

At the 10:30 am service on April 18, 2010, the Rev. Cornel Barnett delivered the following sermon based on Genesis 1:9-10, 20-22; Psalms 104:24-26; Romans 8:22-28 and John 3:17.

“Sacred Oceans and Seas”

Suellen and I go on a spiritual pilgrimage every year to the San Francisco Ocean Film Festival in San Francisco. I am drawn to everything ocean since it has been my playground for most of my life. I feel connected to God when I'm by the sea or in the ocean. A dream analyst encouraged me live near the sea for my health. Every church I have served has been within an hour of the ocean.

Many of us have enjoyed walks on the beach, we have looked seaward and meditated and we have tasted the ocean's fruits, played in her waters, swam, surfed, sailed and traveled its wide expanse.

The sea has inspired many artists: Claude Debussy composed the first notes of *La Mer* when he crossed the English Channel. Thomas Traherne wrote in *Centuries of Meditation* that “You never enjoy the world aright, till the sea itself floweth in your veins.” Harbors and seas with ships dominate the brilliant paintings of JMW Turner.

Today we celebrate Earth Day and the focus is oceans and seas. We rejoice in their wonder and splendor and we look at their sad side. This beauty/bleak aspect of nature comes through in almost every film at the ocean festival. I'd rather focus on nature's beauty and I can't forever but it's important to look at the ugly side.

We see how coastal development, pollution, over fishing, tourism and a host of other human endeavors threaten marine ecosystems around the world. For generations the living oceans have been exploited as a resource, not honored as one of God's gifts. Humans have consumed without regard, dumped what they no longer needed, and physically altered the marine environment.

In my teen years I visited a remote surfing beach along the KwaZulu coastline in South Africa and innocently walked through two-foot high white foam to enter the ocean. I didn't think much about it until later in the day when I itched all over. Someone was dumping toxic chemicals into a river nearby and it flowed into the sea and washed onto the shore.

Another disturbing experience was a visit to a Staten Island, New York, north shore beach, during my first few weeks of being a pastor on the island. All the trash from the East and Hudson rivers washed onto the island. The beach was blanketed with syringes, plastic containers, wood from construction sites, everything. When a wave rose up one could see thick garbage in the wave face. It was a nightmare!

Scripture foresees a hurting earth when Paul writes, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves . . .” Human beings and the earth are connected. If nature goes down, we go down with it. Conversely, if nature is healthy we stand a good chance of being healthy.

This applies to oceans and seas. Living oceans cover more than 70 percent of our planet, have mountains taller than Mt. Everest and canyons deeper than the Grand Canyon, and contain 97 percent of all living matter.

Every living thing on earth, no matter the distance from the seashore, feels the oceans' influences. Oceans define the cultural identity of island and coastal communities. Even for communities far from the shore, oceans are invaluable. Oceans are not only physical transportation byways, but oceans currents help to stabilize the earth's climate. Oceans are a valuable source of food.

The oceans, teeming with sea life, vibrant coral communities, and vast beauty, are part of God's treasured creation. When God created the oceans, as we just heard in our biblical readings, God declared them "good."

As God's stewards, we are called not only to enjoy the oceans, but also to care for them as a sacred gift from God.

Professor of theology and culture, Carol F. Johnston, a winner of the Presbyterians for Restoring Creation award notes that "The Bible is *consistently* about the restoration of the right relationships between God and human beings and the rest of creation all together, holistically."

She adds: "I want us all to start holding up signs at football games that say, 'John 3:17': 'God sent the Son into the world that the world might be saved.' The Greek for 'world' is 'cosmos' — that the whole cosmos might be saved (or made whole)." "That's what it's really all about. That's why what we're doing, even when it seems so difficult, is so exciting and feels so great, because it's really doing what we're called to do and what God has enlisted us to do."

We know what we can do to save our oceans. This is tough since we cannot avoid our modern world. But we can do something.

We can recycle or dispose of trash properly. Every year, millions of pounds of trash degrade habitat and can strangle, poison, or otherwise harm ocean wildlife. Plastic bottles have formed an island bigger than Texas in the middle of the sea.

We can reduce energy consumption. Air pollution particles created from power plants and automobiles fall into the ocean in raindrops, polluting the water with excess nitrogen and contaminating fish with toxic mercury.

We can reduce the use of pesticides and fertilizers. Runoff from lawns, farms, streets, parking lots, and construction sites is a major source of ocean pollution.

We can enjoy responsible recreation. Ocean lovers spend a lot of time in the water. How we engage in these activities determines whether our impact is negative or positive. I have surfed with porpoise. He or she wanted to ride the wave with me. Nature wants to be in harmony with us.

We can reciprocate by encouraging the seafood industry and government regulators to engage in sustainable fishing practices and by making conscientious consumer choices we can help conserve the oceans' fish bounty. The discarding of whole sharks after cutting off their fins for shark fin soup is causing a major shortage of sharks in the world.

We can be in harmony by ensuring that coastal development is done with care for God's oceans. More than 50 percent of people in the United States live within 50 miles of an ocean or Great Lake. Coastal areas tend to be some of the most highly developed regions of the world and country. This development has often had a disruptive impact on marine and lake ecosystems. Coastal marshes are disappearing at a rate of 20,000 acres per year. They trap floodwaters, filter out pollutants and serve as "nurseries" for wildlife. They lessen the impact of hurricanes. They need protection.

Today, more than ever, we understand the interconnectedness of all life and the disruptive impact humankind can have on this balance. As we gain an ever-deeper awareness of the connections between our activities on the land and the health of marine ecosystems we also gain an understanding of how we can partner with God in the restoration and healing of creation.

God created the earth and said it was good. It is still good and it has an amazing capacity to heal. The earth has been entrusted to us by God. We are saved or made whole by God's grace and we are saved or made whole by how well we take care of our sacred oceans and seas. Amen.