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 Redwoods Presbyterian Church
 Larkspur, California
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Genesis 1:9-10, 20-25; Psalms 104:24-26;
 Romans 8:22-28; John 3:17
 "Sacred Oceans and Seas"

Environmental Ministries, a department of the Presbyterian Church (USA) informs us that the Earth Day theme this year is "Care for God's Creatures." Earth Day falls on April 22 each year and many churches celebrate Earth Day on a Sunday near this date. I decided to focus on Earth Day today and the creatures I highlight are those found in the sea.

I do so, because of my love for the ocean and because Suellen and I recently attended the San Francisco International Ocean Film Festival, which we do so every year. Everything I say today applies to all creatures on God's planet. Since fish habituate water, I have placed them and the sermon in their broader context, the ocean, thus, I call this sermon, "Sacred Oceans and Seas."

The sea has been my playground for most of my life. I have seen the good, the bad and the ugly – mostly good though.

I participate in the ocean as a surfer and swimmer. In my early twenties, I wrote a poem about waves and surfing. The first stanza says,

*"Many times have you caressed me
 As I tucked deep within your arms.
 Both drawing our rhythmic pattern,
 Both flowing into one."*

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

The sea inspired Claude Debussy to compose one of classical music's finest works, "La Mer." Thomas Traherne, in *Centuries of Meditation*, wrote, "You never enjoy the world aright, till the sea itself floweth in your veins."

I have surfed in many beautiful environments and caught many amazing waves. The ocean film festivals have taken us to tropical coral reefs and their splash of colors. We have watched orcas, whales, sharks, stingrays, squid and millions of fish grace the

seven seas. The world is a wonderland below the ocean. This is the “good” in “the good, the bad and the ugly.”

The “bad and ugly” is mainly the way human beings treat the oceans. Coastal development, pollution, overfishing, unregulated tourism, and a host of other human endeavors are threatening marine ecosystems around the world. They have led to the decline of ocean wildlife and the near collapse of ocean ecosystems. The living oceans have been exploited for generations. They have not been honored as one of God’s gifts. We have consumed without regard, dumped what we no longer needed, and physically altered the marine environment.

In my teen years, I had a “bad” experience in a visit to a remote surfing beach. I walked through feet high white foam to enter the ocean. I did not think much about it until later in the day when I itched all over. Unbeknown to me, a factory was spilling effluent into a nearby river, which washed into the sea.

The “ugly” was a visit to a Staten Island, New York’s north shore beach. All the trash from the East and Hudson rivers dumped onto the island. The beach was blanketed with syringes, plastic containers, wood from construction sites, everything. When a wave surged up one could see thick garbage in the wave face. It was a nightmare! I heard recently that fracking is causing the release of inflammable methane gas into the Hudson River.

Scripture foresees a hurting earth. Paul writes, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves” There is an interconnectedness of wholeness and health between human beings and the earth. If nature goes down, we go down with it. Conversely, if nature is healthy we are healthy.

Every living thing on the earth, no matter the distance from the seashore, feels the oceans’ influences. Oceans often 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 ocean currents help stabilize the climate. Oceans are also a source of food by providing fish and other sea life for our tables.

The 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.

The diverse and fragile marine ecosystems have an impact on people since oceans help determine weather patterns.

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 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. Because we are people of God, we are to maintain the bounty of the oceans' waters and the integrity of oceanic systems that contain beauty and support an abundance of life. We all share the responsibility to be good stewards of God's oceans. In a way, this is a stewardship sermon. Ani has asked me to extend stewardship to all of life and to other times of the year.

What can we do to be good stewards of God's sacred oceans and seas?

Professor of Theology and Culture at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, the Rev. Carol F. Johnston, winner of the Presbyterians for Restoring Creation award in 2005, says, "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 (made whole)."

"That's what it's really all about," says Johnston. "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."

Second, *we can* recycle or dispose of trash properly as we do in our church kitchen. Every year, millions of pounds of trash degrade habitat and strangle, poison, or otherwise harm ocean wildlife. *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 at the beach, on the water and in our parks.

Third. There areas of special concern such as overfishing, coastal development, coastal marshes, and pollution.

Overfishing: We can encourage 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.

Coastal development: Coastal areas tend to be some of the most highly developed regions of the world. This development has often had a disruptive impact on marine

and lake ecosystems. By ensuring that coastal development is done with care for God's oceans, we can help protect valuable seas and shores.

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 need protection.

Pollution: Ocean pollution directly affects sea life and ultimately affects human health. Pollutants-- including trash, oil, pathogens in sewage in medical waste, fertilizers, pesticides, toxic industrial wastes, and sediments--make up a deadly stew that contaminates our coastal waters. Trash such as discarded plastics and toxic waste can also harm marine life. Just last week, I saw a picture of a seagull in the wild wrapped in a plastic bag. By taking care to prevent pollution, we can help protect God's sacred oceans and seas.

Finally, contact policy-makers. Policy-makers at every level need to hear about protecting God's creatures. Advocate for the Endangered Species Act, for better animal welfare standards in the food industry, for laws that prevent seafood fraud and combat over-fishing, and for conservation of habitats, and more. A shout out to The Ocean Conservancy and The Nature Conservancy and our stewards in the latter, the Rademachers!

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 collaborate with God in the restoration and healing of creation.

Needless to say, global warming is having an adverse effect on our beautiful planet and marine ecosystems.

We must act on all the knowledge we have in order to protect our oceans and seas to not only preserve God's creation but also so that future generations will be able to enjoy clean beaches, healthy seafood, abundant ocean wildlife, and thriving coastal communities.

The Easter message is that many people around the world are waking up to the possibilities of a better world. Everywhere we look, people on the ground and governments are concerned and co-creating with God for the creation of God's new world. Amen.