

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

October 11, 2009

Texts – Genesis 1: 26 - 31

Matthew 7: 24 - 27

We've had a wonderful banner hanging over the front door our sanctuary for the past month. "Green and Growing" it proclaims; "Building for Tomorrow, Open Today!"

Thanks to Matt Bushey who designed it and John Floyd who made it, that sign has attracted a lot of attention. This week I ran across a list of some other real signs which are also turning heads –

- In the front yard of a funeral home there's one that says, "Drive carefully. We'll wait."
- On a maternity room door another reads, "Push, Push, Push."
- There's one on the front door of a residence which says, "Everyone on the premises is a vegetarian except the dog."
- At an optometrist's office this appears: "If you don't see what you're looking for, you've come to the right place."
- In a veterinarian's waiting room another one says, "Be back in five minutes. Sit! Stay!"
- And finally, inside a bowling alley there's this – "Please be quiet. We need to hear a pin drop."

You're out of luck if that's what you want to do Monday through Friday around here – quiet it seldom is!

We are under construction this Fall, "Building for Tomorrow" as our sign says, but we are also striving to be "Green and Growing." That is not only a "sign of the times," it is a "sign

for the times.” What I mean is best described by the story of the father who purchased a globe as a gift for his daughter on her birthday. She had looked at it all day and was reluctant to surrender it when it came time to go to sleep. As he gently took the globe from her hands and tucked her into bed, the little girl asked him, “Daddy, what are you going to do with my world?”

It is at question that deserves serious attention. What are we going to do with the world in which our children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren will live? The word “green” has come to symbolize such concerns in our culture. Will we treasure the fragile gift which is our home planet, or will we continue the pattern of believing (in the words of Bill Vitek, a professor at Clarkson University) that “we can master Earth and treat it as our supermarket, playground, laboratory and dumpster.”¹

“Daddy, what are you going to do with my world?”

It is a theological question that goes the very roots of our tradition and civilization. “*So God created humankind in God’s own image,*” the first creation narrative in Genesis says;

“In the image of God they were created; male and female God created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over . . . every living thing that moves upon the earth.’”

[Genesis 1: 27-28]

There is good news and bad news in that treasured story.

The good news lies in the self-esteem and empowerment it evokes. We are each created “*in the image of God,*” it says; we are as close to divinity as it is possible to be. “*Dominion*” – which we sometimes soften to read “*stewardship*” – over all that we see is our birthright and responsibility. Everything that God has done and all that God has created is for our well-being.

¹ “These Revolutionary Times” by Bill Vitek, www.northcountrypublicradio.org/news/newsfacts/fact080722

The footnote in my copy of The New Oxford Annotated Bible sums it up: “The solemn divine decision (described here),” it says, “emphasizes humankind’s supreme place at the climax of God’s creative work.”²

That’s the good news, but the bad news is the flip-side of the same coin. “God loves you,” it says; “in fact you are God’s favorite; you may do whatever you please to the rest of creation, for it is beneath you.” Instead of understanding ourselves as intimately intertwined into the very fabric of creation, dependent on and interdependent with the whole of the created order, one can read this ancient Genesis text as a license to exploit and plunder. Truth to tell, that is exactly what too many have done over the eons.

Global warming, species extinction, over-consumption . . . these too are “Signs of the Times” we live in, and they are directly attributable to the distorted world view which sees human beings as above and beyond the limits inherent in an interdependent ecosphere. The crusty “old Vermonter ode to frugality” which I love to quote – “Use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without!” – works well when applied to a life lived on the margins of economic security. It has proven to be an utter disaster, however, when used as the standard for a civilization’s relationship with the natural order. What we are “using up” and “wearing out” are nothing less than the resources necessary to sustain human life on this planet. “Doing without” may well be what lies in store for our children and grandchildren.

The little girl’s question – “Daddy, what are you going to do with my world?” – demands an answer. The sign out in front of our sanctuary signals our response: “Green and Growing.” The work to replace our heating system and repair our windows which we have done in Phase I of our capital campaign program has already reduced our utility costs by \$8,000 a year (a 28% savings). More importantly, it has dramatically lowered our energy usage and our carbon

² The New Oxford Annotated Bible With the Apocrypha, page 2, note 26-27.

emissions. We are saving 746 million BTUs a year (enough to heat seven Vermont homes) and the reduction in our carbon emissions is the equivalent of taking eight cars off the road each year.

In “Building for Tomorrow,” in other words, we are trying to be responsible stewards not just of our financial resources but of earth’s resources. It’s a good first step, but it is not enough.

“The world is changing in ways that we would not necessarily choose,” Professor Vitek says. “It is time to accept the creative limits and boundaries that gave us the universe and the sun-powered Earth in the first place.” The signs of the times, he argues, call for nothing less than a revolution in the way we view ourselves and the world we inhabit.

Our New Testament lesson this morning is an old familiar one, isn’t it? *“Every one then who hears these words of mine and does them,”* Jesus says, *“will be like a wise person who built their house upon the rock.”* [Matthew 7: 24] We know it well. There are real consequences in the real world to our actions, he says. What I have been talking with you about . . . what I’ve been trying to communicate by my actions as well as my words . . . this is not just philosophy or helpful psychology or insightful theology. There is a fundamental pattern at the heart of the universe. It is not subject to discussion or negotiation. You and I are not the Masters of the Universe, he says; God is.

- You will reap what you have sown. That’s just the way the world works.
- Where your heart is, there will your treasure be also. Again, that’s just the way the world works.
- You cannot serve two masters: not identically, not completely. Whether you want to or not, you will have to choose sooner or later. That’s the way the world works.
- The judgment you pronounce on others . . . that’s the judgment you will receive from others.

Over and over through his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus articulates the boundaries, the limits, which characterize human life on planet earth. We are free to disagree with him and certainly free to ignore him. He does not command obedience. Again, that's just the way the world God has created works. Freedom lies at its heart. But that does not mean that there are not real limits, real boundaries, and real consequences to our actions. Nor does it mean that the rains will not fall nor does it mean that the floods will not come nor does it mean that the winds will not blow and beat upon the houses we build. That's also the way the real world works.

By saying of ourselves that we are "Green and Growing" we are attempting to say that we are a faith community seeking to understand the creative limits and boundaries of the beautiful world in which God has placed us. Certainly we do not have all the answers. Clearly we do not pretend to . . . nor, quite frankly, do we want . . . a single political philosophy or agenda which everybody else should follow. No one does. What we do have together is a common commitment to grow in our understanding of God's love and to mirror that love in every way possible. We want, I believe, to grow more and more fully into that "*image of God*" that the old story in Genesis says is our true human nature. When that happens, "Green and Growing" will not only be a sign for our times . . . it will be a sign of the times. May that day come soon.

Amen.