

Reflection – Mary Anne Hitt
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church, April 28, 2019

I got my first paid job – very low paid job – as an environmental advocate in 1994. In preparing this reflection I did the math, and that was 25 years ago. I know it's hard to believe. I was in kindergarten at the time...

Actually I was a college student at the University of Tennessee, and I've gone on in those 25 years to have the great privilege of a remarkable career as an environmental advocate, from leading a small organization where I was one of two staff, to now running the largest campaign in the history of the Sierra Club, which is the nation's largest grassroots environmental organization and has been around for over a century.

Along the way, I went from being a person who wasn't very spiritual at all, to becoming a member of this church. And I want to share three points along that journey with you, in the hopes that they might shed some light on the complicated and important relationship between our faith and this planet that sustains all of us and everything and everyone we love.

Here's the first stop on that journey – high school. I didn't start out as a very spiritual person, which is embarrassing to admit standing up in front of a church, but I love that I can admit it in front of this one. I love that this is a place where we can be honest and vulnerable about the struggles that come with this journey of faith that we're all on together.

So I'll be honest – as a young person growing up in the South who was passionate about the natural world, I didn't see a lot I could relate to in the church. My favorite high school teacher had students who, if he mentioned the word evolution, would leave his classroom in tears (never mind trying to teach them about it). For the many very religious kids I grew up with, it seemed like this world was just a layover or waiting room on the way to getting into heaven, not a sacred place worth protecting.

I couldn't really relate to the church for those and other reasons. As we've talked about a lot in this church over the years, the aligning of Christianity and empire has had devastating consequences over the centuries not just for the natural world, but for indigenous, enslaved, and marginalized people, and I've always struggled with that.

I came across a great passage about this in a book I've been reading by the Franciscan priest Richard Rohr, in his new book "The Universal Christ," and here's how he describes this dilemma:

"Perhaps the primary example of our lack of attention to the Christ Mystery can be seen in the way we continue to pollute and ravage planet earth, the very thing we all stand on and live from. Science now appears to love and respect physicality more than most religion does! No wonder that science and business have taken over as the major explainers of meaning for the vast majority of people today (even many who still go to church). We Christians did not take this world seriously, I am afraid, because our notion

of God or salvation didn't include or honor the physical universe. And now, I am afraid, the world does not take us seriously."

I was one of those people who didn't take church seriously, and yet here I am. What happened? That brings us to stop two on this journey. Around ten years ago, well into my second decade as an environmental advocate, I realized that if I didn't get some sort of spiritual foundation beneath me, not only was my work only skimming the surface, but I was going to sink beneath the waves and burn out. My husband was raised in the Presbyterian church – my mother-in-law is a retired Presbyterian minister and amazing spiritual teacher, who has been a guest pastor here several times – and so we found our way to this school of love, and I'm so glad we did.

I knew that my social justice heroes all did their work rooted in a deep spiritual tradition, and I knew I needed to find that for myself. I found it here, in this tradition where our stories are about finding the courage to challenge the powerful. They're stories about finding the strength to look directly into the face of our toughest problems rather than giving into the temptation to look away. And they're stories about doing the necessary work of turning love into action, of standing up for justice, with compassion and nonviolence.

I also found some personal practices that have made it possible for me to get through some very hard and even scary times. Those including learning the necessity of Sabbath and rest, allowing compassion for myself and others for the inevitable mistakes and stumbles that we make along the way, and finding a spiritual community that creates a space for me to pause, reflect, and restore myself each and every week.

So from alienation, to faith, that brings me to the third and final stop this journey, which is today. Right now. This moment here with all of you. From alienation to faith, that final stop is action.

My Evangelical friends (actually mostly former Evangelical friends) have a phrase they use that something is on their heart. It's a beautiful phrase – it's on my heart to tell you this. So friends, this is what's on my heart to tell you today. My daughter Hazel's birthday is tomorrow, and so yesterday we had a house full of 9-year-old girls, and tomorrow there will be more presents and celebration of this incredible little person. Being her mother has been the single most profound experience of my life.

Like everyone in this room, I would do anything to keep my daughter safe. And right now, friends, because of how disconnected we've become from this beautiful sacred world around us, our kids are not safe. From the climate crisis that is barreling down on every single one of us, to the Rockwool factory proposed right here in our community, our kids aren't safe.

It hurts to say those words, but I need to say them because our kids need us. They need us to find the courage to challenge the powerful. They need us to find the strength to look directly into the face of problems we would rather look away from. And they need us to do the necessary work of turning love into action, of standing up for justice, with compassion and nonviolence.

I often close my eyes and imagine all the ancestors who came before me, stretched behind me in a long line, and all their hopes and dreams that I now embody. And then I turn around and look in front of me and I see Hazel, and all the other kids I love, and all the generations to come after them. The world's scientists have made it clear that if we don't start reducing climate pollution significantly in the next decade, our kids face a scary future. So that means I'm the last person in that line of ancestors and future generations who still has a real and meaningful opportunity to turn the corner on climate change. And I want to be able to look Hazel and all those kids in the eye, and let them know I did everything I could to keep them safe.

Rockwool will be built or stopped on our watch. And I want to be able to look Hazel and all those kids in the eye, and let them know I did everything I could to keep them safe.

From climate change to Rockwool, our kids are going to live with the choices we've made. They are the vulnerable that our faith calls us to protect, and they're not in a two thousand year old story, or on another continent. They're right here in front of us. And if there's one thing I hope you'll take away from my remarks, I hope it's this – it's not too late. Everything we do to reduce greenhouse gas pollutions now means a safer world for our kids tomorrow. Everything we do now on Rockwool gives us a chance of creating the future we want for our community.

So whatever journey you've been on, let's take these next steps together. The coming decade is going to be the most pivotal in human history, and the coming months are going to be pivotal for our community. Our faith will show us the way forward. Our kids our counting on us. Let's make them proud.