Sermon for COTT, Climate in the Pulpit

I feel quite humbled to be here before you to deliver my first sermon as a licensed lay preacher in our diocese. I was called to do this, as part of my role as a member of the Maryland Episcopal Environmental Partners. This group was started by the Bishop about 5 years ago, to help develop resources for the greening of the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland, centered in the main tenet of the group, that caring for the environment is an expression of our faith, and is in fact, deeply connected to our spiritual vocation. Many of you know about my day job as a biology professor, and that I love to teach, especially in my field of ecology and evolution. That vocational call took about 14 years of post-college work to hammer out the details, and quite frankly is still a work-in-progress. This vocational call, to preach the good news at the pulpit, was less apparent to me, but perhaps I have been hammering out the details of it my entire life, as I have always been called to be part of the church, and have gained tremendous strength and spiritual fullness by my involvement here. But I always felt my work as a professor to be a bit disconnected from my life as a Christian. Here, today, is how God has helped me find the connection - I am meant to share the urgent message, as Pope Francis put it in his recent letter to humanity, to "care for our common home." We are all connected.

We have read the beautiful creation account in Genesis 1, where God created man in his own image. The passage just before this is Genesis 1:24

> (24) And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds—livestock and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds.” And it was so.

And before that, Genesis 1:11

> (11) And God said, “Let the earth sprout vegetation,
> plants[e] yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is
> their seed, each according to its kind, on the earth.” And it was so.

Read a little further, and Genesis 2: 7 gets into more detail about where man comes from:

> (7) Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground
> and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man
> became a living creature.

So man comes from the same stuff as all of God's creation. This is emphasized by the Hebrew meaning of the name Adam, which comes from adama, meaning soil or earth. So man and beast are from the same place: the same dust that the entire universe is made of. We get a better hint about man's role in Genesis 2:15,

> (15) The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of
> Eden to work it and keep it

The terms "work" and "keep" come from the Hebrew terms, "abad" to cultivate, to till, to work, and "shamar", to care, observe, keep. In other words, we were called to do the work of caring for creation. Our rain garden right outside is a good example of how we can help care for creation with our labor and imagination. That rain garden helps cleanse the oil, fertilizers, and other chemicals that would otherwise find their way into a sewer and ultimately to the Chesapeake Bay. Nature provides us with purification services that we take for granted, and that we circumvent when we build roadways and parking-lots that are impermeable to rain and just shunt the flow of water with all the grime towards man-made sewers that follow our watershed downhill towards the Bay. This is why, when the Bay gets its annual

grade from the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, it has been a D+ or lower. So what is needed are more rain gardens, more emphasis on using permeable materials when building new parking lots, more rain barrels on downspouts, and other green infrastructure projects. We are all connected.

Just like so many of us are connected by a common watershed, with other folks from Maryland and even folks from Pennsylvania, NY, West Virginia, Virginia, and Delaware, and just like we have to be concerned for how our upstream behavior impacts what is downstream, other parts of nature are connected in ways that are at first not quite obvious. For example we experience a common air shed with parts of Canada to the north, as far west as Indiana, and as far south as South Carolina. We experience the air pollution in this air shed mainly in the form of ground-level ozone, which causes breathing problems that can be especially dangerous to those with asthma or other respiratory disorders, and just plain uncomfortable for the rest of us. We produce our own ozone pollution, but what comes from the western part of our air shed about doubles the level of pollution we experience. We are downstream. Regulations have fortunately put a brake on the levels of pollutants that cause ground level ozone but the effects are only moderately more bearable.

Of course, the CO_2 emissions we produce with the burning of fossil fuels in homes, businesses and for transportation, connect us all around the globe. Emissions we produce in the US produce an overall increase in the amount of CO_2 in the atmosphere, and this causes global warming through the greenhouse effect. It turns out that the people who produce the most CO_2 are not necessarily the ones who suffer the worst impacts of climate change. It is, in fact, the poor who are

impacted most by global climate change, and they are the least able to avoid or mitigate the multiple and complex effects. In market terms, this is a failure of the market, when the people who cause pollution are not the ones who have to pay the price for this pollution. Pope Francis, in his encyclical on the environment, makes the link for us that the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth are the same, and that our response to the cry of the earth is a response to the cry of the poor. The Lord hears the cry of the poor, and we, made in his image, are meant to do the same. The Lord is creator of heaven and earth, and we, in his image, are meant to respond to the abuses that the earth has felt. We are all connected.

But what has happened to our connection to nature and the rest of creation? We seem to have walled ourselves off from the work of the cultivator, the caretaker, and have instead been complicit in the role of dominator, user, exploiter. We and our children suffer from a common affliction of Nature Deficit Disorder, replacing what is delightful, slow, and free to us in nature with entertainment that is fast and expensive, man-made and synthetic, such as video games, tv, online gaming, and other obsessions. No you won't find Nature Deficit Disorder as a diagnosis in the ICD or DSM (World Health Organization's International Classification of Diseases, or American Psychiatric Associations Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders), but you might recognize it in trends like the decline of National Park Visits. Or in the trend towards video-philia, such as the kinds of behaviors I see where kids will go out to play and that means they all sit outside playing video games, barely looking up when a bird flies overhead let alone a person walks by. I see it when I take students on field trips and I invariably get the question, "are there going to be bugs there?" (and respond, “I hope so”). I see it when I ask my students if any of them witnessed the fantastic sunset last night and they look at me with blank

stares. Some scientists like E. O. Wilson talk about Biophilia, or the innate tendency of humans to have an attraction towards, or a love of, other living things. In the scientist's view, this innate love of creation is in our DNA, bound there by millennia of evolution. In the theologian's view, it is planted there by God, for love of other parts of creation that also came from the earth, love of neighbor, and love of God are all part of our human nature. We are all connected.

How can we strengthen this connection and show our love of neighbor, love of creation, and thus love of God? We can acknowledge that we are all connected, and that our actions here, on earth, today, impact others around the globe. The temperature IS rising, and with it the polar ice caps are melting. Water level IS rising, and with it island peoples are losing their homes. One of the counterintuitive aspects of the global climate change that is happening as a result of our consumerism and rapid lifestyles is that weather events will be more extreme: where there are now tendencies towards floods, the floods will become more frequent and more extensive; where there are now droughts, the droughts will be longer and more severe. We are somewhat buffered by this in the mid-Atlantic states of the US. How ironic that our lawmakers reside, at least part of the year, in one of the places most buffered by the impacts of global climate change. Perhaps that is why it takes an international visit from a world renowned peacemaker, Pope Francis, to shake things up a little in Congress, and to press into the shame that is attendant with turning a blind eye to the crisis of global climate change. The new scientific language to talk about the problem is one of Planetary Boundaries for Earth's Systems. Our earth has a level of resiliency, but if we push past planetary boundaries, we run into a state of risk of losing the whole ballgame, and earth will no longer be hospitable to human life. We have already raced past 4 of the boundaries: the climate is changing too quickly, the

rate of species going extinct is too rapid, we're adding too many nutrients like nitrogen to our ecosystem, and we're losing too many of our forested lands to development and ranching. What can we do?

Maryland Episcopal Environmental Partners has developed a website, GreenGrace, with actions you can take to live more sustainably. Perhaps there is time to think and talk about these actions as we share a meal in celebration God's gift of the harvest, for our St. Michaelmas feast today. I'd like to toss in out some ideas…Switching your power to more sustainable sources such as wind or solar is one way to make a difference. Simple changes such as not idling your car when waiting for someone - you can park in the shade in the summer and in the sun in the winter if you want your car to maintain a comfortable temperature - or turning the thermostat down a little in winter and up a little in summer to save on energy usage – put on an extra layer in winter, or put in a window fan in summer. Use cold water in the laundry, and wait until you have a full load for laundry or dishwasher. Have a meatless Monday, where you eat lower on the food chain, and the laws of thermodynamics will be in favor of consuming less energy that day. Individually, these changes don't add up to much, but cumulatively they can add up to a very big change, both over time for you as an individual, and over space for all of us working towards the same goal. We are all connected - and called to love God, love neighbor, and love creation.