

**St. Paul's Episcopal Church**  
**Creation Care Season**  
**September 1-15, 2024**

Sermon 9-15-2024 by Karen Barrows

Legend has it that Albert Einstein suggested the most important question a person could answer is whether the universe is a friendly place or not. That is clearly a philosophical, not a scientific question, because friendliness is not a quality that science attempts to quantify. As Christians, who believe that the universe and especially our planet, this snow-globe of blue and white, swinging orbitally in the Sun's embrace, swirling effortlessly through a vast darkness, is *God's creation*; as Christians our answer to Einstein is, "Of course it is friendly, or at the very least, we are safe regardless because the Author of all that is, loves us as favorite children."

I confess that the older I get the less I worry about there being no God or Heaven; I worry more about the fact the He's probably real. There are certainly many who think the way I used to, atheists who think death is simply a final and complete extinguishing of me and those I love, followed by emptiness. I'm a little nervous as age causes my own death to loom ever closer, because Jesus warns in today's Gospel of an approaching judgment, of the possibility of living in shame for Eternity. Throughout scripture evil and righteousness are delineated pretty clearly. When the soul is sold in exchange for power here, shame awaits that person in God's angelic kingdom; that's what it says here in the Gospel.

We are more Christlike when we are full of praise, when we live in empathy for others, and when we are willing to risk expressing the truth. In today's Gospel Jesus risks telling the disciples the truth about the future. He tells them that he will undergo great suffering, rejection, torture, and will be killed. Jesus makes plain, on hearing in his beloved disciple Peter the voice of Satan, that our very and eternal lives depend on our willingness to return to our rightful place in relation to God. "You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things," Jesus says to Peter. Jesus rails against those who place achievement and power in this world above service to God. And this is a tough one, because being human means we *have* to set our minds on many human things: personal hygiene, house and yard maintenance, shopping for clothes and food, cooking and setting the table and doing dishes, raising children, caring for our elderly relatives, finding and paying for and maintaining homes and cars, making a living: to make a good living we have to spend a lot of time getting good at what we do; and we have to please a lot of people along the way; also being a good employee or employer, and finally honoring each other's humanity and each other's very similar human needs.

As Christians we spend our lives trying to mirror Jesus, to be like Him in all our affairs, to behave in the world as he did. Sometimes we succeed, often we fail, but we keep coming back here to be reinvigorated in the ongoing attempt. What does it mean to be a human taking up her cross and following Him? How can we use our humanity to mirror our Creator and His bountiful, beautiful creation? Last week at Launching Sunday, on the labyrinth, Pastor Gail Wheatley said that we're in ecological trouble because we haven't loved our place here enough. In this Episcopal Season of Creation we give thanks and praise for the gifts of God, and we endeavor, in Gail's words, to "*love what we care about more fully*." The task involves learning to distinguish between purely human pursuits and spiritual pursuits, and to ensure that all human pursuits are infused with spiritual teaching and intention. A good example is stewardship, when we pledge and give money to the church. We trust that the money we give, a human thing earned in human endeavor, will be used in the service of extending Christ's love from us to others in our community, a way of "loving what we care about more

fully.”

I know I'm a broken record: human activity is changing the physics of the atmosphere, and we are seeing the predicted effects. At least two days of July this year were the hottest days on the planet in recorded history, and 2024 will probably be the hottest year on record, a record that will no doubt fall next year or the year after that. Everywhere we look we see storms, floods, drought, humidity coupled with high heat, wildfires, mudslides, oceans incredibly warm, snow out of season, etc. I find plenty of folk on the internet arguing that “it's always been like this,” or that “the data is wrong,” or that I'm “just an old lady named *Karen* so what do you expect??” As a person with a graduate degree in this field, the only thing I have suspected is wrong in the predictions is their optimism. Timetables have routinely been very conservative, and what's happening on the ground is both earlier and more intense than many scientists thought, because cascading effects are much harder to predict. There is also still much that we do not know about how complex ecological and atmospheric systems adjust and respond.

We've heard a bit about hydraulic fracturing, or “fracking,” in the political world recently, to ban or not to ban it. Politicians eager for votes in industrial states all agree it should not be banned. I can go down an impressively scary list of salient, statistically significant reasons why fracking for oil and gas should stop. What I have more trouble explaining is why many of those in power shy away from being honest. In the Book of James today the power of the tongue is described as an untame-able thing, a fire, capable of great damage. The tongue has two opposing potentials. James says, “With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.” Our words matter most when we are telling the truth, something that happens when our humanness and our spirituality are *aligned*. But we do have to be open to that alignment, or the purely human motives gradually take over. When we are aligned, as Pastor Gail also said last week, “Love will find us, and show us answers we never imagined.” (That may be how Jesus performed miracles, by the way.)

It should be possible to discuss the very real problems around fracking, and also to describe a vision for the near future to benefit the people now working in that industry: to transition their communities to far less dangerous means of generating power for their needs. And then follow through: actually have an executable plan. The first duty of government is to protect its current and future citizens from harm, therefore governments have to become honest with their people regarding the truth about generational ecological damage.

The reason that this is so vital a matter is that we stand at a hinge moment in earth and human evolution, and that makes us *chosen people*. Literally. And chosen people don't always have an easy time of it in the world, as you'll recall. Everything is in tremendous flux, like being on a jet experiencing repeated heavy turbulence: any moment could be the end. Every ecological system, every political system, every economic system, every industrial system, all are experiencing disruptions, or could at any time. Members of seven generations are alive now, from our elders in the Greatest Generation, the youngest of whom are 97 years old, down to the newest Alpha Generation, meaning everyone who is 11 years old and younger. In these seven generations we have tremendous knowledge, compassion, energy, creativity, skill, and wisdom. Speaking of Wisdom, she is named in our lessons today! From the passage we hear, “She's the brightness that shines forth from eternal light. She's a mirror that flawlessly reflects God's activity. She's the perfect image of God's goodness. She can do anything, since she's one and undivided. She never changes, and yet she makes everything new. Generation after generation she enters souls and shapes them into God's friends and prophets.”

The decisions that we make now, as “spiritual beings having a human experience,” will outlast our time here, will outlast the lives that we are living now. That is what Jesus is telling us today.

And that's a good thing, my friends, because there are, metaphorically speaking, wide boulevards upon which we can embark. We have *so much more* capacity and promise than we are realizing right now. In the modern era we live in tiny boxes of thought, so accustomed to small thinking that, instead of talking about the realities of summers each getting hotter and hotter, and then going *all out* to pursue ingenious solutions, which are what is needed, and of which we are eminently capable; instead we watch intense storms and explosive wildfires forever alter communities, while our leaders brag that we are producing more oil than ever before. It's exactly the kind of contradictory message that has thrown sand in the gears for fifty years, and which keeps the populace confused about what is really happening.

Our fear to speak and to accept the truth is what could destroy us. Franciscan priest Richard Rohr says, “All great spirituality is about what we do with our pain.” Jesus transformed pain into resurrection, and that is exactly what we also are called to do as his beloved children.

In the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit.  
Amen