

GREEN SANCTUARY: SAVING EARTH STEP BY STEP

A Sermon By
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October 14, 2007

I have to start with the most exciting news of the week, or of the year, or of the decade. Al Gore and the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize on Friday, October 12, 2007. Yea!!!! I read that one of the key researchers on that panel works right here at the University of Arizona, Jonathan Overpeck. He is the director of the UA's Institute for the Study of Planet Earth. Overpeck pointed out in an article yesterday that the fact that this is a peace prize is an important indication that "people realize [that] the scale of climate change if we don't act is large enough to cause widespread disruption, conflict and human suffering in the world." ("UA researcher played lead role...", *AZ Daily Star*, 10-13-07)

This month we celebrate fifty years of space travel. Before that, people could only imagine what the earth looked like from space. That first image of the earth as a shining blue ball suspended against darkness became the poster child for all things astronomical as well as environmental. It showed us how interconnected we really are, not just in the theological and metaphorical web that Chief Seattle spoke of, but in a real visual way in which political and state boundaries no longer prevailed.

I googled "earth from space" and found the latest version of images of our planet, composited from satellite and ground images to create relatively cloud-free true color images of both sides. These are from <http://solarviews.com> and I printed them out to inspire you. I also brought my globe. See the difference? The globe is interesting for its delineation of the borders of countries and all the names we have given to our land and waterscapes, and you can see how far we are from some other state or country.

But the images of our earth from space show an entirely different orientation, one of a smooth expanse of earth and sea, with cloud patterns that cover thousands of miles. There is no line between us and Rocky Point, Mexico, no fence, and in the daylight images, you can't even see the cities or roads. You can in the night images, which show lights all over the United States and Mexico, the southern border of Canada, and the coastal regions of South America. The interior of South America is dark.

Here's another image I found on that website. These are real photographs of the planets in our solar system, lined up in their true order, but the spacing is, of course, not true to the real distance that lies between each of them. This tiny blue sphere is earth, the only one out of eight planets--since we recently disowned poor Pluto out on the fringes--we are the only one to hold life, to be alive, which is us, of course. We are the earth alive.

Forty years from the beginning of space travel, in 1996, we finally discovered another planet. People were ecstatic! We knew there were other planets, but we hadn't developed the tools to detect them yet. In the eleven years of successful planet hunting since, we have found about 250 planets, forty of those in this last year. Just up the highway at Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff, actually a short walk up the hill from my kids' old apartment, an astronomer has found the biggest planet ever, so far. It's five

times the volume of Jupiter, but only four-fifths the mass, so if you had a bathtub big enough, the planet could float on the water.

These astronomers, and the earth-bound folk like me who love to read about their discoveries, are getting excited about worlds of gas, worlds of ice, worlds where humans would never dare to tread. The hope is that one day we will be able to detect a world that might hold life. They're looking in a section of space called the "Goldilocks zone," where they say the conditions are right for liquid water and so might hold a habitable planet. So far, no luck there. But in two years NASA plans to launch "the \$500 million planet-seeking Kepler mission," and the search for planets will become that much more successful. (p. 17, *Discover Magazine*, November 2007)

We not only want to know more about our universe, but we also want to know that we are not alone in this universe. When scientists got excited about the possibility of life on Mars, they weren't talking about intelligent life; they were talking about a micro-organism, a tiny, tiny thing, an indication of the very basics of life. Here on earth we are murdering higher order, intelligent beings in wars all over the planet, and destroying life every day, and these scientists are ecstatic about the possibility of one cell on Mars!

It takes stepping out of our mindsets about the value of life, any life, and seeing our global situation from a distance, like the astronauts seeing our world from space, to appreciate that we must cherish this fragile planet we call earth, we call home. Astronaut Loren Acton, said,

Looking outward to the blackness of space, sprinkled with the glory of a universe of lights, I saw majesty—but no welcome. Below was a welcoming planet. There, contained in the thin, moving, incredibly fragile shell of the biosphere is everything that is dear to you, all the human drama and comedy. That's where life is; that's where all the good stuff is.
(www.solarviews.com/eng/earthsp.htm)

I've sometimes wondered if we humans can even survive away from earth. We are the earth alive, and our apparently singular bodies are in fact living ecosystems in themselves, with millions of bacteria enabling us to operate. We are evolved in concert with light from the sun, the absence of which can affect us emotionally and psychologically, and our bodies need gravity, this particular gravity, to function properly as well. I read a list in *Discover* called "20 Things You Didn't Know about Living in Space." It listed all the weird ways astronaut's bodies have reacted to the absence of gravity, such as bones losing calcium, muscles atrophying, and the heart shrinking, and how hard it is to go without regular day/night experience. (p. 88)

I had a conversation with Celinda Marsh one day about the likelihood of finding another planet which could support life. Celinda was our campus ministry coordinator last year, and also was studying meteorites at the U of A. She said they believe there are probably thousands of planets in our galaxy which could support life. I said, but even if we found one and were actually able to travel there, wouldn't we be killed by the viruses and organisms of that planet? She said, not likely, because we would be a different biology, an incompatible biology having evolved as we did here in this particular ecosystem. So those viruses and bacteria, or whatever they would be called, wouldn't be able to kill us, but neither could we survive on the biology of that planet. If we were able

to travel to such a place, we would have to bring our own food because our bodies couldn't metabolize the organisms of a different evolution.

I'm not even going to go into the difficulties concepts of space travel present to us. The more we learn about the universe, the more our own little planet reveals itself as a diamond in a frightening expanse of chaos and creation which would as easily snuff us out as care a whit about us.

When you place our planet in the context of our universe, the term "Green Sanctuary" becomes a shocking reality. This planet is not one from which humanity must evolve away toward the stars. Maybe the science fiction of Asimov and Star Trek will someday be a reality, but maybe not. I have often thought that there is a reason we haven't been contacted by other beings in the universe. My theories are that either we are still too primitive and violent, and haven't developed enough respect for life in general for any alien species to risk contact, or that space travel is not possible, or that life that has evolved on a planet, any planet, is dependent upon that planet, interwoven with that planet in such a way that we can't leave it, physically, emotionally, or psychologically.

We are the earth alive, interwoven with our environment. Just think about the sounds of the birds in the morning, how they connect us with our homes, how integrated that sound is with our human sense of well-being. And that's just one tiny piece to ponder in the wonder of life on earth. I check the sky several times a day to see what the clouds are doing, what size and type and color they are and how they're moving, because they are part of my world and in the mystical sense, they are me.

We are not something separate from this earth and all its manifestations of creation and wonder. The prophecy of Chief Seattle has come true, that what we do to the web we do to ourselves. We are the earth alive, and we must take care of ourselves, in all the interconnected realities of our existence, not in this picture of the globe with boundaries and separations, but in this picture of the earth, one world, one biology, one immense and amazing expression of life, quite possibly unique in the entire universe, our only home.