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When I take my dog Max for a walk, he wants to stop and smell everything. The bushes. The trees. Candy wrappers tossed on the street. Storm drains. And every little hole in the ground. He especially enjoys the small holes in my yard, for chipmunks there, and occasionally, I think he catches their smell, for he places his nose close to the ground, sniffs around the holes, and hesitates when I try to drag him away. The squirrels sit in the trees, chattering away, teasing him since they seem to know he can't reach them, while the birds sing from their nests. Every creature has a home, whether in the trees or in holes in the ground. Max finally gives up and follows me into the house, curls up on his dog bed, falls asleep, and I imagine dreams about catching a squirrel.

While reflecting on all these animal homes, I thought of this text from Matthew, where after a religious leader suggested that he would follow Jesus wherever he went, Jesus reminds his followers that foxes have holes and birds have nests, but he has no place to rest. It's almost as if

Jesus was offering a warning label, "Following me is not easy. May lead to fatigue and risk."

Another follower was quick to respond with eagerness to follow as well, but first he suggested he must complete the burial procedures for his family member. That wasn't an excuse to not follow Jesus, but a delay until he could fulfill his family obligation of caring for the deceased member.

It seems odd that Jesus would reply, "Let the dead bury their own dead." Was he referring to those who were spiritually dead? That hanging out with them further would deaden this follower's life? Maybe Jesus used the occasion to refer to the immediate need of following Jesus' ways, for we often find so many excuses to avoid the difficult journey of following Jesus. We might be concerned that someone will think we're odd. For example, if your faith and trust in Jesus prompts you to speak out about the urgency of a social or environmental issue, you might get labeled us as a radical.

One commentary observed that "taking a stand on controversial social issues in Jesus' name can draw the wrath of family and community."¹ When have you

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found it difficult to stand up for something of your concern? Maybe it's racial justice.

Environmental concerns about the care of our planet. Health care for everyone. Immigration reform to protect those seeking safety in our country. When you begin to speak your thoughts, have you found the eyes of some of those listening to you begin to glaze over? Have you heard responses from those who would rather argue their political agenda rather than listen to the stories of those struggling to survive?

I recall one time when I was speaking in a church about the importance of caring for the environment when an Elder left worship. When I later asked him about his sudden departure, he replied, "I don't want to hear about these political issues in church." Although I had never made any political references, that's how he heard the issue of caring for the environment. He had forgotten that the Bible speaks about caring for creation from the opening chapters of Genesis and throughout the Psalms. He forgot that caring for creation is an act of faith, for God created us as

stewards of Earth, as caretakers to protect this valuable planet on which we live.

Soon after Jesus had this conversation about the challenges of following him as a disciple, they got into a boat to travel to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. It's during this trip that they encountered a storm, with waves so high they were sloshing over the sides of the boat. Jesus seemed either unaware of the storm or unconcerned, for he was sound asleep. The disciples woke him up and implored him to do something.

Jesus replied, "Why are you so afraid? What happened to your trust in me?"

That's a question I imagine was echoing in the early years of the church after Jesus had died, and I imagine this story reflects as much of their fear as that of the disciples. The question also reflects our fears today, and especially this past year. I've found myself afraid, especially in the early days of the pandemic when we went into lockdown and I wondered if every person I encountered could have the coronavirus. Even before the coronavirus, some

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of us may have had concerns about our health, such as

A man who called his physician and asked about the blood pressure medication she had prescribed. “You did tell me I would have to take this medication for the rest of my life, right?”

“Yes,” the doctor answered, “I’m afraid you will.”

There was a moment of silence before the man hesitantly responded, “Then could you tell me exactly how serious this blood pressure thing is?”

The doctor was a bit confused by the man’s question and the tone of the question and she asked, “Why do you ask?”

“Because,” the man explained, “the prescription on this bottle says, ‘No Refills!’”²

In the midst of our worries about the storms in our lives, Jesus invites us to discover calmer waters, for during this pandemic, even the environment has begun to heal. Since the

pandemic began, scientists observing data from satellite images of our planet have noted that “Deforestation rates are changing in some places, air pollution is diminishing, water quality is improving, and snow is becoming more reflective in some areas,” meaning the snow contains less dust and soot.³

While the pandemic has brought disruption and illness to many on our planet, our Earth has had a chance to heal. Even in what has felt like a storm of chaos this past year, God has been able to bring healing to some parts of creation. Wouldn’t it be amazing if we could learn from this experience and continue to live in ways that brought earthly healing? As a Lenten practice that could last throughout the year, may we strive to find earthly healing that brings relief not only for our planet, but for ourselves as well.

¹ Interpretation: Matthew, Douglas R. A. Hare, 95.

² Hodgkin, Michael; *1002 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, Compelling Illustrations for*

Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers. Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #733, adapted.

³ “Environmental impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, as observed from space,” www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2020/12/201208162957.htm