

## Prayer of Illumination

*Gracious God, your Word is a living word. By your Spirit awaken us, that we may see and hear your presence in the world and in the scripture that we read today. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our healer and our guide. Amen.*

Today's passage is from Isaiah chapter 58. It was written to both chastise, and encourage the Israelites who had recently returned from exile to Jerusalem to find both a broken city, as well as those inhabitants who had been left behind in Judea, those whom the Babylonians had deemed unworthy of bringing with them to Babylon.

Now don't worry, I ran this by the Pastor to make sure that I don't blaspheme, at least not too much. So here is the passage from Isaiah chapter 58: verses 8-12.

### **Isaiah 58. New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition**

<sup>8</sup> Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up quickly;  
your vindicator<sup>®</sup> shall go before you;  
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.  
<sup>9</sup> Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;  
you shall cry for help, and he will say, "Here I am."  
If you remove the yoke from among you,  
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,  
<sup>10</sup> if you offer your food to the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,  
then your light shall rise in the darkness  
and your gloom be like the noonday.  
<sup>11</sup> The LORD will guide you continually  
and satisfy your needs in parched places  
and make your bones strong,  
and you shall be like a watered garden,  
like a spring of water  
whose waters never fail.  
<sup>12</sup> Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;  
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;  
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,  
the restorer of streets to live in.

This is the word of the Lord; Thanks be to God.

Sometime back in the mid 90's I was watching the evening news, with Brian Williams, I think, and at the end of the news cast, like they always do, they ended with an interesting snippet that you might not have heard about. On this particular night, the subject was an (almost) record breaker. The Guinness Book of World records recorded that the second largest man-made object on earth had been surpassed. Quite a feat of human engineering, for sure, right?

I'll bet you can probably guess what the largest man-made object on earth is... How many guessed the Great Wall of China? Yap, still number one. Up to that point, according to Guinness Book, the second largest man-made object on earth was the Great Pyramid of Giza.

Initially standing at 481 feet, the Great Pyramid was the tallest man-made structure in the world for more than 3,800 years. Weighing in at an astonishing 6.7 million tons.

But apparently this ancient edifice had been outdone. Mankind had risen to new engineering heights and created a structure so grand, so massive that it had finally bested this ancient marvel. So, what was it that had recently surpassed this ancient, massive structure? Again, according to the Guinness Book of world records, the second-largest object on earth, made by mankind, is the Fresh Kills Landfill on Staten Island outside New York City. A great human achievement indeed.

On behalf of the Green Team here at PCO, let me again welcome you to this Earth Day service. As a Creation Care Congregation, we have made a commitment to do what we can to protect and renew God's creation. Our beautiful world is an amazing gift given to us by God's grace. Our efforts to protect and preserve that gift, here at PCO, speak loudly toward that commitment. But as the Fresh Kills Landfill example shows us, this is no simple task.

The landfill began in 1917 when the Metropolitan By-Products Company built a reduction plant at Fresh Kills that converted the city's garbage into fertilizers. It was closed after just a year, but Staten Islanders continued to discard their trash at the site of the defunked plant. It was only a matter of time before the growing population of New York turned this into an organized process. Most New Yorkers gave it little thought. They placed their discarded items on the street, and it magically went away. What soon became the behemoth mountain of trash arose not from malice, but from long-standing indifference. Almost innocuous in its humble beginnings, it grew and grew as bad habits fed

its insatiable hunger, until it had devoured over 2000 acres of precious space in one of America's most densely-populated cities.

So, this is the lesson that we must learn from the Fresh Kills episode: The footprint that we leave behind, often without even realizing it, can be long lasting, and bigger than we might comprehend.

*Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach.*

Numerous surveys indicate that many of our children have a bleak view of their futures, pointing a finger at us, their parents and their grandparents, for what they see as the ongoing degradation of the planet on which they must continue to live after we are gone; for depriving them of the abundance that we were privileged to enjoy. Fair or not, their protestations have basis. Since the dawn of the modern industrial age, our activities have degraded our world in many ways. The science is clear. And time is short if we are to redeem ourselves in their eyes.

Much of the degradation of our environment is the result of a lack of awareness rather than a willful intent. A concern for convenience or comfort directs our decision making, widening the breach. We know that they have a point, but we are loathed to acknowledge our part in tearing down those ancient foundations, and leaving behind those broken streets and ruined dwellings.

When confronted, we are contrite, but old habits are hard to shed. We want to protect God's creation, but we don't really know how. Will we let that stop us? Will we continue to degrade God's creation, our planet, ***their planet***, because we don't know what to do about it? Or can we learn what we need to do to restore *their* lost hope? Will future generations look back at us and see only unresolved crisis, or can we begin to repair that breach?

The first step is understanding. First to understand that there *is* work to be done. In many cases we do not even know what damage is being done, or even *that* we are doing damage, at all.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian era, a seemingly disparate pair of trends came into vogue around the same time throughout Europe and America. First, a trend for feather-festooned hats for women swept the fashion industry. No woman was to be seen in public unadorned by feathers from some exotic bird or such.

Around the same time arose a craze for fly fishing, which used salmon lures made from, you guessed it, exotic feathers. Two seemingly innocent past times in a dainty society that nearly drove several entire bird species to extinction. Only when the birds themselves became so rare, and their feathers became outrageously expensive, did the practice slow.

More recently, "...over the past several decades, Palm Oil has become one of the most produced oils in the world. This is because palm oil is extremely versatile — it is semi-solid at room temperature so it can be used as a spread, it's resistant to oxidation so it can make products last longer, and it can withstand high temperatures making it perfect for frying food." These characteristics make Palm Oil a great alternative to other products in the manufacture of packaged foods.

But the increased popularity of Palm Oil in the products that we buy has led to deforestation and habitat destruction for orangutans, elephants, rhinos and other species. It sounds like a simple and harmless cooking remedy, but not if you are a rhino. Sometimes we are not even aware of the ill effects that our choices have on our environmental interests. Again, the key is understanding.

So how are we to fix problems which we don't even know we may be causing? **What were the people of New York supposed to do with all that trash, anyway?** Well, if I had a good answer to that I might just go and get myself elected Mayor of New York. But the question illustrates both the enormity and the complexity of caring for God's creation.

Now I want to stop here for a moment. I'm not an environmental expert, and I am certainly not in a position to lecture anyone on how to be a great environmentalist. And I know no one likes to have a finger waved at them for doing something that they did not even know was causing a problem. Living on the planet Earth requires the use and consumption of resources and the disposal of things no longer useful. We cannot avoid treading on this earth, but we must teach ourselves to tread more lightly.

But how?

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus was confronted by the Pharisees on numerous occasions. They felt that his teachings were undermining their authority. And, well, they might have been right on that one. On a particular occasion, they decided to try to embarrass him in front of a crowd.

From **Matthew 22:35-40 NRSV**

A lawyer, asked Jesus a question to test him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus said to him, “ ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

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In telling the lawyer this, Jesus essentially distilled Levitical law down into two bite-sized nuggets: Love God, love your neighbor. “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” He knew that if you loved your neighbor, you wouldn’t bear false witness against them, if you loved your neighbor, you would not steal their possessions. If you loved God, you would keep holy the sabbath, and so on. Rather than memorizing the long list of laws, simply act upon the love you have for God and your neighbor. Do the right thing by them and you will not go afoul of the law.

It seems a simple formula. But to do this, you have to work at it. You must establish the a way of thinking that continually leads you to consider how your actions affect others. This is one reason we come here on Sundays. We gather together, we pray, we worship, and we strengthen the ties that we have to God and community. You must train yourself to make decisions that express that love for God and neighbor in ways that convey that love.

Much the same can be said of caring for God’s kingdom. Creation is a gift, a great and wonderful gift, and a gift for all of us. If you truly love God, you will cherish that gift. And if you love your neighbor, you will care for the resources that we share. If you love your neighbor, you will not plunder the resources that others need for their own wellbeing. But again, to do this, you must make yourself aware. Take the time to learn. There is lots of information available from many sources on things that you can do. The more you investigate, the more you will see things that you can do differently.

Again, it has been reported in the popular media that young people, an activist cohort of millennials and Gen Z's have pointed a finger at us, and you know who I'm talking about, for squandering their resources, for fouling their air and water, for doing harm to creation. But I say we are better than that. As people of God, we have a duty to care for God's kingdom. As a Creation Care congregation, we have pledged to do what is right and good with respect to the great gift that God has given us by way of our beautiful planet. And we have already taken several steps forward. Solar panels gleam in the sunlight right outside. Compost bins are preparing natural fertilizer for our landscaping. Reusable or compostable dishes serve our gatherings, native plants adorn our facility and help restore a more natural habitat. But we can still do more. The Green Team is considering a number of ideas. We have done research into ways that we, as a congregation, can reduce our church's footprint, and we welcome your suggestions. Let us have it. We can take it. But we would also ask that you take the time to read, ask questions and share your expertise so that we all, as individuals, can tread a little more lightly on our planet.

But even at that, simply halting the ever-growing deterioration of our environment is not enough. We must raise up the crumbled foundations of many generations. Beyond halting the degradation is the idea of reclamation. It is good to slow the rate of damage we are doing, but we must, whenever and wherever possible, restore that which has been damaged. We must be repairers of broken walls that have degraded our air and water. We must be Restorers of Streets to live in by reclaiming lost forests. We must put pressure on authorities to act to preserve God's gift. Much work needs to be done if we are to turn over to our children and grandchildren a planet on which they can live and thrive.

*you shall be like a watered garden,*

*like a spring of water*

*whose waters never fail.*

This great work that lies ahead of us is daunting, yet it has already begun. There is another chapter being written in the ongoing story of the Fresh Kills landfill that I opened with. The people of New York, realizing the enormity of the black eye that their city had given to itself, set about seeking a solution.

In early September of 2001, the City of New York announced the start of an international design competition to transform the heaps of trash into a world-class park. A winning bid was selected, and the work began to marshal the resources and expertise needed to fulfill the plan.

Today, at the site of the now closed landfill, lies a bucolic meadow, Knee-high grasses and fields abloom with purple and yellow flowers. Acres of grasslands which are home to pheasants, herds of deer, red foxes, rabbits, coyotes, snakes, turtles, and more than 200 species of birds.

Oh, the landfill is still there. But you can't see any of the detritus, anymore — it's buried under more than two feet of soil and multiple underground barriers, including a thick, impermeable layer of plastic sheeting. But the remaining fill, and the placid meadows atop it, have provided scientists and engineers with valuable tools not only to monitor and research the two disparate environs, but for practical uses as well. Methane capture from the decomposition of organic material in the dump is being used to power homes on Staten Island.

The park is not yet open. It will take many years to complete the reclamation of such a large blight. But soon it will be open to the public, acres of open space in a city that has precious little. And the project can be replicated in other cities and municipalities.

So, I ask you: Will we continue to degrade God's creation? Or will we restore it? Can we work together to pass on to our children a legacy of hope rather than disappointment? Can we restore their lost faith? Will future generations look back and see only unresolved crisis? Or can we marshal the resources needed to renew God's gift? Can this generation, *our* generation, be the ones to turn this thing around? If we but set our minds and our hands to this task, we can do this. We can make this a better world than that which we inherited from our parents. And if we do, then *our* light will break forth like the dawn, our night will become like the noonday, our healing will quickly appear; and our righteousness will go before us. We will be called repairers of the breach.

Join me in prayer.

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God, creator of the universe, Fill us with your love for the creation, for the natural world around us, for the earth from which we come and to which we will return. Awake in us energy to work for your world; let us never fall into complacency, ignorance, or being overwhelmed by the task before us. Help us to restore, remake, renew. Amen