

Sermon for Stewardship of Creation Sunday 4-29-12 Epiphany, Tallassee The Reverend Patrick J. Wingo

Exactly one year ago yesterday I went with a group of about ten people to a little place near Greensboro Alabama, in the Black Belt, called Sawyerville.

As many of you may know our diocese has a long history with Sawyerville—every summer now for many years volunteers from our parishes have gone to the Sawyerville area and put on a Vacation Bible School type event for some of the most economically disadvantaged children in our country.

The Sawyerville Work Project has grown every year, and is now actually two separate events, because the demand is so great.

It is a life-changing week for the children who participate, the high school and college counselors, and the adults who organize.

I went to Sawyerville exactly one year ago yesterday not because I was doing anything that had to do with the Work Project.

I went there because Sawyerville was one of the communities hit by one of the violent April 27th tornadoes. It seems that no one had really gotten around to some of the more rural and poor communities, to give them the aid they so desperately needed, so the word went out, some folks gathered some bottled water and bread and coolers and ice and diapers, and we loaded some pick-up trucks and trailers and set out.

It was a beautiful day and the Black Belt area of the state is particularly beautiful.

Once we left I-59 and headed south there were fields and tall pines and wildflowers along the side of the road.

Then suddenly we were there—you've seen the pictures: trees snapped off, debris scattered everywhere, empty foundations where mobile homes used to be.

I had seen the beauty of God's creation as I drove; when I got out of my car there were three bluebirds on a telephone wire right above me.

As I read the lessons for this Sunday, all the while hearing about the anniversary events that were planned, I knew that I wanted to preach about the goodness of God's creation.

And I just didn't quite know what I was going to say.

What do you say when creation turns violent?

In Alice Walker's great novel, The Color Purple, Shug Avery and Miss Celie are having a discussion about God.

Shug is explaining to Celie how she gradually moved away from the image of God as a big old white man:

"My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and cried and I run all around the house. I knew just what it was. In fact, when it happen, you can't miss it....

Listen, God love everything you love--and a mess of stuff you don't.

But more than anything else, God love admiration.

"You saying God vain?" asked Celie.

"Naw," said Shug.

"Not vain, just wanting to share a good thing.

I think it upsets God if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it. "

"What happens when God gets upset?" asked Celie.

"Oh, God just makes something else. People think that pleasing God is all God care about. But anyone living in the world can see God is always trying to please us back. "

It has always been very tempting for human beings to deduce that when God gets upset, God sends tragedy—an earthquake, a flood, a tornado.

But I like The Color Purple's view—when God gets upset, God creates something else.

God does not willingly afflict us, in spite of what some of the interpretations of particular biblical passages may say.

"Anyone living in the world can see that God always trying to please us back."

If we only had the eyes to see that truth...

When we got to Sawyerville exactly one year ago yesterday we had a list of families who our contact down there, a young woman named Ada, had told us had been touched by the tornado.

Ada led us around to the different houses to deliver our meager offering.

At the first place we went there were several people sitting on a variety of objects under a lone tree with a mattress next to it.

Several yards away was a concrete slab where their home had been.

They had some food and water, but really had nowhere to go.

They spoke of their neighbors, some of whom were in the hospital in Selma, two of whom had been killed in the storm.

They were obviously shocked, but the more we talked, the more they opened up.

One of our group began to talk football with an elderly black man, who had heard that Cam Newton had been the first pick in the NFL Draft, and before anyone knew it a lively discussion with lots of laughter had drawn our attention away from the devastation, if only for a moment.

On the other side of the group under the tree, two young teenagers had taken some concrete blocks, some wood planks, and what was left of some chairs, and had created a throne-like structure on which they happily sat, proud of their work.

Another member of our group was puzzling with them about how to put a canopy over the throne.

We moved on to other families, other stories.

We came to one place where several families had gathered.

We got out of our vehicles, and the wonderful smell of BBQ filled the air.

Everyone in the neighborhood had brought anything they had in their refrigerators, and they were grilling it and sharing it.

And they were happy to share it with us as well.

We had brought bread and water, and we were fed with chicken wings, hamburgers, and even a beer.

In the midst of death, they had decided to live.

Genesis tells us that God looked at everything God created and said that it was good;

God looked at the man and the woman and declared that this part of creation was very good.

God gave us life; we were never promised that it would be easy or perfect or painless.

The gift itself promises that when we live it to its fullest, it is very, very good.

We are stewards, you see, of one another.

Each of us are stewards of the best God made.

When we embrace *this* role of caring for creation, we're not just recycling, and noticing the color purple in a field, and finding God in the forests; we are caring for each other as blessed' creations.

We please God when we care for each other, even if all we have to offer is some bread and bottled water.

What we find is that God is always pleasing us back with BBQ and beer.

So on this Stewardship of Creation Sunday, take heart that in the midst of a terrible anomaly of creation, the gift of life brings out the best in us.

Love this beautiful earth that God has given us, yes.

Yet even more, see the face of Christ on your brother or sister, and rejoice and be glad, because God has given you as stewards of each other.

AMEN.