started to think about what new thing I could say about "Faithfulness to our Covenant with the Earth", which is today's topic.

It felt like climate change has been done to death, even though it will never be finished; we have talked about it, cynically and angrily and despairingly, over and over and over again, both in church and in public. I felt very resistant at broaching the subject once again in a prophetic way, especially with Earth Day looming and another treatment of it then, this time with the kids.

One night last week, getting ready to go to bed, I was seized by a random thought: what if the topic were joy, the joy of our relationship with the earth? Not just our responsibility to it, but the sheer pleasure we take in being creatures in this beautiful Eden?

What if we all thought about that for a moment today, sharing that joy with each other, sharpening our awareness of beauty, of growing things, of life itself? What if, instead of being reminded once again of our derelict behavior, we focused on our love and joy in creation? We are generous with our money because of our joy in community; might we also be generous with the earth because of our joy in it?

The next morning, I woke up early full of bursting thoughts. My "sermon notes" page was full of ideas written down over breakfast, after a workout at the gym, and then I set to work.

It occurred to me, as I pondered the idea, that we are in relationship, in covenant, with the earth in several ways. The earth is our teacher. The earth is our source of awe and joy. The earth is our home. The earth is our healer. There are doubtless others as well, but these are the ones we will focus on today.

On the earth's side, it has nothing to do but Be. And we are learning that it could probably exist quite nicely without its human component. In a blog post written around the time of our big storms, I wrote this entitled *Messages from the Earth.*

Says the earth to humanity:

You are utterly dependent on me. You can work with me or work against me, but I will always win if we are in conflict. I can destroy you and I will destroy you if you are disrespectful. (Sometimes even if you are respectful.) I do not require you for my existence. You do require me.

I will continue to exist whether all my oil and natural gas and minerals are depleted, whether the ice caps melt, whether climate changes drastically alter my surface.

You may not continue to exist if these things occur. I don't care whether you exist or not, for I do not need you. I can heal myself, even when I am scarred and wounded. I don't mind your helping to make the scars and wounds less painful, but when you are gone I will continue to

exist.

I am what I am and I am beautiful and full of life's joys, as well as sorrows. I am here for you to enjoy and use, not to use up, not to deface, not to squander. I am here to teach you, to give you ideas, to show you my mysteries and tease you into understanding them. I am here to flood your heart with awe and wonderment, to give you a place from which you can view the stars, to challenge you to be in relationship with me.

I am the earth. I am the original Sacred Text, wordless yet holding all of the answers to life's questions. You misuse me at your peril. You love me to your benefit and delight.

I asked you, in an email message earlier this week, to think about the ways you have been touched by your human partnership with the earth. I invited you to think about the joy you have experienced, the ways earth has sustained and renewed you, the moments in nature when you have been profoundly touched.

And at this moment, I would invite you to speak a few words to all of us of some experience you have had of the earth as **teacher**. I have told you a story of what I learned from the Colorado River, many years ago. Please tell us in a few words of what you have learned from the earth.

(congregation responds)

The earth is our source of awe and joy. For me, one such experience is always looking west, out across Admiralty inlet toward the sea. It never fails to lift my heart and give me a sense of joyful calm. What are your moments of earth's gift of **awe and joy**?

(congregation responds)

The earth is our home. In my story about the river, I found a sense of connection and belonging, feeling like the driftwood, like the leaf, like the sand beneath my feet, at one with the earth. What are your moments of feeling at **home on the earth**?

(congregation responds)

The earth is our healer. Again, in my river story, I found healing for my tortured mind and heart as I understood that I could find direction, support, and safety, even though my life was chaotic, if I trusted my inner moral and ethical core. What are your moments of earth's **healing**?

(congregation responds)

Our desire to heal and protect our home the earth springs from a heart of gratitude and joy, not from a sense of guilt and despair. We treasure our connection to the earth. We are thankful for its bounty and generosity. We do regret the wrongs we have done it and vow to redeem ourselves by protecting it, but the upwelling of awe and joy in our lives flows from that inner core of human recognition of our covenant with the earth.

We are faithful in our covenant with the earth when we love it, when we protect it, when we offer our healing to it, when we express our gratitude. Just as in our covenants with ourselves and with our faith community, our covenant with the earth inspires our desire to support and nurture it, not merely to take what we can but to value and honor it.

Unitarian Universalist minister and prophet the Rev. Kenneth Patton wrote: “We are the earth, upright and proud, in us the earth is knowing. Its winds are music in our mouths, in us its rivers flowing. The sun is our hearthfire, warm with the earth’s desire, and with its purpose strong, we sing earth’s pilgrim song; in us the earth is growing.”

Let’s pause for a time of silent reflection and prayer.

Hymn #163 “For the Earth Forever Turning”

BENEDICTION:

Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering the ways we love this earth, for its teachings, for the joy and awe it inspires, for the home it offers us, and for the ways it heals us. May we give back to this precious planet the best we have to offer as humans and may we always delight in our place in this beautiful interdependent web. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.