

**Creation Groans**  
Romans 8:18-24a  
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First Central Congregational UCC  
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I think we can finally declare that spring has arrived. Though pardon me if I knock on wood, just in case.

This weekend I planted my vegetable garden, mowed my lawn, and began other spring chores. My windows have been open, and I can go about my household tasks, listening to birds sing. I imagine many of you have done the same. This is more than six weeks later than last year. And while last year was an early anomaly, this year is a late one. And winter wasn't even that bad; but spring sure hasn't been spring-like.

What is said of Nebraska is also said of my native Oklahoma, meaning it's probably true of the entire central plains – if you don't like the weather, just wait, it will change. We are used to wild swings that leave us and our plants confused as to what season it is. This is one reason we are hardy people.

This Easter season we, along with our sister churches in the United Church of Christ, have been celebrating a Mission 4/1 Earth. Fifty days of tree planting, Earth care, and environmental advocacy. This is officially the final week, as next Sunday, Pentecost, concludes the season and its special focus. So, next week, don't forget to turn in your time sheets and record your activities, so that we can post them to the virtual tally board the denomination is keeping.

Throughout this season, our worship has focused on the connection between spirituality and nature. I've preached about the healing relationships we have with trees, about God's love for animals, about the earthiness of the incarnation. While on our all-church retreat, we reflected on water, and participants drew their images of the river of life. Throughout the season, we have heard poems and excerpts from the writings of John Neihardt. I thank Bob Vassell, who read today, for helping me curate those poems and excerpts throughout the season. These readings have helped to tie the biblical themes to our Nebraska landscape.

Today we come to one of the most powerful creation passages in all of scripture – Paul's proclamation of a cosmic salvation. The reading of this passage invites us to listen to the voice of creation. Take a moment and ponder, Do you hear creation's voice?

In this brief excerpt from St. Paul's letter to the churches in Rome he proclaims his vision of God's salvation. And it is broader and grander than anything we might have imagined from early chapters of the letter. According to Paul, salvation is cosmic. Jesus did not live, die, and rise again simply that you and I might be saved. So that human history or human society might be redeemed. No, the salvation of God is for *all* creation. Everything is redeemed and set free by the righteous love of God.

I think in the back of Paul's mind must be some of those wonderful passages from the prophets and the Psalms. Images of the peaceable kingdom, where lions lie down with lambs. Images of justice rolling down like water, of trees bursting into applause, of the very rocks crying out in praise to God.

Paul imagines a new creation, with nature healed and restored.

But, he was quite aware that this beautiful image, this liberation and salvation are not yet realized; healing and restoration are things for which creation still longs. And, so, Paul tells us that creation is waiting, groaning in labor pains. Like a mother struggling to give birth, creation is enduring this present travail, hopefully waiting for God's promised future. As John Neihardt wrote elsewhere in *All Is but a Beginning*: "There is more to come."

If we listen carefully to nature's voice, then not only do we hear the beauty in the birds' songs, we hear the groaning and the travail, for creation is suffering. One reason it suffers is because of its broken relationship with humanity. It was not modern environmentalists who first wrote about the damage that our sin causes. The Hebrew prophets heard the voice of nature and revealed that human sin had damaged the land, polluted the waters, and turned verdant pastures and forests into deserts. Nature has suffered on our behalf and because of us.

And sometimes, we don't have to listen carefully to hear creation's moaning, sometimes she screams and howls her pain at us. As in this story of April 14, 1935 told by Timothy Egan in his compelling book *The Worst Hard Time*.

The day began as smooth and light as the inside of an alabaster bowl. After a siege of black and white, after a monotonous jumble of grit-filled clouds had menaced people on the High Plains for seasons on end, the second Sunday in April was an answered prayer. . . . The air was clear. . . There was no wind . . . [The people] stretched their legs and breathed deep, blinking at the purity of a prairie morning.

About eight hundred miles to the north, people in Bismarck, North Dakota, started calling the weather bureau. A high-pressure system had been sitting over the Dakotas, and it was tussling with a cold front that barreled down from the Yukon. With the clash of warm and cold currents, the air turned violent. Winds screamed over the grasslands, carrying dust so heavy that visibility was less than a hundred yards. . . . In two hours' time, temperatures plunged more than thirty degrees, heralding the cold front's advance. By mid-morning, the windblown soil slid down over South Dakota and was advancing on Nebraska.

This duster was moving south with the cold front, but it was darker by far than anything ever seen before on the prairie. Some people compared it to a wall of muddy water, boiling up and then down on the earth.

When the big roller crossed into Kansas, it was reported to be two hundred miles wide, with high winds like a tornado turned on its side. . . . The sun was blocked. . . . Near . . . Hays, . . . a small boy who had been playing in the fields . . . dashed for home. He got lost in the midday blackness . . . the next day he was found dead. He had suffocated, half a mile from home.

[In Dodge City they said,] “My God! Here it comes!”

The front edge of the duster looked two thousand feet high. Winds were clocked at sixty-five miles an hour. . . . Drivers turned on their headlights but could not see ahead of them, or even see the person sitting next to them. It was like three midnights in a jug, one old nester said. Cars died, their systems shorted out by the static. People fled to tornado shelters, fire stations, gyms, church basements. There was a whiff of panic, not evident in earlier storms, as a fear took hold that the end was near. A woman in Kansas later said she thought of killing her child to spare the baby the cruelty of Armageddon.

April 14, 1935. Black Sunday. The stories from that day are frightening. By this point in the Dust Bowl, “one hundred million acres had lost most of its topsoil and nearly half had been ‘essentially destroyed.’”

Growing up on the Great Plains, the Dust Bowl has always been this epic, even mythic, story, that continues to shape our cultural identity.

It occurred during a horrible, many year drought in the central plains. But the drought did not cause the Dust Bowl. For the Great Plains, through its many thousands of years, had endured long droughts before. The ecosystem had evolved to withstand such droughts. But it had not evolved to withstand the human disaster.

For the Dust Bowl was the worst human-made ecological disaster to impact our country, caused not by the drought, but by the great plow-up which had preceded it. For the first time in its long history, the central plains could not withstand the drought, because its native ecology had been destroyed.

As moving as the official histories are, we know this story, because it is our story. Some of you lived through it; the rest of us have heard the stories from our parents and grandparents.

The bible had warned us. The land will bear your sins; it will suffer for your sins; it will even die for your sins. “The whole creation has been groaning in labor pains.” And in the 1930’s creation howled and screamed; it was impossible not to hear the voice.

Creation is suffering, but she is also longing, waiting in expectation for God’s salvation. We can listen to the song of the birds and be reminded of beauty and joy, and look forward, for there is more to come. There is hope.

Paul wrote that “creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay.” God will save. Nature will be redeemed. But, notice one feature of this salvation – it will come about when the children of God are revealed. Well, who might that be?

Theologian Andrew Sung Park writes, “As the children of God, filled with the first fruits of the Spirit, we will participate in the liberation of the creation.” We. We are children of God. And when we are revealed as God’s children, then we help to fulfill creation’s longing, because we are God’s agents for healing and restoring the Earth.

God will save creation from its suffering, and it is through God’s children that this salvation will be accomplished. Empowered by God’s Holy Spirit, we will heal the damage that humanity has done.

So, maybe you never got on the Earth Day bandwagon. You didn't read Rachel Carson, you never liked Al Gore. Weren't interested in seeing a movie about global warming. Environmental activism is just not your thing. That's fine by me. I'm not interested, right this moment, in the current debates around ecology and climate change.

But in this moment, standing here in a Christian pulpit, reading the Holy Bible, as a person committed to the Christian scriptures, trying to interpret and proclaim the Word of God. I can't avoid what Paul wrote in the letter to the churches of Rome. We have a God-given responsibility to be involved in healing the suffering of nature. And that ethical responsibility is not some tangential teaching, some secondary duty. It is tied directly to Paul's doctrine of salvation. The saved are those who are helping to save creation.

To me, the message could not be any clearer.

Okay?

A few days remain in our season of Easter greening. If you have not participated in this Mission 4/1 Earth, I invite you to pick up a trowel and start a garden. Pick up a shovel and plant a tree. Take a trash bag on your walk and pick up whatever garbage you see.

Do it because you have heard the voice of nature calling to you. Do it because God's Holy Spirit moves through you. Do it because you are a child of God.