**Guest Message by Shantha Ready Alonso, Executive Director of Creation Justice Ministries**

Broomfield Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, Rev. Greg King, Pastor

Richmond, Virginia

February 26, 2017

First, I want to thank Rev. Greg King for inviting me to get to know Broomfield better today. I am glad to be part of the Red Dress celebrations!

Today, along with people across the country participating in American Heart Association Red Dress Day, many of us ladies are wearing red dresses. We are learning about the health of our hearts. In my message today, I’ll explore how the health of our own hearts are connected to the health of our communities, and are connected to the health of God’s creation.

To further our conversation, I’d like to meditate on two Scripture verses:

**Psalm 24:1**

The earth is the Lord’s, and all that is in it, the world, those who live in it.

1 **Corinthians 6:19**

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own.

Let’s take a minute to think about these verses in relationship to the health of our hearts.

Take a moment with me and put your hand to your heart. Close your eyes if it helps you feel and listen to your own heart beat. Join me in offering a prayer, “God, my heart belongs to you. God, my body belongs to you. God, this world belongs to you.”

When we remember it all belongs to God, that takes our stress level down. We are fearfully and wonderfully made by God’s hands, and our lives belong to God. We are the caretakers of all God has made: of our bodies, of our families, of our communities, our country, our whole world.  But it is not ours to do with what we like.

Surrender to God is good for our health, and good for the health of all of God’s creation. If all the gifts of the natural world – from our bodies, to forests, to all God’s creatures, and waters – are in service to God, they exist to glorify and adore God, as well as fulfill God’s mission.

Sometimes, though, we lose sight of God’s ownership. Sometimes, we neglect care for our bodies, as well as care for God’s creation. Maybe we feel too much pressure on our time, or our finances, to nourish our bodies with healthy food, or give our bodies the stretching and activity necessary. Maybe the same pressures keep us from recycling, or conserving energy and water, or paying close attention to what policy-makers are doing and saying to protect the physical wellbeing of our bodies, our communities, and God’s creation.

There is one particular place I want to share with you about, where we are in danger of losing sight of who is the owner, and who is the caretaker: The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska. It was set aside as a Wildlife Refuge by Congress during Jimmy Carter’s presidency, with the provision that it could be opened up to oil drilling by an act of Congress at any time.

The Refuge is considered by some people to be the heart of many ecosystems, pumping new life into them. Hundreds of species of migratory birds travel to make their home in the Refuge every summer, then migrate back from their trip to the Refuge to bring their songs and biodiversity to every state in the United States. Many species birth their young there. Polar bears, whales, moose, caribou and a vibrant diversity of plants call the Refuge home. So do the Native people of that land: the Gwich’in.

Well, the Gwich’in people have been living near the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge for many generations – as long as anyone can remember. They have lived all those generations alongside the Porcupine caribou, which they depend on for more than 80% of their dietary needs, as well as culture and spirituality. Remember how we started by feeling our heart beats? The Gwich’in creation story is rooted on the land where they are planted, and their oral tradition says that at one time, the Gwich’in and the Porcupine caribou were a single organism, meaning they shared a single body. One day, the Creator physically separated the Gwich’in and the Porcupine caribou, but the Creator assured them that they would always retain a piece of one another’s heart. Before the Creator, the Gwich’in and the caribou made a sacred agreement upon their separation: that the caribou would nourish the Gwich’in with their bodies, and that the Gwich’in would be the caribous’ guardians, ensuring they continue to be fruitful and multiply – to thrive for future generations.

Pause for a moment and reconnect with your heart beat. Imagine what it would feel like to share a heart beat with another creature, to feel that level of kinship and responsibility with another part of God’s creation.

If you were to track the locations of settlements of the Gwich’in people in the United States and Canada, their homes’ locations align perfectly with the migration route of the Porcupine caribou. The Gwich’in guard the birthing place of the Porcupine caribou: the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. They call the Refuge: “The Sacred Place Where Life Begins.” Even in times of famine, they refuse to hunt in the Refuge, out of respect for the caribou birthing time and the maintenance of balance of God’s creation.

Today, there are many in Congress and the Administration that would like to open up the Refuge for oil drilling. I have had the honor of accompanying Gwich’in people to Washington, DC to talk to decision-makers. They are calling for decision-makers to understand how oil drilling would destroy the created order and the food system, culture, and spirituality of their people.

So today, I am asking to open your heart to connection with the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. The health of this heart of ecosystems is actually connected to our own human health. It is a national treasure that deserves our collective stewardship, wherever we live. Please join me in supporting protection for the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.