

## **Reclaiming Eden**

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### **Synopsis:**

Our inability to live sustainably has brought us to an existential confrontation with the question of the type of natural world we want to inhabit. How do we humans address the mistakes of our past to create a future wherein we maintain a balance with the interdependent web of life of which we are all a part? Join us as we explore the impact of our legacy of neglect, and how we can apply faith to forge a new legacy for ourselves and future generations to follow.

### **Order of Service Quote:**

"The human race is challenged more than ever before to demonstrate our mastery, not over nature but of ourselves." — Rachel Carson

**Prelude:** "*World Falls*", by The Indigo Girls

### **Call to Worship/Opening Words:**

"We travel together, passengers on a little spaceship, dependent upon its vulnerable reserves of air and soil, all committed for our safety to its security and peace; preserved from annihilation only by the care, the work, and, I will say, the love we give our fragile craft. We cannot maintain it half fortunate, half miserable, half confident, half despairing, half slave to the ancient enemies of man, half free in a liberation of resources undreamed of until this day. No craft, no crew can travel safely with such vast contradictions. On their resolution depends the survival of us all." - Adlai Stevenson, *US Ambassador to the United Nations*, 1964

**Opening Hymn:** *On the Dusty Earth*, Pg 1071

### **Chalice Lighting & Candles of Sharing**

**Story for all Ages:** *Common Ground*, by Molly Bang

### **Reading:**

"If we have been slow to develop the general concepts of ecology and conservation, we have been even more tardy in recognizing the facts of the ecology and conservation of man himself. We may hope that this will be the next major phase in the development of biology. Here and there awareness is growing that man, far from being the overlord of all creation, is himself part of nature, subject to the same cosmic forces that control all other life. Man's future welfare and probably even his survival depend upon his learning to live in harmony, rather than in combat, with these forces...." – Rachel Carson, *Essay on the Biological Sciences*, in: *Good Reading* (1958)"

**Offertory, Hymn of Gratitude:** "*This Could Be Our Day*", by Addison Road

### **Sermon:**

Fellow members and honored guests: what does "home" mean to you? (Poll audience.) We like to think of this community as a home for the religious spirit, but what makes it a home? To me home is a place with a spirit can feel at ease, emboldened by faith, galvanized by courage, and nurtured by fellow spirits in this journey across the universe. A home requires more than a building but the collective commitment of all who share it. This definition is similar to that the literal home each of us dwells in. No house can be a home unto itself. More than simple structure and foundation, home is where the individual can truly feel at peace, knowing their bare necessities of food, water, shelter, security, purpose, and social connection are perpetually readily available. But even a private residence requires far more than

just the continuous upkeep of its immediate inhabitants. Naturally it requires the essential utilities of food, water, electricity, sanitation, and the like to function. Spiritually it also requires the perpetual commitment of the surrounding community to nurture and provide the inhabitants the opportunity to integrate and find their purpose in their life's journey, as well as the knowledge on how to sustain the home for future generations.

Taking a broader view, we remember how fortunate we Americans are to call our country home. In a time when 780 million people lack access to clean potable water, 35% lack access to clean sanitation, and 12% suffer from malnutrition, our very birth in this era and place, giving us the inherent right to call this country home cannot be taken for granted.

Taking an even broader view, we realize how fortunate our very human existence is in this vast and nurturing abyss. Amongst the countless planets surrounding the hundreds of billions of stars in just one of hundreds of thousands of known galaxies, ours alone is the only one known to currently host life. How else can you describe our very existence, let alone the vast abundance and diversity of life on this precious geoid we call home, than a miracle?

Today we see how precious the concept of home is. As political or alarmist I may sound, today I am compelled to speak to you, my fellow inhabitants of this home, not as a scientist, an environmentalist, an American, or even as a Unitarian Universalist, but as a single member of a species concerned for its survival. The UN reported this year that over 70 million people are currently displaced as refugees, the largest number since World War II, without a permanent place to call home or certain future to hope for. Already this crisis is impacting much of eastern Europe and north Africa, fueling a rise in both anti-immigrant rhetoric and unabashed nationalism, all under the guise of protecting a personalized concept of "home". Right here in America, thousands have appeared at our own Southern border unable to return to a place no longer safe or habitable. And similarly, we justify separating immigrant families and housing them in squalid conditions as necessary for the protection of our home nation. But perhaps even more disturbing is the future world this current crisis predicates.

At dawn of humanity, our species inhabited what could hardly be called a biblical Eden, the metaphorical paradise we were exiled from because of our hunger for knowledge. Rather, we eked out survival by devoting much of our daily efforts just to find food, shelter, and community, all while slowly engineering the foundations of technology that would improve and prolong our lives and eventually give us the modern standards of our civilization today. But the further we moved away from our natural home of Eden, the greater the toll we took on it.

As clichéd as it sounds, for good reason, we now face an unprecedented threat to our home, not from some foreign power or migrant surge, but centuries of actions we have all taken in our collective pursuit of modernizing our lives. With unprecedented levels of carbon in our atmosphere, plastics in our oceans, toxins in our food and water supplies, deforestation of biodiversity centers, and animal species being wiped out, we now risk permanently shifting the natural evolutionary course of our home planet. Perhaps the most striking aspect of this shift is not so much the magnitude but the speed at which it has accumulated. In just the past 500 years we have altered the very life support systems of this home planet more disastrously than the last 65 million all to maintain the artificial standard of the new anthropomorphic Eden we've created for ourselves.

These current standards of convenience have come at unavoidable costs to the larger home that we seemingly have forgotten about, as though a more localized concept of home is somehow exclusive from the global definition of it. But no home can exist in isolation as we all take a toll on our planet's resources to survive; any home will crumble without the bare necessities, leaving its former inhabitants to either perish or adapt. In trying to build our current utopian home without balancing the greater home we sacrifice the future world. Humanity wasn't exiled from Eden; we simply tried to conquer it.

Nationally, we Americans gradually face a new refugee crisis: that of our own citizens. Already in Alaska's Aleutian Islands, Louisiana's gulf coast, and Tangier's island here in the Chesapeake bay, families are threatened by rising sea levels, and being forced to abandon their homes with no prospect of returning, one of numerous effects of climate change. Elsewhere on our southern and eastern coastlines citizens face the risk of more devastating hurricanes and tropical storms. Throughout the western U.S. citizens face the devastation of more frequent and rampant forest fires every year. Even throughout the heartland breadbasket of our nation, more intense and longer drought seasons threaten our very food supplies. Now the UN, our own national research institutions, and the Department of Defense have concluded these effects will only intensify with time, not over the course of the next century, but the next few decades. The question is no longer if, but when and how much? When these American refugees move to safer land, how will we meet them?

Most unnerving about this crisis is its ubiquitous source. The numerous threats to our home from climate change, plastic pollution, and countless toxins contaminating our hydrosphere were not caused by a single corporate

entity, the policies of elected officials, or even the indifference of those who continue to deny that such threats even exist or are human caused, but the collective actions and inactions of billions of humans worldwide for the past 3 centuries. Every ounce of fossil fuels burned, every pound of refrigerant released, every pound of meat consumed, every ounce of food wasted, and every piece of plastic waste discarded perpetually contributes to this global threat. Worse, because of the ubiquitous responsibility, the situation has reached such an epic proportion that it seems we cannot motivate anyone to take action without instilling a sense of shameful conviction, a sentiment antithetical to what I especially as a Unitarian Universalist believe.

Although one could easily attribute the bulk of this source to fully developed nations like the U.S., which alone as only 5% of the world's population consumes  $\frac{1}{3}$  of its resources and generates  $\frac{1}{2}$  of its waste, such trends of wanton consumerism are already emerging in third world nations across Africa and southeast Asia, amplified by growing populations and living standards. But if every human lived like the average American, how many Earthlike planets would we require to sustain us (Poll Audience)? Three to five. How do we humans even begin to address a threat that is apparently an unavoidable cost of our very nature?

The irony that our own pursuit of a modern Eden seemingly must come at the sacrifice of the natural Eden we inhabit is only matched by the irony of our perception of its prior inhabitants. We perceive species that required an anthropomorphic or cataclysmic climate change to face extinction as inferior to our own that wholeheartedly seems to orchestrate its own demise. Even today of the countless species that currently inhabit this fragile world, we consider our own, the only species seemingly incapable of preserving its own livelihood, as the only form of intelligent life inhabiting it.

I must clarify my aversion to depicting any future apocalyptic scenario that forecasts the end of our planetary home. From a scientific standpoint, we know that in spite of whatever environmental impacts Earth suffers from our relatively brief time on it, the planet itself will ultimately survive, just as it has through 7 mass extinctions prior to humans. However many millennia it takes, its climate will eventually return to a more balanced state, its natural resources will replenish, and its surviving inhabitants will evolve and adapt to once again thrive in harmony with that new Eden. But how long will we humans survive this shift from our own impact? For countless generations we have squandered future savings for the quality of the present, crumbled in panic at the announcement of short-term immediate threats, and blissfully ignored or disregarded the long-term costs of immediate brief gratification. How will we miraculously adapt to the current consequences of and dramatically shift our seemingly natural avarice to living in balanced harmony with our home? If we cannot even survive our own impact, inevitably we must face the existential question: are we humans worthy of inheriting this home?

As a Unitarian Universalist, my respect for the interconnected web of life of which we are all a part forbids me from discounting the inherent worth of any form of life, including my own species, but my scientific prerogative cannot ignore the self-destructive amalgams of our own behavior. Now we stand at a crossroads, not between current and future environments but how much time and the quality of which we want to invest in each. Even if we can delay extinction for a paltry number of generations, what kind of home would we be bequeathing them? As much faith as we invest in our ability to adapt to the most dire circumstances, what new standards will our future generations be willing to accept? A home plagued by extreme weather, sporadically available food supplies, polluted air and water, and constant global migration just to survive? And regardless of how much we adapt, how long will we endure? A thousand more years, ten thousand, or a million? In the cosmic story of this 4.5 billion year old planet, what possible meaningful narrative can our own feeble species have as we struggle to rewrite our own?

Consider however, the story we write not just for ourselves, but this future home. Countless species have thrived on Earth for millions of years longer than ours, and their history has awakened us to the wonders of our home and augmented our appreciation of it. Every being on this planet that has gone extinct passively laid the foundation for the next species to advance and adapt to our changing home in the eternal harmonious cycle of life. What if we could influence whatever species follows us, whether through our natural evolutionary path or legacy of decisive sustainability? Just as the neglectful actions of prior human generations have lead us to this crisis, so too can our current generation devote ourselves to a habit of conscious sustainability that integrates not only our current global population but every generation that follows. Our species has the unique gift of predicting the future for a reason. No matter how apocalyptic our future home may appear, our very awareness of it has enabled us to begin the steps to prepare for it. Remember that the original Greek word for "apocalypse", or "apocalypsis", doesn't mean the end of the

world, but the revealing of it. How can we describe the natural evolution and resilience of life itself as anything other than divine?

And just as every daily action can detract from our future home, it can just as easily protect and replenish it. Every watt of electricity or ounce of fossil fuel we save, every drop of water we conserve, every piece of trash we recycle, and every sustainable food choice we make has a ripple effect on both ourselves and our greater community, as we fundamentally shift the habitual nature of our species in our own cognitive evolutionary adaption to our perpetually changing home. Any financial advisor stresses the importance of investing in real estate, and what real estate could be more important than a home for the next generation, or evolutionary stage? Paradoxically, acknowledging the temporal nature of our species can incentivize us to take action to shift the course of our history. This desire to defy our own perception of inevitable doom and devote our limited time to combat it will come not from just our action or faith but the harmonious dance between the two.

Compare this to the microcosm of our own limited personal existence. Each of us is mortal, and our own time on this planet is dwarfed by that of our species, let alone the larger biosphere of all Earth's occupants. We can delay death as best as we act through diet, exercise, and social involvement, but ultimately we must pay the biological price demanded upon every living thing. Does this inevitable fate justify anything less than the vigorous tenacity to protect and prolong both our own and each other's lives and the home that sustains them? Even if we were suddenly diagnosed with some fatal disease caused by our own past mistakes, would we not still want to be remembered more for how we applied our life rather than the toll it took on us? Moreover, does not every action we take to improve our health and home help facilitate that same instinctive habit in the following generation, whether related by blood, spirit, shared vision, or evolution? Is this not the very definition of survival?

Going further, what if we also broadened our perspective of community? If a family member was a refugee fleeing their homeland and criminalized by the country they sought asylum in, who here would try to help them? (Poll audience.) What if they were a non-immediate family member? Or neighbor? Or merely a member of the same town, state, or country? At what point do we allow the contrived distances of nationality sever the inherent bonds of humanity? In a world with ever-dwindling resources and time to sustain us all pushes us closer together, we cannot let the arbitrary circumstances of birthplace tear us apart.

If you retain one message from me today, remember this: We can live in harmony with our home. We have the technology for clean renewable sources to sustain all our energy needs, prevent our projected greenhouse gas emissions, begin reclaiming the vast amounts of waste polluting our waterways, and provide fresh food and water for all 9 billion people projected to occupy this planet by 2050. And even when our story ends it can tell whatever fantastic species follows us we were worthy of inhabiting this home, and how they can be as well. What we need is the will to act on our principles to save our species and our home, and the faith that every action we take towards a sustainable future will guide that shift in our evolutionary legacy. We can no longer neglect the inherent worth, dignity, and livelihood of our future generations any more than we can that of migrant refugees in our current one; indeed, as we all occupy this planetary home, we all share its future and the inherent right to inhabit it as we cowrite its story together. To me this is the real Eden: finding that balance between fulfilling present and future necessities, for both ourselves and the other members of the interconnected web of life on this precious geoid we all call home. No longer will we be the conquerors of Eden but stewards of it, in a synergistic rhythm that enables us to thrive congruently with our home rather than against it. And no matter how dire the circumstances of our perceived future home or how long our species can last, the sheer possibility that we can fundamentally contribute towards a sustainable Eden for whoever inhabits it next warrants our ongoing commitment.

Whether in nature or faith, science or spirituality, there is no manifest destiny except the one we craft each moment. Regardless of our past neglect or future conditions, so long as we draw breath in this world, we can prove our worth in occupying it. Just as every living thing is a divine expression of God interacting with this universe, so too are all part of that natural Eden that we can find and preserve here and now. And our story is not over yet. Amen. Shalom. Alhamdulillah. Namaste. Blessed be.

**Closing Hymn:** *Rising Green*, #1068

### **Benediction**

I implore you all, for your faith, for your neighbors, for your home, and for yourself: go out and help write the story of the new Eden, and help us all make it a home. Thank you.

**Postlude:** "*Do or Die*", by 30 Seconds to Mars

### **Sources**

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