

## Psalm 24

**Reverence**

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The Congregational Church of Needham

A few days before the first Blizzard barreled down on us, I realized that 5 Canada geese were frequenting our yard. We have a big field next to our house, and I have seen geese over there, but this was the first time they were in our yard. I know that people don't like these animals in their yards or golf courses because they are messy.

Curiosity got the better of me and I started watching them whenever I was able. One goose was clearly not fit enough to go about daily goose business. And it seemed that the other four geese kept watch over their sick friend. When the blizzard hit, they were still in the yard, four of them sleeping, one of them watching over the flock. Blizzard # 1 created funny drifts, so half of our yard remained uncovered and continued to provide food for the geese. They stayed put, but at the same time started to take practice flights over the house and field. I now know how messy they are. The yard looked pretty gross but I am hoping that all that fertilizing will help the lawn come spring.

They sat through the second snow storm - the one that was totally underreported and dumped close to two feet of snow on us. Same thing happened. One goose always kept watch while the others slept. The next day was a beautifully sunny day, and I noticed a huge flock of geese on the field. I was hoping that they would not come over as well to be with their friends, and they did not. What I believe happened is that our five geese joined the bigger group and took off.

Watching these geese has been quite moving, and a little bit of a spiritual moment for me. Just watching them watching over their sick friend through two bad storm was touching and awe-inspiring. (I did a little research on Canadian Geese, and they are truly magnificent animals!) Moments like that make me appreciate the amazing world we live in, created and gifted to us by a gracious God. Moments like that also make me worry what we have done with and to this great gift.

Last weekend, the national organization “Interfaith Power and Light” called on religious organizations to participate in a nation-wide Preach-In on Climate Change. When our own Environmental Ministry Team alerted me to this event, I offered to join and do my part in the Preach-In. It also fits in with our sermon theme of God. But you can be the judge of that at the end of the sermon.

Addressing Climate Change in this short time frame seems like an impossible task. So I want to start off with a somewhat radical statement: I believe we know what we have to do to slow down the negative effects of climate change. It is not a secret. First of all, we know that we have to do something. We also know that all our personal choices matter when it comes to taking care of our environment. And we know that we are all connected, interdependent, and that my choices affect my neighbor, be it in Scituate or Needham or sub-Saharan Africa.

In order for us all – the whole world – to effectively slow down the change of our climate, we need to address global warming which is caused by heat trapping emissions we are all putting into the atmosphere. The good news is that there are very many practical solutions that could accomplish that, and each one of us can make a difference by lowering our own personal carbon footprint.

We can accomplish this by (top 10 list) driving more fuel-efficient cars, by making our houses more airtight (insulation, new windows), installing programmable thermostats, LED light bulbs, energy-efficient appliances, making better choices in what we eat and chose where our food comes from, washing clothes in cold water (our detergents get them as clean), and buying less stuff - reduce, reuse, and recycle.

Of course the issue needs to be addressed worldwide and action should be demanded by elected leaders to support and implement a comprehensive set of climate solutions such as exploring renewable energy in order to become less dependent on coal and fossil fuels, reducing oil use particularly here in the US, placing limits on the amount of carbon that polluters are allowed to emit, building a clean energy economy, and reducing tropical deforestations.

We know, we have the science of what needs to be done to slow down global warming that causes climate change. So I pose the question: Why aren't we doing it or doing more of it?

Why aren't we all – individuals, elected leaders, and whole governments behind it with body, heart, and soul, making the fight against Global Warming a personal, national, and global priority?

We could answer that question by simply saying that the issue is too big and believing that little me cannot do anything about this. Or maybe we think it is too costly. Maybe we are too greedy, not wanting to invest of our personal wealth. Maybe we are too self-absorbed to think of the rest of the world. See, we are comfortable, and when one is comfortable, it is very hard to make effective changes. These are just a few of the practical reasons that hold us back from seeking lasting and effective solutions in the fight against Global Warming.

I believe that there is a spiritual dimension as well that holds too many of us back in making positive changes. I believe that maybe we, humankind, have lost our sense of **Reverence** – for the world we live in, for trees, and animals, and human beings near and far. We have lost our sense of what a great and precious gifts we have been given by our Creator God in this world.

What do I mean by Reverence? Now there are all kinds of definitions out there about reverence. This is the best description I came across: Reverence is the way of radical respect. It recognizes and honors the presence of the sacred in everything – our bodies, other people, animals, plants, rocks, the earth, the waters, and even messy Canada Geese.

Nothing is too trivial or second class for reverence. And it has to be demonstrated with concrete actions. It is not good enough to just talk about it. If you have reverence for your body then don't abuse your body – eat right, exercise, get enough rest. If you have reverence for the earth, then don't abuse the earth by being wasteful of its gifts. Protect the environment for your neighbors and future generations. If you have reverence for our Creator God, then practice your reverence through prayer and worship, hospitality and kindness. Make God's will for your life your path.

Reverence is a kind of radical amazement, a deep feeling tinged with both mystery and wonder.

But looking at the world we live in, reverence is very far out of mainstream and has been replaced with irreverence. Nothing seems holy anymore! Life marches on at a fast pace, and we are busy keeping up and getting the most out of it. See, when we are at the center of the world, there is no room for reverence.

And yet, we cannot live well without reverence I believe. It is one of the essential virtues all human being must learn if they want to live a life of wisdom. Reverence belongs on the list of important spiritual practices right beside prayer, rest, worship, generosity, friendship, service, or bible reading for that matter. We all need reverence in our lives because it is the virtue that keeps us from trying to act like gods.

Barbara Taylor Brown in her book *An Altar for a World* writes that “Reverence is the recognition of something greater than the self- something that is beyond human creation or control that transcends human understanding.” God fits that bill for sure, but so do all kinds of other things that are holy and sacred: birth, death, nature, truth, justice, wisdom, love, and earth.

Whoever wrote Psalm 24 knew about reverence, knew that we humans don't own this earth. All of it belongs to God, and we are trustees, stewards, not the owners. “The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; for God has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers.”

It is not ours to do with as we please. The ancient story in Genesis about the creation of the world and human beings says that we were given dominion over the earth. We do have such power. But we have too often taken this to mean that we can use it anyway we like. That ancient story tells us that this power was meant to be used to take care of the earth. The earth is a gift, a wondrous garden, and we are the gardeners. That means we are to love creation and do all in our power to take care of it, to be kind to it, too.

Having reverence means standing in awe of something – something that shrinks the self, which allows human beings to sense the full extent of our limits – so that we can begin to see one another more reverently as well. If we can't see things that are up the food chain from us with reverence then

there's no way we'll be able to treat things down the food chain from us with reverence. As people of faith, if we don't view God with reverence and what God has done for us already, chances are we won't view our neighbor or this earth with reverence.

Reverence has a lot to do with our self-perception: if we believe we are the center of planet, we'll live as though we are. If we believe we are a consumer, we'll consume anything and everything. If we have talked ourselves into believing that there is little we can do about climate change, it will dictate how we engage with the world.

Reverence I believe is the glue that keeps us connected – to God, to our neighbors near and far, to this precious earth. How do we get reverence back into our lives?

Paul Woodruff in his book *Reverence, Renewing a Forgotten Virtue* says: "Reverence begins in a deep understanding of human limitations; from this grows the capacity to be in awe of whatever we believe lies outside our control – God, truth, justice, nature, even death. The capacity for awe, as it grows, brings with it the capacity for respecting fellow human beings, flaws and all."

Reverence will come back into our lives when we approach this world with an open heart and when we are able to recognize the little moments that are awe-inspired – like the geese in my back yard. Reverence will come back when we see in our fellow humans the image of God, even in the neighbor we cannot stand; when we realize that all of creation – each leaf, and bug, each snowflake, the food we eat, are a gift to us from an amazingly generous God.

Reverence will come back when we are able to say: "Thank you God, for this earth and everything in it, for the mountains and seas, for they belong to you, o Lord!" and then, act accordingly. Amen.

Sources:

Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*

Paul Woodruff, *Reverence, Renewing a forgotten Virtue*