



First Congregational Church of Anoka United Church of Christ

An Open and Affirming Congregation

January 15, 2023 ♦ 2nd Sunday after Epiphany



This bulletin is designed to assist you as you watch our livestreamed worship service, whether you follow along live or view it at a later time.

The stream can be found on our YouTube channel at this location:

<https://www.youtube.com/@AnokaUCC>

Welcome & Announcements

If you are a guest with us today, welcome! If you are comfortable sharing your information with us, there are cards in the pew holders that you can use for that purpose (place them in the offering plate).

If you would like to join our mailing list, email office@uccanoka.org and ask to be added.

Prelude

Koki Sato

The Church Bell Rings

* Opening Hymn

“We Are Not Our Own” #564 (vv 1-2, 4, 6)

Hymnal use recommended!

**We are not our own. Earth forms us, human leaves on nature’s growing vine,
fruit of many generations, seeds of life divine.**

**We are not alone. Earth names us: past and present, peoples near and far,
family and friends and strangers show us who we are.**

**Therefore let us make thanksgiving, and with justice, willing and aware,
give to earth, and all things living, liturgies of care.**

**Let us be a house of welcome, living stone upholding living stone,
gladly showing all our neighbors we are not our own!**

* Call to Worship and Opening Prayer (drawing from Psalm 36)

One: Holy One, throughout the very heavens is your faithful love;

Many: your faithfulness extends beyond the clouds.

One: Your righteousness is like the eternal mountains,

Many: your judgments are like the mighty deep.

One: You save humankind and animalkind alike, Faithful One.

Many: You hold all of creation equally in your steadfast love!

One: Let us pray.

Many: How precious is your faithful love, O God. All created things take shelter in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light. Extend your steadfast love to those who know you, and your justice to all of creation! In the name of Love we pray; amen.

Special Music

“Reload”

Cole Marshall

*My tale is waiting to be told / I hope for life to still unfold
I wish there was a hand that I could hold / That way I could gain some control
I don't want to have to sell my soul / To talk to all the folks I know
How hard can it be to say hello? / I hope I will die before before I'm old
After a while it's hard to reload / Sometimes I feel like I am a clone
How long before my mind will decompose? / I am patiently waiting in the road
My tale is waiting to be told / I hope for life to still unfold*

A Time for Children (10:30)

*ADVISORY: The livestream of the service continues during the Children's Time;
if your child sits facing the Pastor their face shouldn't appear on camera.*

Prayer of Preparation

“Send Out Your Light”

John Bell

Send out your light, Lord, send your truth to be my guide.

Then let them lead me to the place where you re-side.

*(10:30) Children ages 3 and up may depart at this time for Sunday school.
Activity bags are available in the back of the sanctuary for those who might enjoy them.*

When the LORD has given you rest from your pain and turmoil and the hard service with which you were made to serve, ⁴ you will take up this taunt against the king of Babylon: How the oppressor has ceased! How his insolence has ceased! ⁵ The LORD has broken the staff of the wicked, the scepter of rulers, ⁶ that struck down the peoples in wrath with unceasing blows, that ruled the nations in anger with unrelenting persecution. ⁷ The whole earth is at rest and quiet; they break forth into singing. ⁸ The cypresses exult over you, the cedars of Lebanon, saying, **"Since you were laid low, no one comes to cut us down."**

¹³ You said in your heart, "I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit on the mount of assembly on the heights of Zaphon; ¹⁴ I will ascend to the tops of the clouds, I will make myself like the Most High." ¹⁵ But you are brought down to Sheol, to the depths of the Pit. ¹⁶ Those who see you will stare at you, and ponder over you: "Is this the man who made the earth tremble, who shook kingdoms, ¹⁷ who made the world like a desert and overthrew its cities, who would not let his prisoners go home?"

One: Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Many: Thanks be to God.

Sermon

Rev. Chris McArdle

Hymn

"Touch the Earth Lightly" #569

Hymnal use recommended!

**Touch the earth lightly, use the earth gently, nourish the life of the world in our care:
gift of great wonder, ours to surrender, trust for the children tomorrow will bear.**

**We who endanger, who create hunger, agents of death for all creatures that live,
we who would foster clouds of disaster—God of our planet, forestall and forgive!**

**Let there be greening, birth from the burning, water that blesses, and air that is sweet,
health in God's garden, hope in God's children, regeneration that peace will complete.**

**God of all living, God of all loving, God of the seedling, the snow, and the sun,
teach us, deflect us, Christ reconnect us, using us gently, and making us one.**

Prayers of the People

If you wish to share a prayer with the congregation (joy, concern, hope, worry, or anything at all), raise your hand and a Deacon will bring you a microphone. Offer your prayer and finish by saying, "God in your love" to which we will all respond, "**Hear our prayer.**"

Sung Prayer



Hear our prayer, O God, hear our prayer, O God; in -
cline your ear to us, and grant us your peace.

Prayer of Our Savior (unison)

The Prayer has many versions; pray whichever you desire (debts, sins, trespasses, etc.). We affirm that God has many names, so use one of the suggested or another of your choosing.

Our Father/Mother/Creator, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Offering

Text-to-Give: [844-334-1477](tel:844-334-1477)

Thank you for your gifts to our ministries!

If you are watching from home (live or later), please consider adding to the Offering by sending your gifts by mail, text, or online (uccanoka.org/donate).

Offertory

Koki Sato

* Doxology

NUN DANKET

"Now Thank We All Our God" #419 v. 3

**All praise and thanks to God our Maker now be given,
to Christ, and Spirit, too, our help in highest heaven.
The one, eternal God, whom earth and heaven adore,
for thus it was, is now, and shall be evermore!**

* Benediction

* Congregational Blessing “God Be With You” (#809) Dorsey/Hutchins

**God be with you. God be with you. God be with you ‘til we meet again.
O God be with you. God be with you. God be with you ‘til we meet again.**

Postlude

Koki Sato

*You may be seated as you listen to the Postlude. If you choose to depart at this time,
please speak gently as you exit out of respect for those who choose to listen.*

Acknowledgements

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Sermon Text

If I’m being completely honest, James Cameron’s mammoth movie *Avatar* isn’t my favorite film by a longshot, and sometimes I wonder how it managed to become the world’s highest-grossing film ever with a total box office of nearly \$3 billion. The plot is pretty straightforward and unimaginative. It’s almost a beat-for-beat retelling of *Dances with Wolves*, right on down to the agonizing trope of the white, male savior who rescues an indigenous tribe of noble savages. On the other hand, it IS a beautiful movie visually. Cameron made incredible strides with computer generated imagery, and his worldbuilding for the Na’vi society and Pandora, the moon on which they live, is gorgeous. My hope is that the massive box office haul is related to that and not the other less palatable aspects of the film.

Despite my misgivings, there is one thing about *Avatar* that I think James Cameron really did well and right—the idea that Pandora itself was not just alive, but aware (albeit through the plot device of a deity). The Na’vi are able to psychically link with the creatures of the planet and with the planet itself, creating a social, emotional, and ecological community in which each person recognizes that Pandora itself is not just their home, but their neighbor. Their family. Their beloved companion along the Way.

Oh, that we had such a relationship with our own home!

I’m not aware of anyone claiming that Earth possesses a sentience of its own, but we see evidence of such collective consciousness in smaller ways throughout our world. Have you ever beheld the wondrous undulations of a massive flock of starlings in flight, where the horde of birds seems to move almost with a single mind? Schools of fish swim in very much the same way. There’s a colony of honey fungus in eastern Oregon, functionally a single organism that covers 2,200 acres, and it is estimated to be 2,400 years old. In recent decades, scientists have determined that forests possess a kind of communal awareness that is facilitated by a mycelial network—that is, a swarm of fungal creatures—that inhabits the forest’s root system and passes messages throughout the area. There’s a flowering sea-plant in Shark Bay, Australia, that is approximately 112 miles long, covering 77 square miles. A similar plant in the Mediterranean may be as old as 100,000 years.

It's wondrous to me that ancient authors of Scripture imagined or even sensed that the Earth is more than just the third rock from the Sun, but rather something that has its own agency. We're reminded somewhat of this in the Flood story, when God makes a covenant with not just Noah, but with the entire earth, to never again destroy the world with the waters of a flood. The Hebrew word for "world" here is *ha'eret*, quite literally the ground upon which we walk. I don't believe this is a metaphor!

In Psalm 36 which informed today's Call to Worship and Opening Prayer, we get a bit of that same flavor when the Psalmist affirms that God saves not just humankind, but animalkind as well in a tacit affirmation that in the eyes of God, humanity is not the sole recipient of God's lovingkindness, but just part of the whole of beloved Creation.

And then, in one of my favorite passages in all of Scripture—Isaiah 14—we get this provocative hymn of celebration, unusually replete with an abiding sense of *schadenfreude*, that feeling of joy at the downfall of another, when an arrogant ruler is brought low. Reputable scholars will admit that there's no particular ruler toward which this passage was directed. It's too broad for that, too general. Instead, the author is commenting upon the altogether human tendency to grasp at power and elevate ourselves beyond our neighbors, even to the point of claiming the power to decide life or death for all others. This is a hymn about the fall of a dictator, of an authoritarian, of an abusive monarch who pillages the world for his own gain. When that ruler finally meets his end, the whole earth breaks out into singing. "The cypresses exult over you, the cedars of Lebanon, saying, 'Since you were laid low, no one comes to cut us down.'" The author gives voice to all the living creatures of the earth with a special place for the plants, casting them as the sorrowful victims of the ruler's cruel hunger. The cedars of Lebanon in particular are poignant in their cry, for they are a symbol of unfettered royal wealth, inasmuch as they are the building materials of royal buildings and monuments, including Solomon's. If you want to get a contemporary sense of what this really means, imagine someone like Jeff Bezos or Elon Musk buying the Sequoia National Forest and cutting down those great trees in order to build a mansion. That's what Isaiah's evoking here.

Ancient writers of Scripture in passages like these get right what we so often get wrong. The world is alive, and we are its neighbors. It offers us a home, one that we pillage with wild abandon, stripping it of its resources with scant regard for the other creatures that call the Earth home. Its lifeblood is water, and into that water we pour the poisonous byproducts of industry. Its breath is the very air around us, air that we taint with coal smoke, methane, and carbon dioxide created by burning the sacred remains of life that came before us. Its lungs are the great forests that carpet the earth in green, forests that we cut down so that we might have more pastureland for the first world's insatiable appetite for beef. Its body is the soil on which we walk, filled with beauty that we extract in the most destructive of ways so that we might adorn ourselves with its riches. Is there truly any difference between the earth's diamonds and the elephant's ivory?

We are not our own. Earth forms us, human leaves on nature's growing vine. We may not be able to psychically link ourselves with the horse, the oak, or the whale and operate as a unified, united celebration of shared life, but we can live that way. The earth is crying out all around us in massive snowfalls in Buffalo, in torrential storms in California, in wildfires in Colorado. Just as we cry out to God, "How long, O Lord?" the earth is crying out to us, "How long, O humanity? When will you remember me? When will you remember the promise that God made to us all? When will you remember that God placed you here to delight in me, to serve me and protect me as I serve and protect you?"

As near as I can tell, most of our politicians have stopped denying the reality of our planet's climate crisis. No more do I see debates in the news or on social media that climate change isn't real. People get it. They see what's happening. They understand the gravity of it. But tragically missing from this evolving awareness is that certainty that the Earth is not just our home, but our sibling. Cain once cried out to God, "Am I my brother's keeper?" The earth cries out the same, and the answer is as it has always been. YES. We are our neighbor's keeper. Nonetheless, the human inclination to strip the earth and possess its wealth still reigns supreme. The blockers of climate-saving legislation profess to speak on behalf of people whose livelihoods will be impacted if we stop draining the earth's body for fuel. They cast their opponents as callous toward people who work in fossil fuel industries. But are those lives of more value than the life of the Earth who shares with us her bounty? Who makes of herself a home for us all?

I worry that Jesus got misinterpreted by those who heard him and remembered his words. He was speaking to the people about worry, encouraging them to place trust in God. He said, "Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" Folks live as if the answer to that question is, "Yes, we are." But I don't think that's right at all. We're not of more value than the birds of the air or the lilies of the field, of the seas of Sargasso, of the herds of wildebeests, of the mountaintops or the deep places of the earth. We are all part of God's holy creation, gifted with free will and choice, entrusted with responsibility, enjoined to remember that all life is of infinite value. The Earth itself is our neighbor, our sibling, our parent, our child, our friend.

God, grant us not just the ability to perceive and remember that, but the will to live out that reality in all our decisions and actions, on Earth as it is in heaven.

Amen.

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First Congregational Church, UCC of Anoka is an Open and Affirming Christian Community for all. We affirm that the image of God is most fully reflected in diversity. We invite all people to share their energy and talents in full participation with our community. We welcome all individuals and families of any sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, gender expression, relationship status, race, national origin, socioeconomic status, age, mental and physical health or ability, or belief. Together, we celebrate these and all other facets of one's essential being.