

## Creation Care (Kick-Off)

## Psalm 104:14-30; Wild Geese

*(Ute Molitor, Tim Sheehy, Doug Webb), First Congregational Church, Camden, UCC, September 29, 2024*

### Psalm 104:14-30:

*You cause the grass to grow for the cattle and plants for people to cultivate, to bring forth food from the earth and wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine and bread to strengthen the human heart. The trees of the field are watered abundantly, the cedars of Lebanon that he planted. In them the birds build their nests; the stork has its home in the fir trees. The high mountains are for the wild goats; the rocks are a refuge for the coney. You have made the moon to mark the seasons; the sun knows its time for setting. You make darkness, and it is night, when all the animals of the forest come creeping out. The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God. When the sun rises, they withdraw and lie down in their dens. People go out to their work and to their labor until the evening.*

*O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. There is the sea, great and wide; creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great. There go the ships and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it. These all look to you to give them their food in due season; when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things. When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground.*

*Wild Geese | Mary Oliver*

*You do not have to be good.*

*You do not have to walk on your knees  
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.*

*You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
love what it loves.*

*Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.*

*Meanwhile the world goes on.*

*Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
are moving across the landscapes,  
over the prairies and the deep trees,  
the mountains and the rivers.  
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,  
are heading home again.  
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—  
over and over announcing your place  
in the family of things.*

Tim, Doug and I are sitting here as members of the fledgling Creation Care Action Group of our church which is becoming part of our Justice & Witness efforts. We would like to share a bit about what motivated us to participate together in the “Claiming Your Call for a Climate Changed World” Retreat this summer.<sup>1</sup> We will also reflect on how we were impacted by the retreat and how our own call to engage you and the wider community in addressing climate change is deepening. Susan Yoder also attended but she needs to focus now on caring for her spouse, Tom. Jean Sheehy has joined us since the retreat and is helping in other ways today. Thank you, Jean! We hope more of you will join us!

I (Ute) will begin by sharing some reflections based on the readings for today. There is something about Mary Oliver’s line: “You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves” that keeps captivating my heart and imagination. It speaks to so much of what creation care means to me. Creation care starts with

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<sup>1</sup> The retreat was offered by a collaborative of Eco-spiritual groups dedicated to creating community and constructive faith-based action in this time of ecological crisis: BTS Center, Climate Justice Ministries, and the Anabaptist Climate Coalition.

realizing that creation is not something “out there” that we relate to. We are part of this embodied creation and share the atoms and molecules and minerals that make up other beings across species and other realms of the created order.

We are existentially affected by the illusion of separation from other beings, from God, and even from ourselves. This sense of separation is one way of thinking about the meaning of “sin.” When we act from such a sense of separation, we end up harming relationships. We end up harming ourselves. This manifests on multiple levels, including the ways we exploit the earth and its many creatures to secure our supposed well-being.

Oliver suggests that the remedy does not lie in “walking on our knees through the desert for a hundred miles, repenting.” The remedy lies in seeking and renewing a sense of connection. “You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.” I hear an invitation to get in touch again with our own beingness, our own incarnated presence as enlivened beings in relationship. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we are capable of feeling, loving, collaborating, growing. Herein lies our challenge and our strength.

Mary Oliver calls us to have the courage to trust that something in us already knows quite instinctively what/whom we love or desire to love. Part of our work might be to learn to love our own bodies – whether we are entering puberty or struggling to embrace our wrinkles, scars, and aches. We are a body longing to touch and be touched, carrying within us our own ancestors and the seeds for new generations. A body capable of appreciating the beauty and preciousness of another being. A body made up of elements, minerals, ... stardust from past eons, all of which we share with other beings.

Oliver further reminds us of the connection of one to another through our shared experience: “Tell me about despair, yours and I will tell you mine.” There are numerous people in crisis in our community right now and I am daily touched by how they always ask about the other people who are struggling and want to include them in our prayer. There is genuine love at work here.

How important it is to be expansive in this love! Richard Rohr often says that we will only protect what we love. What might it be like to extend this loving compassion beyond our human species to the suffering of insects dying from pesticides, the birds who depend on them for food, the plants that depend on the insects and birds to carry pollen and seed, the fish swimming in a polluted river or ocean...? Since childhood, the heartache of seeing other beings suffer has always been a major motivation for me to challenge how we care for the earth, for our winged, feathered, scaly, furry, and plant relatives. What has deepened for me is the belief that God dwells in this creation. As my teacher, Jim Finley, likes to say: “We are not God, but we are also not other than God because God dwells in everything.” Therefore, when we exploit the earth and other beings, we dishonor God. Elizabeth Barrett Browning said it so well: *“Earth is crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God; but only those who see take off their shoes.”*

Our seeing was expanded during the retreat. I was struck by the story of an Anabaptist Pastor’s conversion to advocating for the integrity of creation. He and a parishioner were planning the individual’s baptism in a local river only to find out that it was so badly polluted from the run-off from a huge agrobusiness nearby that it was unsafe to enter the water. Imagine life for all the regular inhabitants of

that river! Baptism is meant to be a sacrament of renewal, transformation and of entering a new way of life. What a heartbreaking story about how the consumerist and exploitative aspects of our way of life need spiritual and practical transformation. It can be easy to despair.

Even amidst the despair, "... the world goes on," Oliver writes, but these sufferings are not simply a given. As important as it is to begin by accepting what is real in its unfolding, every moment also invites a sense of connection, a reaching out, a daring of the imagination. Notice how Mary Oliver names that another species, the Wild Geese, following their flow and flight, announce to us "our place in the family of things." We learn who we are through the interconnection with others. I love how Mary Oliver speaks of the "family of things." This is a far cry from the common tendency to place humans at the pinnacle of a hierarchical pyramid rather than into a circle or web of interconnection and belonging.

This web of interdependence and interconnection is amply described in the portion of Psalm 104 Ru read for us. It is God, ground and source of all our being, who "causes the grass to grow for the cattle ... plants to cultivate which bring nourishment and joy to humans as well, the trees become sanctuaries for the birds and the high mountains for the goats." It is God who gives us life, who breathes us into being, without whom we cannot be sustained. This text is a powerful and refreshingly humble description of our human place in the "family of things." The retreat we attended was shaped by such a humble perspective of interdependence within the "family of things."

Doug and then Tim will now share about what motivated them to devote several days to learning and worshipping together during the retreat. They will also offer

what impacted them and how their own call is deepening to engage all of us in learning about and addressing creation care.

**Doug:**

1. What motivated you to participate?

Well, the easy answer is Pastor Ute kindly asked if I'd be interested to be part of the group and how can I say no to that when it includes an all-expenses paid retreat to Acadia!? And being a new member of the FCC community, it was a thoughtfully welcoming invitation to participate in something I care deeply about. Environmental protection had been my original career path, joining the Coast Guard because it gave me a chance to save the turtles, and I was fortunate enough to do exactly that responding to- and investigating oil spills and chemical contamination of our waterways. I took that into grad school for environmental policy and worked for a Congresswoman that was an environmental champion, with an eye toward working for the EPA or Fish and Wildlife or back to the Coast Guard. Even though the work went in a different direction the interest never has, up to recently completing a UMaine climate science and adaptation program which is probably the reason Ute thought to ask in the first place!

2. What was deepened by the experience of the Schoodic forum?

Trust & Hope. My default is to view the climate crisis from a political, policy, or technocratic lens. It's far too easy to get lost in climate doom and despair in those arenas. From the climate scientist lens, they tend to be more optimistic for our climate future than most would expect, while still being firmly planted in casual existential threat research and publications. The spiritual, religious creation care perspective however, is something I don't have extensive experience with and

through our time at Schoodic, reinforced the importance of communities of faith being at the forefront of climate advocacy and action, because they always have been. What stood out was just how many actions each of the congregations at the retreat, ours included, have already taken that make positive impacts on our living ecosystems in ways big and small, that often are not even thought of as acts of creation care. The feelings of unsureness or lack of confidence in how we individually and collectively impact creation care were addressed from the start, and throughout the retreat those feelings noticeably shifted to trusting ourselves in our intentions, as well as trust in knowing the countless other communities of faith are doing the often-unnoticed work of creation care every day as well. Witnessing the passion for advocacy from church leaders also deepened my sense of hope in faith communities growing to be a constant, leading voice for climate action.

1. What is a takeaway from the forum?

A key takeaway from the Schoodic forum was the reminder to slow down and continuously embrace being present within nature. Everyone is doing too much and our world changes at breakneck pace, and when tackling something as overwhelming as the climate crisis, it's easy to focus solely on the urgency of action. But during our time in the retreat, I was reminded that creation care also calls us to be present in and deeply connected to the natural world we seek to protect. It's in these moments of slowing down, reflecting, and simply being within nature that we can renew our sense of purpose, grounding our actions in the appreciation of God's creation. This mindful presence is crucial, not only to sustain our efforts but also to reconnect with the beauty and sanctity of the natural world, which gives meaning to our work.

**Tim:**

1. What motivated you to participate? The Climate crisis is the moral imperative of our time. Unless people acknowledge our impact and make meaningful changes, the suffering of human and non-human life will increase exponentially. I believe God calls us to reduce suffering wherever and whenever we can. The opportunity to participate in a professionally curated seminar with proven positive results with a dozen other faith communities from New England was irresistible.
2. What was deepened? The seminar struck an extraordinary balance of community building, theology, hard climate science, culture and history and social science in building the program. We experienced lectures and discussion with a Wabanaki elder, an Acadia-based climatologist, pastoral leadership from numerous traditions, and the chance to meet and share ideas with other faith communities. John Bear of the Wabanaki reminded us that because of the recent glaciers, his people can only document their care for these lands on petroglyphs going back 12,000 years, though oral tradition stretches back past that time. He shared his wisdom through stories and implored us to tell our own stories of the beauty, sacredness, and interconnectedness of all creation.
3. What was a key takeaway? My takeaway is that with open minds and hearts, it is absolutely possible to begin to make a difference. We heard steps as simple as churches using savings from eco-smart infrastructure changes to fund carbon footprint reduction. We heard a story of eco-justice where a Nashua church fought to keep an asphalt plant from being located in an economically challenged

section of their city. We have access to a network of like-minded people of faith who will happily share the successes and challenges of their experiments in moving ahead of us on this path. Our “small radical experiment” begins today with the first of 4 sessions meant to share what we learned, worship together, and discern where the energy of this faith community is called to care for creation in a world already changed by the climate crisis. Moving forward together will be good for the heads, hearts, and souls of our FCC community. Please consider joining us after coffee hour to learn more. Today, you can also participate by writing something you love about creation on a leaf which we will be attaching to a tree image which Jean created. Come to our special table in the Pilgrim Room right at the start of fellowship and take time to love what the soft animal of your body loves.”