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# ASH WEDNESDAY

February 22, 2023

By Paul Galbreath

“Remember you are earth and earth you shall become.”

These words taken from the creation story in Genesis 3 accompany the action of being marked by the sign of the cross on Ash Wednesday. It is a way to remind us of our limits – these days of our lives that we share on this fragile planet. This day invites us to look at ourselves as part of the earth, taken from the ground, breathed into life by the gift of air, and returned to the earth. The season of Lent invites us on a journey to reconnect with the earth. It is a chance to no longer look at ourselves apart from the earth, but to see ourselves as deeply part of the earth, the source of our life, and the place to which we will return. It is a challenging word and also a word of hope since our future is bound up with the future of the earth. Caring for the earth is a way of caring for ourselves.

We are invited this Lenten season to reflect on our relationship with the earth and to choose ways to act that care for the earth. It is a journey that we share together as we travel towards the hope of sharing resurrection life for ourselves and for all of creation. You are asked to commit to new practices of earth care during the coming weeks – a way of building new habits that show that baptismal life includes a commitment to care for the earth as central to Christian discipleship. For example, you may choose to focus on conserving your use of water or decide to pick up trash in a park near you each week.

Consider that your earth care practice is also a form of embodied prayer – a way to work for the healing of the earth.

Rev. Dr. Paul Galbreath’s new book, ***Elemental: A Journey Through Lent with the Earth***, offers an intriguing, scripture-based format to bridge the gap of how people relate their own individual environmental activities to Christian faith.



# FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

February 26, 2023

by Barbara Hassall

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7

In the beginning, God created the heavens and earth; God separated the light from the darkness; created all living things and placed Man and Woman in the Garden to care for all of creation. God looked at this and declared it Good!

It was all in harmony. Death was not part of the equation until Mankind was misled and succumbed to their own pride and violated the only prohibition given by God. They ate the forbidden fruit and evil entered their lives and they would now die. Even God's beautiful creation began to feel the effects of death.

As we enter the Season of Lent, a season of repentance and self-reflection, we look at our personal responsibility to the creation that God placed in our care so many generations ago. It isn't so much a time of "giving up" a favorite food or activity. It is a time to learn and put into action practices that will lead us toward a restoration of the harmony with God's creation that was lost through disobedience and pride.

As we move toward the Celebration of Resurrection and Restoration think about some practical actions to bring the earth back into harmony. **Do simple things such as turning off the water when brushing your teeth, turning off lights when you leave a room, plant broad leaf trees to increase the canopy, invest in clean energy and care for God's creatures with love and compassion.**

God wants and desires the relationship with Mankind that we lost so long ago. Take the steps to move closer to God and be bathed in God's smile and grace as we honor His son.

Prayer: Creator God, who created all things, bless your creations and restore harmony for generations to come.

Barbara Hassall is a Ruling Elder at The Sanctuary in Fort Lauderdale, Florida; the President of the Florida Presbyterian Disaster assistance Network, former Presbytery Moderator of Tropical Florida and a Commissioner to the 225<sup>th</sup> General Assembly.



# SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

March 5, 2023

By Collette Nies Von Hanna

## Psalm 121

About eight years ago, I was traveling late in the last hour of my six-hour drive to Spring, Texas. Driving the vast stretches of west Texas highways was a common practice for work and its an area of the country where one can drive for hundreds of miles and see no one. It was around eleven o'clock and I stopped at the last rest area, let my pit bull out for a few minutes, put her back in the car, and walked toward the restroom. There was only one other vehicle there, a family of four that was loading up and by the time I walked by they began to drive off. The women's restroom entrance was not in the middle at the front of the building, like they normally are, but around the side towards the back corner, which is an odd placement, because it is not very well lit and out of sight from most of the parking lot. When I reached the doorway there was a very pale man, maybe 25 years old, over 6' tall, standing in the shadow, wearing dark clothing, and he had a hoodie covering most of his face.

Turning quickly into the large bathroom, every hair on my body was on alert. What was he doing there? The men's room was on the opposite side of the building. There were no other cars in the parking lot and we were an hour each direction from any kind of gas station or town. It is not often I feel physically threatened, but I knew something was about to happen. I started praying...praying in my mind, with my words, in tongues in my spirit, all of it, desperately pleading for protection.

Gathering my wits, I walked out and he was still there, in the same place, hovering next to the door in the dark. I didn't make eye contact, walked really fast past him to my car, all the while still praying. I specifically remember envisioning two giant angels to my right and to my left.

The family that was leaving, that should have been long gone, had sat on the exit ramp, waiting and watching. When I got to my car and drove out, with their window rolled down, we made eye contact and the driver nodded, as we both knew that something horrible could have happened, and then they drove off.

Like that anxious traveler in Psalm 121, Yahweh is there when we are most vulnerable. And I cannot explain why there is great suffering and tragic violence in the world where some are spared at times. But the one who watches over us, the God who keeps Israel, the God who made heaven and earth, is who is with us throughout our life and after, no matter how long or short that pilgrimage may be.

Collette Nis Von Hanna, MDiv, MSSW, lives in New Braunfels, Texas with her 4-year-old adopted daughter, Emberlyn, and is working on her DMin dissertation in Land, Food, and Faith Formation from Memphis Theological Seminary.

# THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

March 12, 2023

By Courtney Bowen

John 4:5-42

"Living water" does not describe our water. Water in many places, thanks to pollution and runoff, cannot support life at all. It's the opposite of living water. It's deadly water.

Jesus says to the woman of Samaria, "If you knew the gift of God ... you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." Do we know a gift from God when it's in front of us? Do we, like the woman, fail to recognize it?

We have not well-tended to the gift from God of water. But, we are not without hope. Change is possible.

Initially, the woman is confused and mocks Jesus ("Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob?"). Yet, the woman is able to move forward, see more clearly, and even asks Jesus for this "living water." Jesus proceeds to tell her everything she's ever done. There's no mention of sin or judgment of those actions. There is only the revelation that Jesus knows her entirely. And in being known by Jesus, the woman begins to understand who he is - the Messiah. It is in knowing Jesus and being known by Jesus, that the woman experiences the life-giving gift, the living water of Christ. She is changed and rushes to the village to share the good news with others.

How might *we* be changed by Christ? In knowing him and being known by him, might we be more cognizant of gifts from God? Might that knowing, that relationship, change how we live and treat God's gifts - not turning them deadly, but ensuring that we and others may experience that "spring of water gushing up to eternal life?"

Prayer

*God of Living Waters, help us to know you, and in that knowing become channels of your gifts to the world. Amen.*

Courtney Bowen is Associate Pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Jackson, TN (a certified Earth Care Congregation of the PCUSA).



# FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

March 19, 2023

By Susan Gilbert Zencka

1 Samuel 16:1-13, Psalm 23, Ephesians 5:8-14, John 9:1-41

This particular week has a number of interesting themes—I want to focus on seeing and not-seeing, in 1 Samuel. Samuel has been led by God to visit the household of Jesse to anoint a new king. And so during his visit, he meets the sons of Jesse. And as they pass by, Samuel recognizes that some are strong or handsome or for whatever reason, look like good king candidates. But God says again and again, “No, that is not the one.” Finally, Samuel has met all the sons who are present, and he asks Jesse, “Is that all?” And Jesse responds something like, “Well, there is the little guy, the youngest. He’s out with the sheep.” The little guy. The one that Jesse hasn’t thought to even bring in to introduce to Samuel, and yet the little guy turns out to be David, who becomes the greatest king of Israel (despite his significant flaws), the one with a heart after God’s own heart.

So often, we overlook the little things. The people, places, or critters we deem unimportant. But sometimes these little ones are incredibly important. That’s true of insects. We have finally grown to understand the importance of bees and butterflies, but there are thousands of species of insects that are vital to the eco-system. And one important contribution that we can each make to the health of God’s creation is to plant flowers, shrubs, and trees that are native to our own areas, because it turns out that insects are picky. By providing these plants that sustain insects, we help create habitats that support birds and small mammals as well, and help with the pollination cycle of life.

The Rev. Dr. Susan Gilbert Zencka lives in Allentown, PA with her husband and their dogs. Over the last year they have planted 400 native flowers, 10 shrubs, and 5 trees as they try to create a bio-diverse ecohabitat for their insect, bird, and animal neighbors in their city yard.



# FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

March 26, 2023

By Angela Michler

John 11: 1-45

Light of hope

Climate change is an important news topic today. There is flooding, droughts, hurricanes, drench pours, mud slides, and other destructive events around the world. These are just some of the examples and there are more to come. With news like this we should just give up on humanity caring for his creation, DON'T!

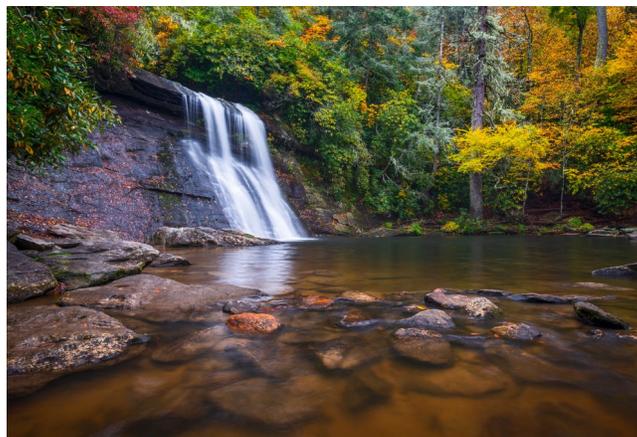
The following passage in John says other wise. Mary and Martha were caring for their sick brother Lazarus and sent for Jesus. Lazarus dies before Jesus shows up. In verse 8, on the way there the disciples asked "a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?" His reply was simple, in verses 9-10 he talks about daylight and how doing so you see the world in a more hopeful point of view. On arrival he saw Mary and Martha weeping hopelessly over the death of Lazarus. In verse 33, Jesus also wept. In verse 40, Jesus asked Martha before the stone was moved "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God!" The stone was moved and Lazarus was risen from the dead. Hope was restored in the village of Bethany.

The next time you watch the news keep in mind Jesus' hopefulness in a troubled world.

Loving Father,

Give us humility to see hope in your creation. Help us to see the light of hope through your loving eyes. Give us courage to walk as your son did with hope for a better tomorrow. Amen

Angela Michler is a Presbyterian that cares about the earth, which she has been studying since 2018.



# LITURGY OF THE PALMS AND PASSION

## SIXTH SUNDAY IN LENT

April 2, 2023

By Jody Mask

I never knew until I went to seminary that "liturgy" meant "work of the people." The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops notes the fuller sense of the Greek word from which it came: "public work or work done on behalf of the people."

Today we celebrate the Liturgy of the Palms which commemorates the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. Matthew doesn't refer to the branches being waved as palms, but church tradition insists on it.

That's good for me, living in Florida. Palm trees are a dime a dozen here! Instead of having to source responsibly farmed palms from a far-away place, we can go to our backyards. Armed with a pair of loppers, we watch out for paper wasp nests on the back side of saw palmetto fronds, or bats roosting in sabal palm trees. Ideally, we look for non-native palms first, but that is not always practical. We share the responsibility so that no one has to cut too much from our native species.

We work together as the people bringing our gifts of greenery into the worship space. This is a public work. We do it on behalf of the whole people of God. It is closer to actual liturgy than any responsive reading in worship, important as that might be.

Palm Sunday arrives, and we wave our locally sourced fronds together--a glorious display of local color!

As the celebration ends, and Holy Week dutifully advances, we give thanks for the communal gathering of the fronds and for the trees and shrubs that produced them. Then, we set them alight. We source the remnants as next year's Ash Wednesday ashes. Nothing is wasted, especially the work of the people. Hosanna!



# MAUNDY THURSDAY

April 6, 2023

By Carolyn Winfrey Gillette and Bruce Gillette

John 13:34-35

Jesus calls for us to love as he loves us. This is not the “Golden Rule,” but the “Platinum Rule”—love that is very costly. We need to love others, including by caring for God’s creation that benefits everyone. It is a real challenge, but as we share in the Lord’s Supper, we are strengthened so we can love God, neighbors and creation.

## **O God, You Give Us Grapes and Grain**

ELLACOMBE (“I Sing the Mighty Power of God”)

O God, you give us grapes and grain; you give us salt and oil.  
You bless us with refreshing rain and sun — and rich, dark soil.  
And so your care for all these things means we can be well-fed.  
Creation praises you and sings — as you give wine and bread.

You sent us Christ, who walked the fields and saw your love abound;  
he spoke of trees and crops and yields, and growth beneath the ground.  
He spoke of ordinary things like sheep and mustard seeds,  
and chicks beneath their mothers' wings; Christ taught your love through these.

One day at table, Jesus prayed, and blessed the bread and wine.  
These things of earth that you had made became your gift, your sign:  
You love the world! You sent your Son! And now, through wine and bread,  
our Lord is present once again and so your church is fed.

Your Spirit moves across the earth — the earth that you made good.  
May we see your creation's worth and love it as we should.  
As we now share the bread and wine, as Christ is here anew,  
God, give us strength to go and care for all the earth with you.

Tune: *Gesangbuch der Herzoglich Württembergischen Katholischen Hofkapelle*, 1784  
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Bruce & Carolyn Winfrey Gillette are the pastors of the First Presbyterian Union Church in Owego, NY. Bruce is PEC Moderator. Carolyn is a hymn writer.

# GOOD FRIDAY

April 7, 2023

by Sally Swan

John 18:1 – 19:42

The book of John tells us that on the evening of the Last Supper, Jesus foretells of his betrayal, commands his followers to love one another, tells of the promise of the Holy Spirit, and prays for his disciples.

John verse 18 states that "After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered."

It is in this garden that authorities and soldiers come "with lanterns and torches and weapons" to confront Jesus. Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, "Whom are you looking for?" They answered, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus replied, "I am he."

Jesus confirms a second time, "I told you that I am he." So, the soldiers and the police arrested Jesus and bound him.

**First reflection:** Pause to consider how might Jesus have felt...knowing his confirmation "I am he" will lead to arrest, conviction, and death? What statements of bravery! What actions of steadfast love and faith!

Later, in John 18:37, Pilate asks "So you are a king?" Jesus answered "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and *for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.*"

**Second reflection:** Do we take time to listen and hear the voice of Jesus testifying truth to the world?

**Blessing:** May we be assured with each prayer, each hymn, each communion...each offering of ourselves in the service of Christ, that Jesus is with us. May we listen to his voice. May his truth live in us. May we testify to the truth.

Rev. Sally Swan is an ordained Interfaith Chaplain and Presbyterian Elder who incorporates nature-based spirituality into worship. [www.blessingallbeings.org](http://www.blessingallbeings.org)

# RESURRECTION OF THE LORD

## EASTER SUNDAY

April 9, 2023

John 20: 1-18

Early on the first day named Easter, Mary Magdalene is crying in a garden, mourning for Jesus at his empty tomb. She sees someone nearby, "supposing him to be the gardener." If Jesus wore what Rembrandt painted – wide-brimmed sunhat, sheathed knife in his belt, hand on a spade – Mary had proof. The man says, perhaps in a whisper, "Mary!" She answers, "Rabbouni!" Jesus spoke of hens, sheep, mustard seeds, and grapevines. He knew the Earth as a place of nourishment, beauty, new life, and toil.

Bless those who mourn as the Northern Hemisphere  
turns toward the Sun

For grief has no season and Easter can be bluer than Christmas.

Bless those who misunderstand their own Easter mornings

For ambiguity and confusion are part of resurrection.

When sad or bewildered, may we each know Someone  
who whispers our name.

I write on February 1<sup>st</sup>. In Maryland, the first shoots of wild grasses are emerging. The star magnolia's buds are swelling. Forsythia is blooming. Each adds to the crescendo of new life, building toward summer. For several years, I preached at the middle-of-the-night Easter service in a nearby hospital. Patients' souls can find new life in hospitals but the dead do not rise. So I distinguished between grand Sunday Easters and the humble, everyday ones that come with spring. My faith is in the latter.

Bless our grand Easters, those with cathedral organs, family feasts,  
and White House eggs

For majesty and lavishness can remind us of God.

Bless our humble Easters,

even those with just a hint of green or the opening of a single bud

For sometimes that is all we can love.

Whether majestic or humble, may the beauty of Easter on Earth sustain and nourish us all.

Phyllis Windle is a botanist and member of Rockville United Church.



Presbyterians for Earth Care (PEC) invites individuals and congregations to participate in the growing earth care movement within the PC(USA) and beyond.

PEC is a national eco-justice network that cares for God's creation by connecting, equipping, and inspiring Presbyterians to make creation care a central concern of the church.

Presbyterians for Earth Care (then Presbyterians for Restoring Creation) was founded in 1995 as a national, grassroots organization to support people of faith working towards "environmental wholeness with social justice." PEC helps the church to fulfill its current environmental policies, to create new policies and practices, and to energize and educate church members about eco-justice, the well-being of all humankind on a thriving earth.

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