
Season of Creation
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
Sept. 12 2021
by Rev. Dr Paul Shepherd

Based on 1 John 2:15-17 and Mark 9:38-50

Given that yesterday was the 20th anniversary of the event we call “911”, I did want to talk about that today. But it’s far too political to discuss during an election cycle, so we’ll discuss it later. Perhaps on one of the upcoming Peace Sundays. So instead ...

Who here believes in magic? Anybody? Really? Well, we will find out, because we are going to do a live test today to see who here believes in magic. And you might be wondering ... what is the connection between magic and the fact that this is the first day in the “Season of Creation”? We’ll get there too.

But before that, I need to ask, what does the word “creation” mean to you anyway? I’m not able to hear your answers right now, but I’d love to hear over coffee time or during the week. What does “creation” mean to you. I am going to assume that the word “creation” is one of the ways that we think about our planet. Our ecosystems. Our atmosphere. Our water. The cosmos. Perhaps including all life forms. Sort of everything you can see in this image. In other words, the word “creation” - for most of us - probably includes what we call “the environment”.

The word “environment” is a very broad term. So what do you expect a sermon about the environment to be like? What are you hoping I will speak about? What are you hoping I will NOT speak about?

The Bible gives us a conflicted picture of how to value the environment. We have both a positive and a negative image of the world - our home - within the Bible. For example, we have a positive image. In Genesis, it says that God created the world, the land, the waters, the plants, the animals - including us. And declared that it was good. We were told to manage the earth and its resources. In other parts of the Bible we are told to love everyone as we love ourselves. If we put those two ideas together then clearly the earth’s resources are meant to be shared. The earth should be sustained for all people, including future generations, so conservation is important. That’s the positive image.

The Bible holds negative images of the environment too - one example being our reading from 1 John this morning. In passages like these, faithful Christians are seen as “not of this world”. And the world itself is seen as the enemy, full of evil desires. Something temporary that is passing away, therefore conservation is a waste of time. Those texts drive a theology popular today that says that heaven is important and permanent. But the earth is temporary and therefore disposable.

So the Bible does not directly answer the question as to whether we should care about our environment. And of course, we should not expect the Bible to address that issue anyway. None of the biblical authors could have imagined what we now call “climate change”. There are passages in the Bible that describe great environmental destruction of course. Al Gore famously said that “every night on the evening news is like a nature hike through the Book of Revelation”. But that’s something else.

Given that I am an environmental scientist, and given that Marjorie is a climate change policy executive, you probably now expect a boring sermon about climate change - the impact on our climate caused by human behaviour. You probably expect a focus on blame, guilt, perhaps even shame. You probably expect me to tell you what we can do about it. Well, we might get there in the end, but I want to start somewhere else.

I want to start by saying that I love history. I love learning about history, and in particular the “big” stories of human development. We usually use the term “narrative” to talk about social developments in the big picture. And what I love about learning about history is seeing the broad narratives at work. It reinforces both my belief in - and my disgust at - human behaviour. Understanding our own narrative often gives the best answer to the question “how did we get into this mess in the first place”.

One problem with any narrative is deciding where to start. All narratives are built upon the myths and realities of the past, so in some sense, narratives never have a beginning. But we have to jump in somewhere. I want to jump in at the end of the Second World War, right here in North America. Please tell me later if you think I missed the right time period.

Having the Second World War end was undoubtedly a good thing. But the cessation of hostilities was partially responsible for the next phase in our own narrative.

Post-war, we believed that our system of government was superior to fascism, and moreover that democracy really worked. And perhaps it even did then. But that belief, coupled with the fact that so many people had made great sacrifices during the war led to our next stage of development. Where there was some sense that individual people had done their part to make the world safe. And so we could now just go back to normal life. Honest people that we were, we were just required to work hard, vote every few years, pay our taxes and allow our elected officials to run things. And of course, things would run well because we had a great system in place. We ourselves could sit back and let ourselves be taken care of by “the system”. And consequently, many of us stopped thinking for ourselves at a time when life actually became more complex.

If you don't believe me, consider this. How often do you wonder why your financial investments are not doing better? Are you frustrated that when you have a mutual fund the fund managers get 2.5% every year while you don't necessarily get that much yourself? It's your money after all! But when did we decide that spending 1 hour per year with a financial adviser should get us a massive return on our investments? When was it the we - as a society - came to see that we should get positive results with no personal effort on our part? After the war, to some extent we stopped wanting to think for ourselves and felt that others should take care of us just because we pay them to do that.

And this attitude has had a huge impact on our current environmental crisis. Even people who recognize that we are in an environmental crisis are waiting for other people to solve this problem. Perhaps we are waiting for the government to take care of the problem. Perhaps we are waiting for some genius to develop a car that runs on tap water or whatever. Are we waiting for someone else to solve the environmental crisis for us?

Pick any environmental issue you care about, and I guarantee you can make progress on that issue without any help from the government, or from anybody else either. Are you worried about emissions from power plants? Use less electricity yourself, and you will make a difference! Are you worried about the environmental damage that comes from the production of livestock? Eat less meat, and you will make a difference. Are you waiting for the government and fast food outlets to ban plastic straws? Just stop taking those straws - today - and you will make a difference!

Jesus said, “If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire.” Now if Jesus was here today, he might say, “If your fuel-guzzling car is causing you to stumble, take the bus or find a better car. If your single-use plastic water bottle is causing you to stumble, get a re-fillable water bottle. If your fossil fuel-based diet is causing you to stumble, learn to eat better. Choose to enter life in a new way rather than to go to hell and to take the whole planet with you”.

But of course, we would rather that someone else solves these problems for us. To me, this does come from our post-war narrative that says we want and expect our government to take care of us because we pay them to do that. And speaking about issues isn't enough either. I saw a quote this week that said, “Spirituality says, trust yourself to change yourself. And if each one of you do it, the world will change. But if you just sit down, and lecture, and write articles to the newspaper, and talk wisely of how the world must change, how the atmosphere must change, how politics must change, nothing will change!” Presumably this logic extends to preaching too. Preaching a sermon on the environment changes nothing. Listening to a sermon on the environment changes nothing. Change only happens when individual people change.

Jesus does not say, “If your right hand causes you to stumble, complain loudly about your hand to everyone you meet.” Jesus does not say, “If your right hand causes you to stumble, wait for someone else to fix your hand.” Jesus does not say, “If your right hand causes you to stumble, finding someone to blame.” Jesus says, “If your right hand causes you to stumble ... do something about it yourself.”

Well, this seems like as good a time as any for our demonstration to test whether or not you believe in magic. Are you ready? Let me just get my tools. What's this? (plastic water bottle). What's this? (Blue bin) Now, if I drank the water out of this bottle, what should I do with the bottle afterwards? Should I put the plastic bottle into the recycling bin? Yes, of course, because the blue bin is for things that can be recycled.

Question 1: Is this plastic water bottle recyclable?

Answer: Yes.

Question 2: If I put this plastic bottle in the bin, will it be recycled?

Answer: No.

Are you surprised? Then perhaps you do believe in magic. When items are labelled “recyclable” it means that the item can be recycled. But whether or not the item will actually be recycled depends on whether or not it is profitable. In Canada, approximately 9% of plastics are recycled. 91% are put into landfills, incinerated, or just tossed. Plastics like in this bottle are actually never recycled, at best they are “down-cycled” because if they are used again they can only be used to create cheaper, inferior products. At best they can make 2-3 cycles before they are landfill.

Other types of recyclables do better. Most steel is now made from recycled inputs. Glass, metal, cardboard all recycle more easily - that is more profitably - than plastic. But really, the gold standard of recycling is what we do here at Sydenham-Heritage United Church. We collect newspapers and sell them to Hartmanns who turn the newspaper into egg cartons. That’s effective recycling. But the recycling of plastic in Canada is basically mythical.

To quote from National Public Radio, “Here's the basic problem: All used plastic can be turned into new things, but picking it up, sorting it out and melting it down is expensive. Plastic also degrades each time it is reused, meaning it can't be reused more than once or twice. On the other hand, new plastic is cheap. It's made from oil and gas, and it's almost always less expensive and of better quality to just start fresh.”¹

Most people don’t know this because - once again - we have stopped thinking for ourselves. You don’t have to be an engineer to know that the environmental costs of recycling are massive. We - and this includes me - would rather just believe the delusion that our blue boxes are magic. You put a plastic bottle into the blue box and - whoosh - problem solved. I’ve done my duty. But we all know - if we think about it - that blue boxes are picked up by fuel-burning trucks. Those trucks take the material to fuel-burning plants for processing, shipping, sorting, etc. Prior to 2018 a lot of recycling material was shipped to China - burning even more fuel. The blue box program in Toronto now takes

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/11/897692090/how-big-oil-misled-the-public-into-believing-plastic-would-be-recycled>

even more fuel because Toronto is sending teams of inspectors (in fuel-burning vehicles) to inspect blue bins before they get collected because rising issues with contaminants. Contaminants in blue bins became an issue in 2018 when China stopped accepting contaminated recycling from around the world. Since then, vast amounts of recycling have been stored or buried. The blue bin program consumes a lot of environmental resources - the very things we want to believe that blue bins are preserving!

If you didn't know that, perhaps you do believe in magic after all!

Some environmental advocates are now saying that we should stop recycling plastics altogether. That recycling is just a subsidy to the plastics industries and to bottled water companies. Because without the myth that recycling is magic, the bottled water market would hopefully shrink significantly. And I do believe we should make every effort to NOT recycle. Recycling is better than making garbage. But recycling is still MUCH worse than the other 2 R's, reduce and reuse. We need to stop thinking that recycling is magic. We also need to stop thinking that recycling plastic is good. Recycling is bad for the environment. Yes, garbage is even worse, but recycling is still bad. Reduce/Reuse is what we need to be doing, as much as possible. And to be honest, I want to add another R to the list too - Re-think. Re-thinking should perhaps be the first one on our list.

I want to leave you with 1 practical idea. When we are at home, by all means, put plastics into our blue bins. That's what it's for. But when we are out shopping, let's all remember that 91% of plastics are not actually ever recycled when we are choosing what to purchase. Do we care enough about our environment to do that? Or do we prefer indifference.

Remember, the opposite of love is not hate. The opposite of love is indifference. Indifference says that the world - and its people - are disposable. Love says that the world and its people matter deeply. Let's choose love!

If your hand causes you to stumble, ... do something about it yourself!

Amen.