

“50” (26April2020)

I thought it might be worthwhile to do a little recap of what happened this week.

42,800 people died this week from the virus.¹ Gov. Evers issued a plan for the Badger Bounce Back to lay framework for what it might be to get past some of this. You continued figuring out how to operate from home. That, of course, defined this week.

But there’s much more than that.

On Monday, a coyote was taking a nap in an empty parking lot at Yosemite, a bear roamed the streets of a town in Italy, and penguins strolled sidewalks of Cape Town, South Africa.

On Monday, my peas were sprouting. A miracle! saving a little eventual shipping fuel.

On Tuesday at Picnic Point, trout lilies were budding and I spotted my first ruby-crowned kinglet, a tiny chipper little bird with a red hat.

On Tuesday, John Muir was born. Well, he turned 182 years old that day, but...

He went on to help give us National Parks, but of his boyhood in Wisconsin he wrote of learning to swim by watching frogs, and about a loon he’d brought inside by the fireplace attacking his cat, and of all his favorite flowers. When the passenger pigeons came, he said “Of all God’s feathered people that sailed the Wisconsin sky, no other bird seemed to us so wonderful.”² At the death of a horse, he gained

“a real knowledge of animals as fellow-mortals, learning to respect them and love them, and even to win some of their love. Godlike sympathy grows and thrives and spreads far beyond the teachings of churches and schools, [he said] where too often the mean, blinding, loveless doctrine is taught that animals have neither mind nor soul, have no rights that we are bound to respect, and were made only for man, to be petted, spoiled, slaughtered, or enslaved.”³

I hope as the MCC and elsewhere, we rediscover a truer Christianity that fosters rather than dissuades

what John Muir knew even as a child about our relationships with all creatures.

Besides Tuesday giving us those John Muir connections, also on Tuesday Aldo Leopold counted 871 geese along the Wisconsin River and examined bloodroot flowers at dawn. They were his final field notes, as he died later that day fighting a spreading fire.⁴ He’d said “many historical events, hitherto explained solely in terms of human enterprise, were actually biotic interactions between people and land.”⁵ His death was interacting with the environment, and he shows us it is always about relationship, including in the likely origins of the coronavirus. Leopold’s personal interactions with the land and ecology have been gone 72 years now.

This lost Leopold also leaves us grief about the extinction of passenger pigeons, for a monument still standing at Wyalusing State Park. He said it was

“the funeral of a species. It symbolizes our sorrow. We grieve because no living [person] will see again the onrushing phalanx of victorious birds, sweeping a path for spring across the skies, chasing the defeated winter from all the woods and prairies of Wisconsin.

“It is a century now since Darwin gave us the first glimpse of the origin of species. We know now what was unknown to all the preceding caravan of generations: that [humans] are only fellow-voyagers with other creatures in the odyssey of evolution. This new knowledge should have given us, by this time, a sense of kinship with fellow-creatures; a wish to live and let live; a sense of wonder over the magnitude and duration of the biotic enterprise.”⁶

To continue with the week in review, on Wednesday, my cousin was born. Well, this Wednesday Peter celebrated his 50th birthday.

Also hitting the half-century mark on Wednesday was Earth Day, started in 1970 by Wisconsin Senator Gaylord Nelson and becoming the most widely observed secular holiday in the

¹ <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/coronavirus-death-toll/>

² Muir: *Nature Writings*, “My Boyhood and Youth: A Paradise of Birds,” p78

³ Muir: *Nature Writings*, “My Boyhood and Youth: Life on a Wisconsin Farm,” p56

⁴ Aldo Leopold: *His Life and Work*, Curt Meine, p519

⁵ in *A Sand County Almanac, The Land Ethic: The Community Concept*

⁶ in *A Sand County Almanac, “On A Monument to the Pigeon”*

world. In his speech that original day, Nelson reminded us of the objective

“to put Gross National Quality on a par with Gross National Product... concerned ...not just with how we dispose of our tin cans, bottles and sewage [but all our problems]...It is a hungry child in a land of affluence...[It] is a problem perpetuated by the expenditure of billions a year on war, instead of on our... congested, polluted urban areas that are inhuman traps for millions of people. Our goal is not just an environment of clean air and water and scenic beauty. The objective is an environment of decency, quality and mutual respect for all other human beings and all other living creatures. Our goal is a new American ethic that sets new standards for progress, emphasizing human dignity and well being rather than an endless parade of technology that produces more gadgets, more waste, more pollution. Are we able to meet the challenge?” our Senator asked, and answered: “Yes.”⁷

Four years ago on Wednesday, then, the Paris Climate Agreement was signed.

This Wednesday Dane County announced a new solar farm, part of its Climate Action Plan to cut greenhouse gas emissions in half this decade.⁸

Still, it was for quite different reasons this week that the air was clearer and easier to breathe in Los Angeles and Beijing and probably Madison. And oil, often black gold and the driver of life on this planet, instead had value below 0, as investors were not selling, but paying up to \$38 to get rid of barrels of oil.⁹

Further in the week, on Thursday on an outing, I counted 34 forsythia bushes blooming in people’s yards versus 19 magnolias, even though the magnolias had a decisive early lead.

Yesterday, Saturday the 25th, marked the beginning of the Flint, Michigan water crisis six years ago, and an enormous earthquake in Nepal five years ago, and our best ever view of our universe, when the Hubble telescope was put into orbit 30 years ago.¹⁰

That view of our week and our broader surroundings, of feathered people and the biotic community and our predecessor kin of humans and entire species, that view of our neighborhood on this planet and beyond into the galaxies and the future, that view and perspective took me a long, long time to be able to see.

Coronavirus, I lamented more than a month ago, became the only thing going on. I was supposed to write for a church organization, Lutherans Restoring Creation,¹¹ about the 50th anniversary of Earth Day, but I kept putting it off, because it wasn’t where my attention was. It even seemed pointless. We’ve got enough just to make it through each of these strange days. In a phrase that Pastor Sonja uses, we just haven’t had the bandwidth to deal with much of anything else.

I admire the people who look at the changes we’ve been making and can anticipate that it will help in being better to the planet and each other going forward. For me, it partly just manifests frustration; if we can change our lives so intensely, so instantly because of the virus, why are we so immobilized to much real adaptation to address climate change? In the early weeks, this even meant that political parties on Capitol Hill were able to work together (though our legislature in Wisconsin seems unshakably stuck in preferring partisan parrying over actually confronting crisis and doing something to help).

That huge list from this past week and from the past I was eventually able to see, of how we make it through or move forward. I hope maybe it helped you to see it too, to see beyond the glare of present circumstances.

Still, a second conundrum for me is that I’ve arrived at a point where sermons would normally be wrapping up and I still haven’t mentioned Jesus. We got to the 50 years of Earth Day, but what does that have to do with living amid the 50 days of Easter?

⁷ http://nelsonearthday.net/docs/nelson_26-18_ED_denver_speech_notes.pdf

⁸ https://madison.com/wsj/news/local/environment/dane-county-looks-to-develop-18-megawatt-solar-farm-joe-parisi-says-project-to-save/article_b3de5ee4-ad45-58c8-8b63-6bc86c68e5.html

⁹ <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/20/838521862/free-falling-oil-prices-keep-diving-as-demand-disappears>

¹⁰ <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/andropov-writes-to-u-s-student>

¹¹ <https://lutheransrestoringcreation.org/third-sunday-easter-year-a-utphall/>

For how directly our Bible readings kept fitting to speak God's Word into the reality of the virus and our lives right now, these readings this week left me wondering how God was speaking into all that larger context of creation.

For example, we might feel sympathy with the two disciples in the Gospel reading, who, it says "stood still, looking sad" and knew overwhelming present circumstances as they asked, "Are you the only stranger who does not know the things that have taken place in these days?" (Luke 24:17-18)

Again, we probably pray honestly the words of the Psalm: "the anguish of the grave came upon me; I came to grief and sorrow. O LORD, I pray you, save my life. Precious in your sight, O LORD, is the death of your servants." (Psalm 116:3-4, 15). While that's a faithful prayer, and may hold those dying or facing the most danger, we're probably looking for more of an answer.

A question from our 1st reading may then be on our minds: "what should we do?" But we may find less validity in the response: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you" (Acts 2:37-38).

In the face of climate change, against stubborn deniers, we might take Jesus' words: "O how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe." (Luke 24:25).

In the end, even though it's not about a task or how we're supposed to feel successful, I suggest we take confidence from Luke that the risen Jesus is with you, present, and made known even in something like a confused and fearful, quiet meal at the end of a day, at home when darkness settles. Christ is coming for dinner, for your sustenance.

What matters, then, for any context, what ultimately shapes all our reality, and what puts you in proper relationship with God, neighbor, and creation is simply that, as it declares, "you have come to trust in God, who raised Jesus from the dead...so that your faith and hope are set on God. You have been born anew...through the living and enduring word of God" (1st Peter 1:21,23).

Alleluia! Christ is risen!