

## Leave It Better Than You Found It 11-1-09

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

### Psalm 96

O sing to the LORD a new song;

    sing to the LORD, all the earth.

Sing to the LORD, bless God's name;

    proclaim God's salvation from day to day.

Declare God's glory among the nations,

    God's marvellous works among all the peoples.

For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;

    to be revered above all gods.

For all the gods of the peoples are idols,

    but the LORD made the heavens.

Honour and majesty are before the Lord;

    in whose sanctuary are strength and beauty.

Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples,

    ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.

Ascribe to the LORD the glory due that name;

    bring an offering, and come into God's courts.

Worship the LORD in holy splendour;

    tremble before God, all the earth.

Say among the nations, 'The LORD is king!

    The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved.

    God will judge the peoples with equity.'

Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;

    let the sea roar, and all that fills it;

    let the field exult, and everything in it.

Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy

    before the LORD; who is coming,

    to judge the earth.

The Lord will judge the world with righteousness,

    and the peoples with truth.

Have you heard the saying, "Leave it better than you found it?" I remember hearing that growing up. The idea is a great one, isn't it? And the consequences of adopting that philosophy are great... just as are the consequences of leaving it worse than you found it. I was reading a bit about where that phrase comes from. One source is scouting. From what I read, Scouting goes back a British Army officer, Robert Stephenson Smyth Baden-Powell at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While stationed in India, Baden-Powell wrote a small handbook called *Aids to Scouting*, which emphasized resourcefulness, adaptability, and the qualities of leadership that frontier conditions demanded. After Baden-Powell's death, a letter was found in his desk that he had written to all Scouts. It included this passage: "Try and leave this world a little better than you found it."

Before this founder of scouting wrote those words, the Iroquois, in the Great Law of their Confederacy, wrote that in "every deliberation, we must consider the impact on the seventh generation... even if it requires having skin as thick as the bark of a pine." Leave it

better than you found it... consider the impact on the seventh generation... that is in terms of our faith, what we call good stewardship.

Those who have lived close to the earth and to the impact ones actions have upon their environment tend to understand the importance of stewardship of creation and the earth's resources. For most of history we have understood, at least to some extent, that we impact for good or for ill, the environment in which we live. It is a modern notion that we can use all the resources we want and dump our waste where we cannot see it, and get rid of the bad by burying it or emitting it or dumping it into our waterways and somehow it would be okay. After all, it doesn't have an immediate impact on us. This dualistic thinking, unfortunately has been perpetuated even among religious people. People have used the *Genesis* material about humans having dominion over creation as an excuse to use and abuse creation and think it is okay, and that doing so has no negative effect on our faith or spirit or bodies, for that matter. That era is gone. And, of course, that

interpretation of scripture was not faithful. We were created by God, in the image of God to care for and to keep creation. We were created to be co-creators with God. We have a tremendous responsibility, for the sake of God's creation; for the sake of our children and our children's children; for the sake of the soul of humanity, to return to our proper relationship with the whole of creation. God gave us creation, of which we are not separate, but a part, as a gift for life and joy and health. But as with all gifts of God, it is both a great joy and responsibility. It is for us, but not just us; creation is God's gift to all of humanity throughout the generations. And if we are to be grateful for this gift; if we are to honor the giver of this tremendous gift, then we will take care to leave it better than we found it.

I remember a debate that was going on in the early days of the environmental movement. There were some who said, "We should not worship creation. We should worship God." The problem is, that is dualistic thinking that has gotten us into the mess we're in where we are leaving the earth far worse than we found it. The truth is, it is not

an either/or proposition. It is a both/and. We don't either worship creation or worship God. We worship God by honoring and caring for God's creation. Think about it. Children are a gift and a blessing. No one would accuse a parent of worshiping their child because they take great care to protect and keep their child safe and to promote the best, most healthy practices for the child and make appropriate sacrifices for the welfare of the child. Why would it be different with the gift and blessing of the earth and all creation; a gift from God dependent upon us for health and safety and well-being.

This fall, we have been focused on the statement that came out of conversations about who we are at First Christian Church. That statement contains these words, "We care about creation, especially harm to the environment. We are passionate about making our community and world a better place.... We are students of Jesus, who did not start a religion but launched a movement of extravagant love... [that] is not just for humans, but for all of creation. We are given the earth as a blessing, but that includes an imperative to take care of

creation so it can bless generations to come." The source of this care and concern for creation does not come from our politics, but rather from our spirituality. We care because we are grateful for the gift of creation - a gift from God. We care because we understand that we are connected to creation in a fundamental way and that God is not separate from creation, but rather in and through as well as beyond all creation that rises up in joy and praise of God, as the Psalmist proclaims.

We do want to leave this earth better than we found it. It is our job as stewards of the many blessings we have received from God. That's why we started the Earth 101 group that is evaluating the way we use our resources here at church. That's why we have taken some concrete steps to reduce the amount of energy we use by adding insulation and using mugs instead of paper or Styrofoam cups whenever possible and reducing the amount of paper and recycling or reusing the paper we do use and switching to non-toxic cleaners and encouraging public transportation and riding bicycles. Soon you'll hear about ways

that you, as individuals can take steps in your own homes to reduce your energy consumption. We have a long way to go to "leave it better than we found it," and some might say it is impossible. But we must do what we can as a way to rise up in joy and praise and honor of the creator of heaven and earth, and sing a new song - a song of connection and care for our children and our children's children as well as for creation itself.