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Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
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Genesis 6:11-22, John 3:1-17
“We Are the World”

As mentioned last week we will launch each of my Lenten sermons with a work of art. Before you turn to the picture in the insert, listen again to the last two verses of the gospel reading.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

The picture in the insert came from the “Blue Planet Green Living” website. The artist is unknown. Reflecting on the biblical text, look at the picture. What does it say to you?

For me, the boy in the picture can be God’s son, Jesus. He is in a mystical space and given the world and asked to assess what is going on. A pastor friend reminded me that the biblical writers thought the world was flat. In fact, they saw the world in three tiers, firmament of heaven on top, the underworld below, and the flat earth in the middle. God never saw it that way. God saw it as it is: round and that’s the world God gives to Jesus to assess if we stick with the picture. What does Jesus think when he looks at the world?

The biblical passage gives us clues. He is told that God loves the world and he wants to send Jesus to the world to save human beings in the world and to give them life that will continue forever.

There is also a sense that God is worried about the world as he was in the Genesis story. It is stated in Genesis that the world was corrupt and violent and God was so upset that he wiped out everything except for Noah, his family and the animals of the world. In the gospel story, God is concerned but does not “condemn” the world. Jesus will save it.

With the dual sense of God’s love of the world and being concerned about it, what does God see about the world? What is good about the world and what is not good? The fact that God is concerned about human salvation indicates that God is primarily concerned about people, every human being on the planet. That’s why I called this sermon, “We are the world.”

The song “We are the world” (see insert) written primarily by Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie for the organization “USA for Africa” affirms that there is no

difference between people in Africa and their neighbors in the US. The only difference is finances, education, housing standards, and opportunity. Former South African President, Thabo Mbeki, was vilified for his stance on HIV/AIDS but he gave one of the finest speeches on the problems of Africa at the 13th International AIDS Conference in Durban, South Africa, July 9, 2000. For him, the biggest problem in Africa was "extreme poverty."

He said in the speech that poverty is the main reason why babies are not vaccinated, why clean water and sanitation are not provided, why curative drugs and other treatments are unavailable and why mothers die in childbirth. It is the underlying cause of reduced life expectancy, handicap, disability and starvation. Poverty is a major contributor to mental illness, stress, suicide, family disintegration and substance abuse. Every year in the developing world, 12.2 million children under 5 years die... They die largely because they are poor...

"USA for Africa" raised funds for Africa with the launch of the song sung by the best rock/pop artists at the time. If you have not seen the clip of the song sung you can go online. It still gives me goose bumps. I can see it a hundred times and be moved each time.

If Jesus looked at the world today, what would he see? To answer this question I turn to what I consider some of the best analysts of what is going on in the world. One can call them Jesus figures. One such figure is Lester R. Brown who wrote a book called, *World on the Edge: How to Prevent Environmental and Economic Collapse*.

In his preface he says, "When I meet old friends and they ask, 'How are you?' I often reply, 'I'm fine; it's the world I am worried about.' 'Aren't we all' is the common response." Brown continues: "Most people have a rather vague sense of concern about the future, but some worry about specific threats such as climate change or population growth. Some are beyond questioning whether civilization will decline if we continue with business as usual, and instead they are asking when this will occur."

"If we continue with business as usual," writes Brown, "how much time do we have left before our global civilization unravels? And how do we save civilization?" God asks the same question in the gospel story today. God sent the son into the world so that the world can be saved through him. It takes Christ-filled, enlightened and knowledgeable people to restore the world in a way that gives glory to God.

Salvation for Brown is what gives us hope and his organization, Earth Policy Institute, has come up with what they call Plan B. He writes that there are two policy cornerstones underlying the Plan B transformation.

The first is to restructure taxes by lowering income taxes and raising the tax on carbon emissions to include the indirect costs of burning fossil fuels, such as climate change and air pollution, in fossil fuel prices. The amount of tax we pay would not change.

The second policy cornerstone is to redefine security for the twenty-first century. The threats to our future now are not armed aggression but rather climate change, population growth, water shortages, poverty, rising food prices, and failing states.

Our challenge is not only to redefine security in these terms, but also to reallocate fiscal priorities to shift resources toward achieving Plan B goals. These include reforestation, soil conservation, fishery restoration, universal primary school education, and reproductive health care and family planning services for women everywhere.

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If we loved the world as much as God loves the world we would do everything our power to replenish it, protect it, nurture it, sustain it, embrace everyone in it, and in doing so live as one born once in the flesh and born again in the spirit as Jesus tells Nicodemus in our story today. It takes the spirit, or as a pastor recently said, it takes the "spark" in us to be God's creative, loving, compassionate people in the world.

This pastor wants to see the spark in all of our eyes when we celebrate our faith, when we speak about our faith, and when we enact our faith in the world, for the sake of the world. Amen.