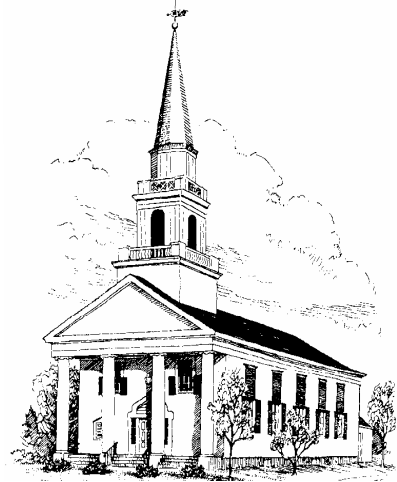


# Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

## Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from April 20, 2008  
Rev. Barbara J. Libby  
“God’s Spirit In Us”

Scriptures:  
Psalm 148  
John 14:15-21



**M**y deep reverence for the environment began for me as a child growing up in New Hampshire. I was raised in a family that loved being outdoors at all seasons. As a family we camped and hiked in the White Mountains of northern New Hampshire in the summer. We swam and learned to fly fish for native trout in the icy cold waters of Wild River, way up north in the mountains. We rough-camped along the dirt road that crossed through the White Mountains National Forest before it became known as the Kancamangus Highway. We found old logging trails to walk down in the fall of the year, always wearing our bright red-and-orange jackets so we wouldn’t get mistaken for deer during hunting season. We cross-country skied down those same woods in the winter months. We swam in the summer in the clear waters of Lake Winnepesaukee and then ice-skated there in the winter. We bird-watched and noticed trees and wildlife in the daylight. We went moose- and deer-watching at dusk.

I am glad to share that as a family we still sit and watch sunsets every night and star-gaze after dark on our vacation. I think that being raised in the outdoors and the natural world of New Hampshire filled me with a natural sense of awe and wonder. It certainly filled me with a lifelong appreciation for all of God’s creation. I know I’m not alone in that appreciation. Mystic is an amazing place for appreciating the wonders of God’s creation!

Those of us who have spent a lot of time here in New England seem to notice and relish the change of seasons, don’t we? The flow of the year as it moves from winter to spring to summer to fall and back around again—for many of us, that flow of the seasons here in New England runs as deep as our breathing in and breathing out.

It may seem as strange to you, as it does to me, that we still earmark a day each year that we designate as “Earth Day”. It strikes me as almost comical (if it weren’t so sad) that, in this environmentally conscious day and age, we should even pretend to “officially” focus on this amazing earth just one day a year.

I had to do a Google search of *Earth Day* to remind myself that it was officially established as a special day on April 22, 1970 to celebrate the importance of the environment and to encourage action. Wisconsin Senator Gaylord Nelson in 1970 started a “teach-in” to protest the government’s environmental ignorance. This eventually led to legislation including the Environmental Policy Act of 1969, the Clean Air Act of 1970, the Clean Water Act of 1977, and fuel efficiency standards for automobiles. So although I’d like to think that we have made some progress, I’m sure we can agree that there is still plenty of ignorance out there.

However, I don't believe that any one of us here in this sanctuary can claim ignorance of the need to pay attention to this earth's environment. I don't believe that one of us can claim to be simply an "observer" of the ongoing wounding that we human beings are continuing to inflict on God's creation.

Taking care of this earth, taking care of God's creation, taking care of the gift that God has given us, I believe can now be clearly seen as a faith issue. Being good stewards of this amazing space-ship earth is no longer a choice we make but, I believe, a matter of obvious obligation.

It doesn't take reminders from our native American brothers and sisters anymore that we are visitors and guests on Mother Earth. We now readily make the connection that one way we can honor and respect God is by caring for and sustaining the creation. Taking good care of this earth is another way of demonstrating how much we love God.

Jesus reminds us in our text for today that the Spirit of God lies within each of us. Even as Jesus prepared for his own death, he reminded his disciples that he would never leave them orphaned. Jesus was clear that there would always be a Comforter, a Holy Presence, that would be alive in each of us. Jesus trusted that each of us would take seriously that living Spirit within us and that we would each be empowered by God's Spirit within us as we faced into living on this earth. Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would live in us and would help us as believers. In a few weeks we will focus even more on the arrival of the Holy Spirit—on what we call the birthday of the church—at the event of Pentecost.

We all know about some of the biggest problems facing this planet, right? We know about coal-fired power plants, car and airplane exhaust, destruction of the rainforests, old and inadequate sewer treatment plants, global warming, melting ice floes, water pollution.

We also know that each of us can assume some of the blame as well. We leave a room and the lights remain on. The stereo or the Ipod oozes music even if we have left the room. In the winter we fail to weather-strip or caulk the leaky windows well enough and our furnaces run on a little longer. We forget and, yes, we must confess our forgetting.

We let the water run in the bathroom sink as we brush our teeth. We let the first cold water run in the morning until it's warm cause it causes the arthritis in our hands to ache. We forget to capture that water and use it to water our house plants. We forget and, yes, we must confess our forgetting.

We stop in traffic for the bridge to go up every hour starting May 1<sup>st</sup> and we let the car idle. The air gets a bit more polluted, not to mention the expensive gas that gets wasted. We forget and, yes, we must confess our forgetting.

We've heard about those funny-looking compact fluorescent bulbs but we decide they don't look as nice and maybe we aren't willing to put out the extra money even though we know that, in the long run, we will save money because they use less electricity. We forget to put them on the shopping list and, yes, we must confess our forgetting...

So we confess. Yet we know confession is not enough. We know about the next step which is repentance. Repentance begins with simply saying, "I am sorry!" and then being willing to take some action. As we fail to or forget to take care of God's creation we dishonor ourselves and the God whose Spirit resides in us.

"I'm sorry" means acknowledging our own part in the wounding of creation—leaving those

lights on, leaving the car engine running, letting good water run down the drain, not buying eco-friendly cleaning products, etc. etc. We are sorry. We are sorry not only for wasting but we are sorry that we use more than our share of the world's power and energy and water. Yes, we are sorry for mis-using & abusing the creation entrusted to me by a loving God.

So, guess what? Confession and "I am sorry" are a good start and they are still not enough! So we turn off those water faucets, buy foods locally grown and lower on the food chain. We may lower our thermostat in the winter and raise the AC in the summer. We may consider installing solar panels or eco-friendly flooring, or stop buying water bottles and increase our recycling efforts. We may support the environmental agencies that we know are taking public actions and putting pressure at the state and national level for higher standards and better care for this or that.

And yes, there is probably still more we can do. As people of faith, as people who follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, we carry in us the gift of the Holy Spirit. We cannot afford to lose heart or lose hope. We carry in us the Spirit of life at work in us. It is up to each of us to take seriously the dangers to planet earth that we face. It is up to each of us to take a lead in caring for and sustaining this earth that is our home, a home on loan to us by God.

I like what John B. Cobb, Jr., from his book *Is It Too Late?* suggests here about the power of that spirit of life in each of us:

*It is the belief in this Spirit, the giver of life and love, that is the basis of hope. In spite of all the destructive forces we let loose against life on this planet, the Spirit of life is at work in ever new and unforeseeable ways, countering and circumventing the obstacles we put in its path. In spite of my strong tendencies to complacency and despair, I experience the Spirit in myself as calling forth the realistic hope apart from which there is no hope, and I am confident that what I find in myself is occurring in others also.*

*Since what makes for life and love and hope is not simply the decision of one individual or another, but a Spirit that moves us all, I do not have to suppose that my own efforts are of great consequence in order to believe them to be worthwhile. I can recognize that they may even be futile or misdirected and still persist in them as long as no clearer light is given, for I see what I do as part of something much greater, something in which all persons participate to whatever extent they sensitively respond to the insights and opportunities that come their way.*

*Belief in the Spirit is belief that I am not alone, that in working for life and love in hope, I am working with something much greater than myself, that there are possibilities for the future that cannot be simply projected out of the past, that even my mistakes and failures may be woven into a healing pattern of which I am not now aware. Belief in the Spirit is no ground for complacency. There is no guarantee that people will respond to the Spirit's prompting in sufficient numbers and with sufficient sensitivity to begin the healing of the planet. But there is the possibility. The future can be different from the past. Therefore there is hope. Where there is life, there is hope.*

Hear these hopeful words of the poet Mary Oliver who writes in her poem, adapted, called *Wild Geese*:

*You do not have to be good.  
You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.  
You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.  
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,*

*The world offers itself to your imagination,  
Calls to you like wild geese, harsh and exciting—over and over,  
Announcing your place in the family of things.  
Go forth knowing your place,  
Answering the call, and  
Loving the earth.*

Amen.