

From Debra Hepler, Executive Director of Ghost Ranch

I want to share with you an Earth Day message which comes in the form of a sermon offered on April 26, 2009 by Mark Zaineddin.

**The Creation Covenant:
Dialoguing and Interrelating with God and the Entire Earth Community
April 26, 2009
Ghost Ranch**

As many of you probably know, Ghost Ranch has been graced by the presence of the rich and the famous over the past three quarter's century or so. Well-known artists including Georgia O'Keeffe and Ansel Adams have painted and photographed the ranch's beautiful mesas, chine formations, and high-desert plains. Physicists with decidedly foreign accents working on the Manhattan project during Second World War took R&R right here under the cover of American-sounding names like Nicholas Baker and Eugene Farmer. These men were later revealed to be none other than Robert Oppenheimer, Enrico Fermi, Niels Bohr, and others.

The Johnson and Johnson clan (of whose factories have produced Johnson's baby powder and Band Aids) owned the house that is now known as Cottonwood and serves as our library; the renown aviator Charles Lindbergh and his wife, Anne, paid a visit on a cross-country trip; and Rock Hudson watched the Oscars on TV right here at the home of former ranchlands supervisor Jim Shibley. And think about it, when it comes to Hollywood personalities the ranch has hosted John Wayne, Cary Grant, Billy Crystal, Steven Spielberg, Joan Allen and Jack Black to name but a few. Indeed, Ghost Ranch has been graced by the presence of the rich and the famous over the past three quarter's century or so. And my guess is, that won't stop.

But it is the ordinary folk who have visited or worked on Ghost Ranch that have in large part made it what it is today. And this morning, I want to briefly mention but one: a person that only few of you have probably heard of; a person I never knew; yet a person who in no small way impacted the ranch, the surrounding community, and even, dare I say, the greater world.

O.J. Lougheed, as the myth goes, showed up sometime in the early 1980s in a '61 Volkswagen crammed with 600 pounds of seed and 600 pounds of books. A former military veteran who had been living on the East Coast and studying seeds since the early 1970s, Lougheed headed out to the Southwest to fulfill a dream and serve greater purpose. He took Ghost Ranch's nascent small-scale demonstration farm which had been in existence for only few years and expanded it into a High Desert Research Farm; one that encouraged local growers in Northern New Mexico and indigenous people all around the world to utilize the time-tested ancient farming methods of their forefathers and foremothers, to make use of open-pollinated, heirloom, and landrace seeds, and to rely on the sun for their energy needs.

Each year, he and others on the farm would test dozens of varieties of food and cover crops adapted to marginal environments and share the seeds and the results with others near and far. In fact, in 1986 alone at least seventy varieties of peas and more than 200 varieties to beans were planted for evaluation on our farm and seeds were shared with growers in six native American pueblos, four African countries, in Australia and at twelve locations in North America. Furthermore, in these years and subsequent ones, the farm was also deeply involved at the time in a farm-to-market program, in raising sheep, and in providing technical assistance to, and learning from, the local community.

Although he may have appeared to be a “hippie”, O.J. was not a luddite or someone who looked only to the past. The research farm made use of important solar and computer technology and even had its own ham radio sign. By the late 1980s, well-known agricultural organizations such as The Land Institute in Salina, Kansas, and the Desert Botanical Garden in Phoenix, Arizona, as well as the greater church and even the Nation magazine had taken interest in, or written about, the vital work being performed right here at Ghost Ranch.

You see Lougheed along with his co-director, Lynda Prim, believed that creation matters. They followed the advice of the essayist and poet, Wendell Berry, who has suggested that “a healthy agriculture can take place only within nature, and in cooperation with its processes, not in spite of it, and not by ‘conquering’ it.”

Lougheed and Prim also recognized and regularly recalled that for healthy and harmonious living there must be an interaction between the natural, the human, and the spiritual elements of the earth. And that a lifestyle which paid close attention to others, to the land, and to flora and fauna upon it was “not only a physical and intellectual choice, but a moral and spiritual choice as well.”

Which brings us to this morning’s scripture. This morning, we have been reminded that God’s first covenant -- the universal covenant -- was one between not only God and humanity but that it also included all of creation. It’s a covenant that requires us to pay attention to God’s still small voice within and around us and to be in dialogue and relationship with others. Yet, it also mandates that we seriously take into consideration, as Job has suggested, the voices and teachings of animals, birds, and plants for in them God has had a hand.

Scientists, philosophers, and theologians today suggest that we have a lot to learn from the environment. And that by doing so, we can see that often we have not followed Paul’s advice to the Philippians; that is, too often we have acted out of selfish ambition and conceit; that we have put ourselves before other peoples, generations, and even the earth upon which we live.

As humans with agency, we have a choice to make. Like Francis of Assisi and others in ages past and present, we can carefully listen to and learn from the God’s wondrous nature or we can disregard it and go about living in an “it’s all about me” way. We do

have that choice to make, but if we make the wrong choice what will it mean for the future?

Jesus, it appears, was very much attuned to this first covenant. While it is certainly true he regularly interacted with others including the marginalized, the outcast, and the infirmed, it seems to me that he also quite often sought a better understanding of God's intentions on mountain tops and in the wilderness. He paid attention to his natural surroundings.

And let us not forget, that with each covenant comes a sign. For the first covenant, it's the beautiful rainbow. Ghost Ranch after a rainfall is often blessed with double rainbows. I have often wondered what that means. Perhaps God is telling us that we need to pay special attention to this covenant. Perhaps God is suggesting that too often we forget it.

Finally, last Wednesday was earth day. It's the day when we celebrate, promote, and fight for a healthy and sustainable environment. On this day, in schools, kids learn about conserving energy and solving local environmental problems; in parks, groups coordinate cleanup drives; and on Capital Hill, organizations lobby Congress. Now, I have no idea where O.J. was that day and what he was doing. But my guess is that wherever he was and whatever he was doing, in the back of his mind he was thinking that earth day should not be relegated to one day in April; and that for us, everyday should be earth day. And perhaps, just perhaps, he would be right.

Support Footnotes

Poling-Kempes, L. Ghost Ranch. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2005. p. 159. Rio Arriba Sun. August 6, 1987.

Office of Special Offerings, General Assembly Mission Board and The Support Agency. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). "Cultivating Seeds of Hope through One Great Hour of Sharing." Horizons Magazine. October 1988. Quoted in Lougheed, O.J. and L.S. Prim. Farming as if the Creation Mattered. Unpublished article. 1987. Ibid.