
Earth Sunday
Chapel in the Park United Church
April 21, 2024
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on 1 John 2:15-17 and Mark 9:38-50

Who here believes in magic? Anybody? Really? Well, we will find out later, because we are going to do a live experiment today to see who here believes in magic. And you might be wondering ... what is the connection between magic and the fact that this is Earth Sunday? Hopefully we will discover that together.

But before we go there, I need to ask, what do you make of all these “earth” celebrations anyway? We have Earth Day, Earth Sunday, Creation Sunday, the Season of Creation, and countless others. What do you think of all these celebrations. Are they meaningful to you? We have so many of these celebrations that I need to ask - do you find them meaningful? Is anyone here disappointed that here at the Chapel we are completely ignoring the fact that last Wednesday was Bat Appreciation Day?

We have all these “special celebration days”. All the time. So what do you think Earth Sunday should be about? I’d love to hear what you think over coffee time or during the week.

For me, Earth Sunday needs to lift up our concerns about our environment. That can include discussing climate change, garbage mountains, plastic islands, soil and water contamination, and many other topics.

You know, 20 years ago it was much easier to preach on this topic. It was simple then. I would just tell you to change your incandescent light bulbs for more efficient options. Don’t run the water while you brush your teeth. Use your blue box. Simple things that did not call on us to change our lifestyles. But for a variety of reasons those efforts have not been adequate. Now, if we want to help our environment, we need lifestyle changes. Preaching on earth day used to be easy, and hearing those sermons used to be pretty easy too.

But today the subject is harder to talk about. And defiantly harder to hear. So

really - what do you expect for a sermon today? What are you hoping I will talk about? Is there anything you hope I will NOT talk about?

The Bible gives us a conflicted picture of whether or not we should even care the environment. We have both a positive and a negative image of the world within the pages of the Bible.

For example, we have positive images. In Genesis, it says that God created the world, the land, the waters, the plants, the animals - including us. And declared that it was good. We are told to manage the earth and its resources. In other parts of the Bible we are told to love everyone as we love ourselves. If we put those two ideas together then clearly the earth's resources are meant to be shared. The earth should be sustained for all people, including future generations, so conservation is important. That is a positive image of the environment we can find in the Bible.

The Bible also holds negative images of the world. One example being our reading from 1 John this morning. In passages like these, faithful Christians are seen as "not of this world". And the world itself is seen as the enemy, full of evil desires. Something temporary that is passing away. Therefore conservation is a waste of time. For example, if you think the rapture will happen soon you likely don't care about climate change. Those biblical texts drive a theology popular today that says that heaven is important and permanent. But the earth is temporary and therefore disposable.

So the Bible does not directly answer the question as to whether we should care about our environment. And of course, we should not expect the Bible to address that issue anyway. None of the biblical authors could have imagined what we now call "climate change". There are passages in the Bible that describe great environmental destruction of course. Al Gore famously said that "every night on the evening news is like a nature hike through the Book of Revelation". But that's not what we are talking about here.

Given that I am an environmental scientist, and given that Marjorie is a climate change policy executive, you probably now expect a boring sermon about climate change - the impact on our climate caused by human behaviour. You probably expect a focus on blame, guilt, perhaps even shame. You probably expect me to tell you what we can do

about it. But you also know me well enough now to know that I'm not that interested in blame or guilt. But I do care - passionately - about changes that you and I can make today.

That sounds like a daunting task though. So I'm going to detour to something else.

I want to start by saying that I love history. I love learning about history, and in particular the "big" stories of human development. We usually use the term "narrative" to talk about social developments in the big picture. And what I love about learning history is seeing the broad narratives at work. Studying history reinforces both my belief in - and my disgust at - human behaviour. Understanding our own narrative often gives the best answer to the question "how did we get into this mess in the first place".

One problem with any narrative is deciding where to start. All narratives are built upon the myths and realities of the past, so in some sense, narratives never have a beginning. But we have to jump in somewhere. I want to jump in at the end of the Second World War, right here in North America.

Having the Second World War end was undoubtedly a good thing. But the cessation of hostilities was partially responsible for the next phase in our own narrative. Post-war, we believed that our system of government was superior to fascism, and moreover that democracy really worked. And perhaps it even did then. But that belief, coupled with the fact that so many people had made great sacrifices during the war led to our next stage of development. Where there was some sense that individual people had done their part to make the world safe. And so we could now just go back to normal life. Normal, honest people that we were, we were just required to work hard, vote every few years, pay our taxes and allow our elected officials to run things. And of course, things would run well because we had a democratic system in place. We ourselves could sit back and let ourselves be taken care of by "the system". And consequently, many of us stopped thinking for ourselves at a time when life actually became far more complex.

This attitude has had a huge impact on our current environmental crisis. Even people who recognize that we are in an environmental crisis are waiting for other people to solve this problem for us. Perhaps we are waiting for the government to take care of

the problem. Perhaps we are waiting for some genius to develop a car that runs on tap water or whatever. Are we waiting for someone else to solve the environmental crisis for us?

Pick any environmental issue you care about, and I guarantee you can make progress on that issue without any help from the government, or from anybody else either. Are you worried about emissions from power plants? Use less electricity yourself, and you will make a difference! Are you worried about the environmental damage that comes from the production of livestock? Eat less meat, and you will make a difference. Are you waiting for the government and fast food outlets to ban all forms of single-use plastic? Just stop taking those plastic items - today - and you will make a difference! Or - as some of us did yesterday - if you don't like the amount of garbage on our streets, pick it up!

Jesus said, "If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire." Now if Jesus was here today, he might say, "If your fuel-guzzling car is causing you to stumble, take the bus or get a better car. If your single-use plastic water bottle is causing you to stumble, get a re-fillable water bottle. If your fossil fuel-based diet is causing you to stumble, learn to eat foods that have less impact on our environment. Choose to enter life in a new way rather than to go to hell and to take the whole planet with you".

But of course, we would rather that someone else solves these problems for us. To me, this comes from our post-war narrative that says we want and expect our government to take care of us because we pay them to do that.

I hope we all noticed what Jesus did not say.

Jesus did not say, "If your hand causes you to stumble, complain loudly about your hand to everyone you meet." Jesus did not say, "If your hand causes you to stumble, wait for someone else to fix your hand." Jesus did not say, "If your hand causes you to stumble, finding someone to blame." Jesus said, "If your hand causes you to stumble ... do something about it yourself."

Well, this seems like as good a time as any for our demonstration to test whether or not you believe in magic. Are you ready? Let me just get my tools. What's this?

(plastic water bottle). What's this? (Blue bin) Now, if I drank the water out of this bottle, what should I do with the bottle afterwards? Should I put the plastic bottle into the recycling bin? Yes, of course, because the blue bin is for things that can be recycled.

- Question 1: Is this plastic water bottle recyclable?
- Answer: Yes.
- Question 2: If I put this plastic bottle in this bin, will it be recycled?
- Answer: No.

Are you surprised? If you are surprised then perhaps you do believe in magic.

When items are labelled “recyclable” it means that the item can - in principle - be recycled. But whether or not the item will actually be recycled depends on whether or not it is profitable. In Canada, approximately 9% of plastics are recycled. 91% are put into landfills, incinerated, or just tossed. Plastics like in this bottle are actually never recycled, at best they are “down-cycled” because if they are used again they can only be used to create cheaper, inferior products. At best they can make 2-3 cycles before they are landfill.

I'm happy to say that other types of recyclables do better. Most steel is now made from recycled inputs. Glass, metal, paper, and cardboard all recycle more easily - that is to say more profitably - than plastic. The recycling of plastic in Canada is basically mythical.

To quote from National Public Radio, “Here's the basic problem: All used plastic can be turned into new things, but picking it up, sorting it out and melting it down is expensive. Plastic also degrades each time it is reused, meaning it can't be reused more than once or twice. On the other hand, new plastic is cheap. It's made from oil and gas, and it's almost always less expensive and of better quality to just start fresh.”

Most people do not know this because - we have stopped thinking for ourselves. You don't have to be an engineer to know that the environmental costs of recycling are massive. We - and this includes me - would rather just believe the mythology that our blue boxes are magic. You put a plastic bottle into the blue box and - whoosh - problem

solved. I've done my duty. But we all know - if we think about it - that blue boxes are picked up by fuel-burning trucks. Those trucks take the material to fuel-burning plants for processing, shipping, sorting, etc. Prior to 2018 a lot of recycling material was shipped to China - burning even more fuel. The blue box program in Toronto now takes even more fuel because sometimes Toronto sends teams of inspectors (in fuel-burning vehicles) to inspect blue bins before they get collected because of rising issues with contaminants. Contaminants in blue bins became an issue in 2018 when China stopped accepting contaminated recycling from around the world. Since then, vast amounts of recycling have been stored or buried. The blue bin program consumes a lot of environmental resources - the very things we want to believe that blue bins are preserving!

If you didn't know that, perhaps you do believe in magic after all!

Some environmental advocates are now saying that we should stop recycling plastics altogether. They say that the myth of recycling is just a subsidy to the plastics industries and to bottled water companies. Because without the myth that recycling is magic, the bottled water market would shrink significantly. And I do believe we should make every effort to NOT recycle. Recycling is better than making garbage. But recycling is still MUCH worse than the other 2 R's, reduce and reuse. We need to stop thinking that recycling is magic. We also need to stop thinking that recycling plastic is good. Recycling plastic is bad for the environment. Yes, garbage is even worse, but recycling plastic is still bad. Reduce/Reuse is what we need to be doing, as much as possible. And to be honest, I want to add another R to the list too - Re-think. Re-thinking should perhaps be the first item on our list. We need to re-think before we buy things.

I want to leave us with 1 practical idea. When we are at home, by all means, put plastics into our blue bins. That's what they are for. But when we are out shopping, let's all remember that 91% of plastics are not actually recycled when we are choosing what to buy. When we are shopping we should remember that the recycling of plastic in Canada is mythical.

If your hand causes you to stumble, ... do something about it yourself!

Amen.