

“THE WHOLENESS OF CREATION”

A sermon by the Rev. Cynthia L. Black, D.D.

Church of the Redeemer Morristown, New Jersey
Advent III December 11, 2011

It gives me great pleasure to share with you this morning that the Church of the Redeemer will be participating in a national environmental certification program sponsored by GreenFaith.

The GreenFaith Certification Program is the first environmental leadership program of its kind in the country, and it is designed exclusively for religious institutions. To become certified as a “Green Sanctuary,” we will be addressing environmental stewardship and justice issues over the course of the next two years.

Our Vestry has taken the bold step to launch this program, based at least partially on the deep commitment of our members to issues of justice and sustainability, but also on the basis of the good work already done by our Peace and Sustainability Committee. The fact that our own liturgical Creation Season has been the model for so many others worldwide is an accomplishment of which we can be extremely proud.

We will be increasing our programmatic emphasis on environmental stewardship and justice in everything from our children, youth and adult education to worship and stewardship. In time, we hope to implement a rigorous set of environmental stewardship measures aimed at improving our use of and relationship to food, water, energy, transportation, waste, toxics and grounds maintenance.

We will develop working relationships with area environmental justice leaders, continuing to work to improve the living conditions of the poor, who often absorb the brunt of local environmental degradation. Redeemer will also actively engage in legislative advocacy efforts to promote responsible and meaningful environmental legislation.

This is a comprehensive program that I believe will challenge and inspire us. It's not just about recycling or using compact-fluorescent light bulbs-- this is about taking our commitment to "do justice" seriously, as Redeemer has done so well throughout its history.

In some ways, our launch today of our GreenFaith certification program is a non-event. Redeemer already does much of what the certification program requires, so why bother?, you might wonder. The answer, for me, is two-fold.

I spent my summers as a child by the ocean in Maine. The house that my architect-father designed is not even one hundred feet from the high tide mark (it's whatever the zoning board, that was, and is, notoriously careful with building permits, allowed). It was built long before our world had embraced curbside recycling, but at a time when using the can opener to take the ends off of cans and then flatten them for the virtually non-existent recycling program at the local dump was one of my childhood chores.

It was built at a time that wetlands preservation was only beginning to be understood, but my father was insistent on siting the house so that the impact of run-off would be borne, not primarily by the sea, but by the driveway that he refused to pave.

As children we received lessons in tidal pool ecology, and the rock that juts out into the ocean, the one my mother calls “Table Rock,” was my favorite place to practice the trumpet as the tide came crashing in. My connection to the earth is decidedly through the ocean.

In the almost 50 years since that house was built it has gotten closer to the ocean. No, the house hasn't moved. But the so-called ‘hundred year storms’ seem to happen every three or four years now. The worst storm that my parents saw before my father died in 2001 has been repeated three times in the 10 years since his death. The shingle beach is eroding.

I love the rhythm of the ocean. I think it's best when you can live by it to fully appreciate it, and not just visit, as I do now, for only a few days at a time. It's impossible in that house to ignore the ocean. To see the seaweed strewn rocks gradually covered by water on a calm day as the tide gently rises, and to hear the relentless pounding of the waves in a storm is to know something of a world beyond our puny selves, a power that is far more than human.

The rhythm of the ocean is one of filling and emptying; the cycle of the tides is the cycle of our lives, never-ending birth, death and re-birth.

My connection to the earth is a connection to the taste of salt spray on my lips, the ankle-numbing cold of sea water, and then the dive into the ocean that washes away all thoughts of ever being warm again. To experience the rhythm of the tide and to feel the power of the surf, is, for me, a glimpse of the eternal.

This is my connection, my portal to a passion for our earth. And although I know that my story, feeling one with the sea, is not necessarily your story, I think we each have one. I think we each have a story, somewhere within us, about how we are connected to this fragile earth, our island home. Yours may not be on the tip of your tongue at this moment, but I hope by the end of our two year program, it will be.

I mentioned that my commitment to this enterprise is two-fold, and I've shared the personal part of that. The other part is about community. The 'why bother?' of GreenFaith certification is also about our responsibility as a community, and as leaders within a larger community.

I believe that we are holy to the extent that we contribute to the wholeness of *all* of creation. We claim that it is "our mission ...to seek God's justice and wholeness for this earth and all its inhabitants." By participating in the GreenFaith certification program, we can, as a community, put our money where our mouth is, so to speak. And we can, as leaders in the larger faith community of Morristown, and beyond, be an example of the change that we want to see in the world.

So what's next?

A Green Team is being formed to plan our work and to consider how we will meet the four components of the program: Spirit, Justice, Stewardship and Communication. In the first six months we'll write a Mission Statement, develop a Communications Plan, conduct a Comprehensive Audit and develop an Action Plan for fulfilling the Spirit, Stewardship and Justice requirements. These requirements include everything from Sunday School and Adult Forum programs to interfaith activities and an environmental justice advocacy campaign. We'll be looking at environmentally sustainable food practices in our fellowship, ways to encourage sustainable grounds maintenance practices here and at home and programs to educate ourselves about waste and toxics reduction. My hope is that, in addition to these opportunities, we will include components involving the arts and literature as they relate to sustainability and the environment.

To kick off our certification program, our young people have created a work of art on our front lawn. Its message is simple—sustainable practices play an important role in creating Peace on Earth. I'm grateful to our kids, and the adults who work with them, for reminding us, and the larger community, of this. At the end of the service we will process out to the front lawn, hear some words of encouragement from the bishop and the Morristown Sustainability Officer, Mr. Paul Miller, and dedicate ourselves to the task ahead.

How appropriate it is, in the season of Advent, a season where we look forward in hope, that we take on this new initiative. How appropriate it is, on this third Sunday of Advent, a day when we rejoice in all that God creates, that we challenge ourselves to do better.

I'd like to close with a thought from the prophet Anne Lamott, from her book, Grace (Eventually): Thoughts on Faith.

"If my heart were a garden, it would be in bloom with roses and wrinkly Indian poppies and wild flowers. There would be two unmarked tracks of scorched earth, and scattered headstones covered with weeds and ivy and moss, a functioning compost pile, great tangles of blackberry bushes, and some piles of trash I've meant to haul away for years.

"I used to create a lot more garbage, and then I got sober 20 years ago. Now I try to clean as I go, because sober people taught me that a willingness to help clean up the mess we've made is a crucial part of adult living; that our scary, selfish, damaging behavior litters the planet. Garbage hardens your heart.

"My friend Father Tom says that when we appear before God, God will say, "I love you very much. I forgive you all your crap. Now go clean up your mess, and then come into heaven, because lunch is waiting."

In the next two years, we're going to work on cleaning up our mess, literally and figuratively. Our foretaste of the heavenly banquet, as well as the daily bread we need to sustain our lives await. In fact, I think I can smell it.

"For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so God will bring righteousness into full bloom and put praise on display before all the nations."