

# St James United Church

## Message for September 12, 2021 The First Sunday in Creation Time



“To Praise and Protect” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Psalm 19; James 3:1-12; Mark 7:31-37; Excerpt from *The Great Work* by Thomas Berry

Today we begin the Season of Creation, a time to pause in wonder and praise God for creation. I didn't need to wait until today to do that though. I was in awe when I woke up in the wee hours of Saturday as the trees were whipped around and the sky flashed green. How Glen slept through it I will never know. Clearly Newfoundlanders are made of tough stuff. I hope he'd wake up for higher than Category 1. My hat off to the folks along the US Coast who regularly experience much stronger hurricanes. Even at Category 1, the hurricane made me feel very small and underscored how not everything in nature is benevolent. Hence the biblical instruction for humans to subdue the earth. About an attacking enemy, the instruction is a reminder that nature can bring death as well as life. It was a directive to tame the earth to grow food, build shelter, harness fire, for us to survive, to thrive in a world that can be harsh as well as kind. Humans definitely have thrived, so much the climate is changing, species are at risk, ecosystems in crisis. It's been our too human tendency, especially in the past century, "to subdue" without thought of the teaching's fuller context, including the bit about "having dominion" (more on that later). This season helps us restore the context as we take time to reflect on the importance of this amazingly beautiful, and at times very powerful world.

I find a good place to start is with praise. I don't just mean praising God for creation but creation itself. As I said, the hurricane left me in awe. To paraphrase the psalm, the sky told God's glory; the wind, rain and lightning proclaimed God's handiwork. But not just a hurricane leaves me gape-mouthed. On Friday, I hiked with our dog Finley from Middle Cove Beach to Houlihan's River. Views of the cliffs and ocean, the forest with trees sculpted by wind, the river flowing into pools before emptying into the sea, breath-taking. With landscapes like this, every day feels like a vacation, at least until it snows. The walk reminded me how I am one part of a larger whole, not above creation but connected to it. This is where having dominion comes in. We misinterpret this in Western culture, not realizing the Hebrew for "dominion" originally had an element of descent to it so that the monarch led not from above but alongside, her subjects as her equals as she took the responsibility to ensure that everyone and thing was cared for and tended to. We were called to tame the world but to do so as a gardener looking after his plants, like a farmer caring for her animals and protecting them from harm. Having dominion demands a deep sense of connection.

That sense of connection is what I appreciate about our gospel selection this morning. Jesus is asked to help someone who is deaf and mute and does so by putting his fingers in their ears and then taking his spit as a medium by which to loosen their tongue. I love that. Saliva is

water, a reminder of the fact that we are mostly water. It contains salt too, a reminder of the ocean from which all life came, us included. Jesus healed the person by reconnecting him to the ocean, to remind him that, to quote Thomas Berry, “there is a single integral community of the Earth that includes all its component members whether human or other than human.” Berry writes: “Every being has its own voice” and so it is no surprise that the man finds his voice by being reconnected to the Source of his and all life.

And we need that reconnection if we are going to survive on a planet with ever increasing storms and more erratic weather. Creation is speaking, but many pay attention to corporations that don't just put profit before people, but also put profit before the health of the planet. We end up doing harm as we consume resources rather than tend and protect this fragile shared community. James alludes to this when he speaks about the tongue's power to curse as well as bless. We're starting to heed words of blessing, to listen to warnings of scientists, youth like Greta Thunberg, Indigenous peoples, but we've been warned for most of my lifetime. In that time other voices have intentionally sown doubt in the scientific consensus because a shift from fossil fuels means lost profits. I realize this is a sensitive subject given our reliance on offshore oil for jobs and tax revenue. Sadly, if we'd acted more quickly, we could have had some fossil fuel in a mix of energy options but now must seek alternatives. Fortunately, we have an abundance of wind in Newfoundland that we can harness for energy, not to mention all the hydroelectric potential in Labrador.

There are solutions if we pull together for each other and the other than human. It's the only way to protect for future generations a gift that has sustained us for so long. We know how to do this. Twenty years ago, American airspace was closed after the attack on the World Trade Center, and hundreds of planes were diverted to Canadian airports, including to St. John's and Gander. In response you did what needed to be done, helping the passengers in a time of fear and loss. In a time such as this, when many young people are afraid and we all face loss, we can pull together again. This is knit into the fabric of Newfoundland and Labrador. It's what you do in times of crisis. But more so, community-based practices are the heart of this province: harvesting from the land and sea, sharing with neighbors, repairing instead of buying new, responding to local needs with local solutions. As much as I believe that restoring a sense of community will heal the planet, I also believe that shifting from corporate-driven individualism will reconnect us to each other and to the Earth and in the process heal our hearts.

Friends, following 9/11, the US government responded with military force in Afghanistan, then in Iraq, Libya, Syria and beyond. Don't get me wrong. I understand why they responded to the crisis with these “police actions”, even though there were alternatives that wouldn't destabilize the Middle East quite so much. In this time of ecological crisis, I pray that we make choices that won't destabilize the climate quite so much by listening more to the voices of Indigenous peoples, scientists, youth, and fellow creatures. After all, we are called not just to subdue but to care for the Earth, to have dominion with, not over it. I pray that we will do just that, praising creation with our hands as well as our voices, protecting not only what God has made, but also protecting what we truly love. May it be so. Amen.