

**“Life on Earth”
Psalm 24
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Morningside Presbyterian Church
Atlanta, GA
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*The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world,
and those who live in it...Psalm 24:1*

In the Old Testament Book of Deuteronomy, Moses addresses the Hebrew people one last time before he dies. His speech concludes with a starkly stated challenge to the community that he has led through the wilderness, a community to whom God has given a special responsibility to bless all the other families of the earth. They are God's covenant people, and they are God's covenant for the sake of other people. He says to them, "I have set before you life and death. . . Choose life so that you and your descendants may live."

This text strikes us to the heart on the Sunday after the Monday of a terrible massacre in our nation. Thirty-two of the victims of Monday's tragedy had no choice to make regarding life or death. Because of the choice made by one, many died. Those who would have had children, had they lived, will now have no descendants. Those who were parents or grandparents have left families to grieve. Sometimes there is no choice for life to make. Ministers and rabbis who want to offer comfort have been left reaching for words this week, but, really, there are no adequate words to explain the suffering and deaths of so many innocent people. There is no word to say other than the reminder that God is not the author of evil, but rather the enemy of evil, nothing left to say except that God suffers and dies with those who suffer and die – witness the cross. In a way we can never fully comprehend with our finite minds, redemption emerges from God's complete identification with the dark side of the human condition.

Alex Evans is a long-time friend. He is pastor of the Blacksburg Presbyterian Church and chaplain to the Blacksburg police department. He is the one who accompanied the police chiefs, the city and the campus police chiefs, as they went through the terrible ordeal of taking the families of the victims in to private rooms to give them the news. The parents literally crumpled in grief; one mother crying the cry that all of us felt, "No, not my baby. It can't be." Choose life, the

great patriarch Moses said. Choose it not only for your own sake but choose it for the sake of your descendants. Choose it for the good of the whole. I turned this week to the words of Albert Einstein. He wrote, "Never forget that we humans are part of the whole called universe. Our task is to free ourselves from the delusion that we are separate from the rest. This delusion is a prison for us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion." We have grieved as a nation this week because we have remembered that those who died were not just one mother's child; they were our children, they and we, members of the same human family.

My friend, Alex Evans sounded very much like Albert Einstein when he told a reporter from the *New York Times* last week, "This demands all our compassion as human beings. It demands that we help one another. I believe God is crying with those who are crying, encouraging those who are offering encouragement, and above all, God is urging us to find ways to make a safer, more peaceful world."

Today we come together as we do each Sabbath Day to give thanks to God for the gift of life. This Sunday, we pray particularly for the gift of healing and to ask God for the spiritual gift of discernment, so that we can learn in a new way how to bear witness, here and now, to Jesus, whose personal mission statement was: "I came that they might have life and that they might have it abundantly."

Rachel Hill was 18; she was studying biology. Nicole White was 20; she had a double major in international studies and German. Daniel O'Neil: environmental engineering, specializing in the effects of urban development on regional watersheds. Waleed Shaalan, young father of a one-year-old, who purposefully distracted the gunman to keep the wounded student next to him from being shot again.

In honor of these and all the others, shall we renew our commitment to life and offer ourselves as guardians of all that works against the forces of destruction and death?

I am going to save the subject of the easy availability of handguns for another day, and I'm not going to talk about how you can order clips of ammunition on the internet. I will talk about that another day, and I will talk about the omnipresence of blood, slaughter and mayhem in movies, in music and video games in American culture. We need to talk about that another day. I will say that our three-year-old grandson had a birthday recently. When Al and I went to Toys R

Us to buy him what he wanted (We were told he wanted “action figures”), we found that 99.9 percent of them wielded weapons, many of them claiming intergalactic killing capacities.

I will not speak today about the very real tension that exists in our democratic society between public safety and individual rights, but this too is an important and complex subject about which our whole society must be in conversation.

No, on this first Sunday since the tragedy, I simply want to remind you that “though the mountains shake at the heart of the sea, the Lord of Hosts is with us.” Today I encourage us all to remember that “the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those that live therein.” These are the promises that hold the universe secure and that give us reason to do what we can, wherever we can, to preserve life as fragile and as vulnerable as it is, so that our descendants and the whole created order can live in joy and praise as God intended.

It is today, the 37th day in which Earth Day has been observed. In remembrance of those who will never again hear a bird sing on an April morning, or walk under a blue spring sky, I want us to think together about life on earth, and about the nature of the threat even earth itself is facing. According to a report issued just two weeks ago by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, “between 250 and 980 million people, mostly in Africa, could find themselves without fresh water in 40 years. At least 130 million people will face food shortages, and 30 percent of the plant and animal species that currently exist are now facing extinction.” A separate study in the journal *Science* has predicted the American Southwest – one of our nation’s fastest growing regions, will be gripped by permanent drought by the year 2050.

This is the reality. This is no longer a concern of those on the fringes. The world that is our home is facing terrible possibilities. Now is the time for us to wake up and do what we can for the sake of the earth, the place where eagles soar and children run and play.

In a few moments we will use a Confession of Faith adopted by our denomination’s General Assembly in 1991. In that Confession is a statement that has never been made by a Christian community in the history of the world. *We confess before God that we threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.* Here is the basic question: whose world is it, and what did God intend for the human being’s role to be in the world that God created?

In the Book of Genesis, God creates the human creature and gives the creature dominion over the earth. But in doing so, God did not mean that the earth was now OURS. The earth is still the Lord's; the earth and everything in it still belongs to God. We are to be stewards of God's good creation. Remember the order in Genesis? First, God created the world and the plants, the animals and the sea, and finally God created the human creature.

Poet Wendell Berry writes, "Most of the important laws for the conduct of human life are religious in origin. Laws such as these: be merciful; be forgiving; be kind to others; love your enemies. We must, in short, love and care for one another and the other creatures. We are allowed to make no exceptions." Every person's obligation toward creation is summed up in two words from Genesis 2:15 – "Keep it." Keep it. Here, I am leaving the world in your hands. Keep it for me.

There is an old Jewish story that claims that upon creating the first human beings, God took them all around the Garden of Eden and said, "Look how beautiful and perfect everything is. You are now in charge of it all. Make sure you do not ruin or devastate my world. For if you do, there will be no one after you to fix it."

It has been broken, our world, and exploited. Now is the time for us to change, to throw away that "subdue and exploit" mindset and replace it with a new theology of creation that understands life is a gift, the earth is a gift, all the creatures on the earth as precious in the sight of God. There is a wonderful little line in the Book of the prophet Hosea in which God says, "I am going to make with you a covenant with the birds of the air and the beasts of the field and the creeping things on the ground," which means it's not just WE who are involved in the covenant. According to the prophet, birds and snails and bobcats are included too, included by the gracious, sovereign Creator of all things now living.

Here is a little story that perhaps can clarify why we got so confused about these things. The late, wonderful preacher and writer, John Claypool, talks about how during World War II, a family that knew his family lent to the Claypools a green Bendix washing machine. The father of the other family had been shipped out to Europe, and the family decided to wait out the war living in the grandparents' house. For the first time, the Claypool family had a washing machine. Everything was all well and good until the father came back from Europe, and the family asked that the washing machine be returned. John, though he was still a boy, was really frustrated about it. He complained to his mother until she explained,

"Listen, son, I want you to remember that washing machine. It never belonged to us in the first place. That we got to use it at all was a gift."

And so it is with the world that God has given us responsibility for and given us to enjoy and to take pleasure from. It's time for the church to claim our responsibility and to proclaim the word that I am proclaiming to you today: The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. We need to start making noise about major public policy. We need to speak with a faithful voice, not in a fussing, belligerent way, but in a "how can we solve these matters together?" sort of way. We need to speak the word that comes from the Lord. We need to do big things and little things too, like recycling projects and changing our light bulbs. I confess to you I have not changed my light bulbs, because I don't look so good in those little white bulbs. It's either a face-lift or the old light bulbs for me for awhile. But we all need to do something, don't we?

We do not live in a disposable world. We live in God's world, and there will be no one coming after us to make it right. It is we who must do it, and we must do it now, out of faithfulness to God, who put the golden sun in the morning sky, the song in the throat of the robin, and who placed in the human heart the capacity to change, the capacity that we have all demonstrated as a nation this week: to care about more than ourselves. Einstein called it compassion. The Bible calls it *agape* love, the ability to care about something that is beyond ourselves, and not primarily for the sake of ourselves. Choose life, Moses said, that you and your descendants may live.

Is care for creation on your agenda? Do you think it's silly, overwrought, overstated? Some people do get overwrought and overstate, but the threat is real. The planet is in peril. Global warming is a reality. Polar bears will soon have no place to live except in a zoo. Care for creation must be on our agenda and on the agenda of the church of Jesus Christ. God has placed before us the choice of our lifetime. Let us make the right choices, and if all that we hear can be believed, or even one-tenth of it can be believed, we'd best get started now, today.