

Easter IV/Earth Day April 22, 2018. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland  
Nigel Taber-Hamilton Genesis 1:24-2:3, A poem of St. Columba, John 10:11-18

A poem of St. Columba of Iona

Alone with none but you, my God,  
    I journey on my way;  
What need I fear, when you are near,  
    O king of night and day?  
                    More safe I am within your hand,  
                    than if a host did round me stand.

My life I yield to your decree,  
    and bow to your control  
In peaceful calm, for from your hand  
    no power can wrest my soul.  
                    No earthy omens e'er appal  
                    Someone that heeds the heavenly call!

The child of God can fear no ill,  
    their chosen dread no foe;  
We leave our fate with you and wait  
    your bidding when we go.  
                    Tis not from chance our comfort springs;  
                    You are our trust, O king of kings.

Some of you know that one of the members of the Friday clergy group I'm a part of is Katherine Foote. Katherine is a pastor at University Congregational/UCC in Seattle; she lives near me in Clinton. Katherine keeps sheep. She mentioned to us last week that this is the one Sunday out of the year when she's in great demand! Why - well, it's called "Good Shepherd Sunday!" It's called that because of the gospel passage, where John identifies Jesus as "The Good Shepherd." Our clergy group had a lot of good discussion about this text, none of which - or perhaps only one of which - I'm going to share with you! Katherine shared with us the International Sheepdog Association's motto: "No good flock without a good shepherd; no good shepherd without a good sheep dog." (I'm tempted to say "Brought to you by Sheepdog Union Local 341"!)

"No good flock without a good shepherd; no good shepherd without a good sheep dog" could actually be a good motto for a congregation - if you had a good sheep dog. Let's lay aside any conversation about who might be the metaphorical 'sheep dog' here! But I do want to mention some things about that motto that I think are worth holding onto: *its relational, its Trinitarian, and its organic.*

On this day - Earth Day - when we are also celebrating our Celtic heritage, all three of those

things are important, because they connect us to creation: *its relational, its Trinitarian, and its organic*.

You've heard this before, but it's always worth repeating that a focus on creation and creation's relationship with the Trinitarian God is one of the more significant markers of Celtic identity. The writings and prayers of the Celtic Saints are filled with their experiences of encountering our Trinitarian God's presence in the earthy, rich world they lived in. Those moments of encounter were really only possible for them when they sought to live simply and with an awareness of the sacredness of all things. Those moments of encounter, that awareness of the sacredness of all things, led them to try and live in harmony with all creation. For them, all life was a divine pilgrimage, with God as their companion on the way. You can hear that in Columba's poem which was our second reading.

That understanding was built on scripture. As our first reading makes clear, all things originate in the Divine Source, and so all things are sacred, all things are holy. For the author of Genesis, that Holy Presence permeates all of nature, and speaks to us of the 'Original and Essential Goodness' of everything. To enter into this Holy Presence is a sacramental experience, so that when we walk in nature, everything is a visible reminder of God. 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God.' the poet Gerald Manley Hopkins said. This is how the Celts could see all of nature as a 'thin place' – a place where the divide between the ordinary and the sacred becomes permeable, translucent. Not just every thing, but every moment is holy.

You can see this in the words of another Celtic saint – Columbanus: "If you want to know the Creator, first get to know the creation."

Some of you know all about this – either from sharing in a Celtic pilgrimage, reading, or being a person who tries to practice this sort of spirituality. Whether you know a great deal, or very little, though, I do think that's there's a missing piece here for all of us – and the clue is in that last word: "us."

When we pray and sing about creation it tends to be praying and singing about *something*: earth, sea, sky, animals and so on. We pray and sing because we who here celebrate and wish to protect creation are remembering that today is "Earth Day" (I know that's true, it says so on the front of the bulletin!). Last year we celebrated "Earth and Ocean Sunday" – and after seeing a piece on the news on Friday evening about the tons and tons of plastic polluting our oceans, it's not hard to see why would want to remember the oceans as well as the land. And most of us know that we're right to be concerned about the health of our planet.

This is where the "us" comes in. We need to take that understanding further, and recognize the truth that we humans are not separate from creation, we are **a part** of creation. When we pray for creation we are praying, too, for each other, and for ourselves. We are a part of creation, we and creation are one.

More and more Christian communities – including this one – are increasingly concerned about the ecological crisis that’s not just in the future but is now. The way we treat Earth is no way to treat a relative!

This is very Celtic! It also lays a load on us, a responsibility, because if we can accept the Celtic and biblical understanding of the closeness between God and nature then it would be a failure on our part if we didn’t honor the earth and God and each other and ourselves, by being good stewards of all of Creation.

There’s a flip side to that, too: **failing to care for the earth – for creation – is failing to care for ourselves.** If we fail to care for the earth – for creation – for ourselves, then this failure also has the potential to hinder our relationship with God and the ways God uses to minister to us.

In fact, if Columbanus is anywhere close to right – that to know God we should get to know the creation, then if we abuse the creation, aren’t we in some way abusing God?

On this day – and, actually, every day, I invite you to begin this sacred journey – because that’s what it is: a journey. Remembering we are a part of creation, and honoring and protecting it – and us – is a daily journey; we don’t just do it once a year!

I think it’s also important to recognize that any particular spirituality risks being inauthentic if it doesn’t have some real and concrete impact on our lives in a recognizable way. So here is something concrete you can do today – out of this Celtic vision that sees the creation – including ourselves – as holy.

Signatures are being gathered for Initiative 1631, which seeks to to reduce pollution in our state by investing in clean air, clean energy, clean water, healthy forests, and healthy communities. The initiative proposes doing that by putting a price on carbon. Over 200 groups have partnered together to create an Alliance for Jobs and Clean Energy which created Initiative 1631 – a significant number of these groups are faith-based organizations – for the reasons I’ve just outlined – including all the major denominations in our state – which, of course, includes us! So sign the initiative as a simple way of proclaiming your intentional stewardship of God’s good creation!