

“Pastoral Presence”

Fifth Sunday

Colossians 3:1-4; Matthew 28:1-10

April 5, 2026

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The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

Saint Paul, Minnesota

Wednesday was Earth Day. And what a glorious day it was. The first day of the year that actually got hot, but most of the day was so pleasant—bright warm sun, mostly clear, blue skies. Green bursting from lawns. Trees awakening. Daffodils and tulips aflame. People out all over the cities, enjoying themselves, taking delight in the moment.

On that splendid day, a handful of us gathered up on the roof over the Kirk Parlour and stood in the middle of our brand new solar array. We were there to stream a service of blessing. Jessica Bandelin pointed out the juxtaposition of the old-style Gothic architecture with new technology—the solar panels and David Phillips’s drone, which was hovering above us, recording the whole thing.

The service began with Tim Short playing the carillon. He had picked an assortment of music for the day, from hymns like “For the Beauty of the Earth” to pop standards like “Here Comes the Sun.”

Phil Romine began our service with words of grace and peace. We read scripture—“God said, let there be light,” “O Lord, how manifold are your works!,” “You are the light of world.” Deb James and Elly Verhagen spoke on the journey to become an Earth Care congregation leading to the installation of the array. We gave thanks to God, blessed the panels, and sent everyone forth as people of light.

In a brief reflection, I said,

Light is one of the first gifts of creation—essential, abundant, freely given. Today, we celebrate not only the light itself, but our response to it. These solar panels represent a commitment: to live more gently on the Earth, to participate in healing rather than harm, and to embody hope in action.

In a world facing climate crisis, this is not a complete answer—but it is a faithful step. It is a sign that we believe care for creation is an expression of our love for God and neighbor. It is a testimony that the church can shine—not only in word, but in deed.

What a delight this moment was! We all enjoyed getting out on the roof, a place we don’t normally go, and definitely don’t go for a liturgy. In 29 years of ordained ministry, I’ve never done a service on a roof before. It’s fun when, after all these years, you get to do something new.

Plus, here was another opportunity to put hope into action, to play our part in the healing of creation.

The late, great Walter Brueggemann writes that in Isaiah 55 the prophet and poet imagines a cosmic parade of exiles returning home, joyous and secure. An “exuberant well-being” parade he calls it. One that involves all of creation in bringing about an alternative future. It is a homecoming parade that includes the healing of creation.

What a beautiful image! And I’m sure there were Earth Day events this year that tasted of that prophetic image. A few years ago, I just happened to be in Concord, Massachusetts on Earth Day. It was also a radiantly beautiful day. I was at the Old North Bridge to visit the starting point of the American Revolution, but a crowd was gathering for an Earth Day celebration. And there was such exuberant creativity in the crowd. Many dressed festively for the occasion. Some carrying musical instruments. A few were in costume or performing puppets of various woodland and river creatures. There was a cute otter puppet, being managed by 3 or 4 different people. I could almost imagine the parade of exuberant well-being involving all creation.

Isaiah 55 begins like a street vendor, crying out to passers-by, “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters.” The poet is issuing a summons. Calling us to pay attention and to join in the celebration.

The passage is also a summons to mode of life. Isaiah contrasts two ways of being. On the one hand, is the way of death. An imperial, Babylonian mode of being that is “exploitative, coercive, [and] oppressive.” A way of life that is opposed to well-being and flourishing. These are the social, economic, and political models that dominate our lives and pretend that there are no alternatives.

But the Biblical witness is consistent—there is an alternative and better way of living. This is the way of well-being and abundant life. On this way, creation itself joins in, singing and praising and delighting in all that God has done. This is the way that God desires for us. This is a life of abundance, peace, and joy in harmony with the world around us.

Our ethical and the spiritual challenge, the choice that we are being summoned to, is which way of life will we join? Will we join the march of consumption, exploitation, and cruelty? Or will we join the exuberant well-being parade? Choose life or choose death, basically, is the way the Bible often presents it.

I feel like our new solar array is another step in choosing life, in healing the earth, another way to follow God in the way we should go.

If we are to choose this path, then we must learn to pay attention for how God appears to us and speaks to us in the natural world. God’s word goes forth and will not return to God in vain. God is still speaking to us, is present to us, in the world around us. Part of our spiritual and ethical challenge is to slow down, to look and to listen, and to attend to God and what God is saying in our encounters with nature.

The theologian Sally McFague wrote beautifully of this:

When we contemplate the wonders of evolutionary history in both its smallest and its greatest dimensions, through a microscope or a telescope, what we grasp is a concrete experience of awesomeness Suddenly to see some aspect of creation naked, as it were, in its elemental beauty, its thereness and suchness, stripped of all conventional categories and names and uses, is an experience of transcendence and immanence inextricably joined. This possibility is before us in each and every piece and part of creation: it is the wonder at the world that young children have and that poets and artists retain. It is to experience the ordinary *as* extraordinary. This is experiencing the world as God’s body, the ordinariness of all bodies contained within and empowered by the divine.

I love this idea, that when we experience the world with child-like wonder, then we are having an experience of the presence of God. When we have a moment of awe and wonder, we are drawn more deeply into the concrete and particular reality of the moment. *And* we transcend the moment, escaping from the domination of time, and experiencing resonance. Last autumn we explored, in more depth, the spirituality of awe and wonder. But good to touch on again and remind ourselves.

I also love the idea that we should be looking for the beautiful in everything around us, including the everyday and the ordinary. I believe attuning ourselves to beauty to also be a vital spiritual and ethical practice. Attending to and appreciating beauty helps to shape us into the people of love and joy that God desires we might be. To enjoy the beautiful aids in our flourishing.

Hopefully this week, you were able to get outside and enjoy nature some. Maybe you took a walk to enjoy the blooms. I love seeing the flowering trees. Even if I know that their blooms are short-lived. That just means you have to slow down and take the time to appreciate them before they are gone.

I know some of you started on your gardens. I did this week. After the cold months, it felt good to have the sun on my shoulders as my hands got dirty in the ground. I think all gardeners feel that way.

I want to encourage that these natural delights are deeply spiritual. They attune us to the world around us. Help us to tell time in the natural way, and not the way our economic and social clocks demand of us. There’s also all sorts of evidence that medically and psychologically it’s good for us to be outside, to walk in the woods, to dig in the dirt, to sit and listen to birds sing.

But these natural delights are also training in virtue. Spiritual practices that open us up to the working of the Spirit. Shaping our character.

Because we believe that God is present with us in those moments in a special way. God can and does speak to us through the wonders and beauties of the natural world.

One of my favorite books of recent Reformed theology, is *Ravished by Beauty* by Belden Lane. He was a professor at Saint Louis University and specialized in theological reflection on nature. In this particular book, he explores the love of nature that resides in our Reformed theological tradition, descending from John Calvin.

Calvin used the metaphor of a theater to describe the natural world. Creation is like a theatre performance, used by God to delight, inspire, and instruct us. Here's how Belden Lane describes Calvin's use of this metaphor:

Calvin's metaphor of the world as theater involved all of creation in the act of performances. Oceans and mountains provide commanding sets that astound the theatergoers. Trees, birds, and animals serve as a Greek chorus, echoing the theme of God's glory. The audience ranges from humans in general, viewing the production with varying degrees of understanding, to the church down in the orchestra, singing along with the cast. All the while, God is the principal actor on stage, variously arrayed in garments of star-studded fabric, wearing masks that flash with the wild beauty of a storm at sea or the calm splendor of an alpine meadow.

What a truly delightful notion! God arrayed in costumes, having fun performing beautiful spectacles for our enjoyment!

Definitely not the stern, judgmental father-sky-god we identify so often with traditional piety.

Belden Lane explains that God's purpose in all that natural beauty is "to awaken desire in those God loves, luring them back in ravishing delight."

God wants us to enjoy the natural world! God wants us to have these experiences of beauty, awe, and wonder. Because in those moments, God draws us nearer. And God awakens in us the kind of people God desires us to be.

That nature is intended by God to reveal God's glory to us is one of the many reasons that damage to the natural world is so devastating. In 1990 the PC(USA) adopted "A Call to Restore the Creation." Which declares that "God's work in creation is too wonderful, too ancient, too beautiful, too good to be desecrated."

Belden Lane states it simply. In our Reformed tradition, "it is a sin to make ugly what God has created for the purpose of reflecting and sharing God's beauty."

Our ecological ethics flow from our understanding of the glory and sovereignty of God. To care for the earth is to understand the earth as a revelation of God. Installing solar panels not only aides in healing the earth, it is an expression of the beauty and the glory of God.

So, this spring, let us choose life, to follow on the righteous way. Let's join the "exuberant well-being" parade!

Creation is bursting forth as it sings the praises of God. Luring us to join in, delighting and rejoicing in God's beauty. Reminding us that God is always present with us, even in the ordinary and everyday world all around us.

Go outside! Enjoy nature. Respond to it with the wonder of a child. And let these moments of delight shape you into the person God desires for you to be.