

14. RECLAIMING THE WORLD



Focus: While human beings have been gifted with a beautiful and complex world in which to live, its systems and resources are being stressed by our behaviors, lifestyles, and arrogance. Care for the environment is not only deeply biblical and practical, but increasingly critical – for both the present spiritual life and for our collective future.

THE HEAVENS ARE TELLING

In no small part due to 19th century Native American leader Chief Seattle, traditional Native American spirituality is often associated with honoring the sacredness of all creation. Seattle was heard to say, “Our religion is written in the hearts of our people. Every part of this country is sacred...every hillside, every valley, every plain and grove....” For Chief Seattle, the divine reverberates from every corner of creation, a perspective not absent from the heritage of Judeo-Christians:

- 1 *The heavens are telling the glory of God;
 and the firmament proclaims God’s handiwork.*
- 2 *Day to day pours forth speech,
 and night to night declares knowledge.*
- 3 *There is no speech, nor are there words;
 their voice is not heard;*
- 4 *yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
 and their words to the end of the world.*

– Psalm 19

When reading Genesis 1, it is helpful to note that the Hebrew word translated as "created" is not in static past tense. It can also be interpreted as "In the beginning, when God *began* to create the heavens and the earth...," suggesting that God initiated a creative process that continues even to this moment. The God of Genesis is a creating God. As we are made in God’s image, we are made not only to bring order out of chaos but also to be creators. We are not shameful “fallen” creatures, redeemed only by some cosmic and violent act beyond our control. We are emerging beings, blessed to be a blessing, and bearing special responsibility toward the creation in which we live and move and have our being.

PRAYING WITH OPEN EYES

“Never lose an opportunity of seeing anything that is beautiful for beauty is God’s handwriting – a wayside sacrament. Welcome it in every fair face, in every fair sky, in every fair flower, and thank God for it as a cup of blessing.”

– Ralph Waldo Emerson

Although many Christians feel duty-bound to talk about morality and sin, these are not the only themes in scripture. “I don’t think morality is the basic theme of the Bible,” writes author Katherine Paterson. “I think its theme is closer to ... beauty. By itself, morality is not beautiful enough.” When God saw everything that God had made and declared it “good,” it wasn’t a moral judgment, but an aesthetic one. Creation was beautiful, delightful, and even “awe-ful.” Emily Dickenson remarked that one commandment she’d never broken was, “Consider the lilies of the field.” More than a simple “stop and smell the roses” sentiment, it’s a call to cultivate a deeper sense of awareness and awe – an appreciation of the beauty and mystery that transcend the mundane. Barrie Shepherd was stirred to awe while observing porpoises lunge through the surf:

*“And so I caught the deep and dreadful brushing-by of mystery,
Exulted, silent, in the moving, living presence of an alien world
That swept along our shores, just as it does, and is,
In each and every moment, whether we watch or pray or wake or sleep.
Consider the lilies of the field, and the porpoises of the seas.”*

Perhaps praying with one’s eyes open is more a part of the spiritual life than many have considered. St Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuit order, encouraged an attitude of seeing “God in all things and all things in God.” Not to be confused with the “God is everything” of Pantheism, theologians have dubbed the subtle yet very different understanding of “God *in* everything” as “Panentheism.” Although most recently popularized in the “Creation Spirituality” writings of Matthew Fox, this sacramental embracing of creation has its roots in the earliest expressions of Christianity, the practices of mystics, and by the first “Process” thinkers, Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne. Embracing a consciousness of the Divine in everything and everything being enveloped by the Divine counters the dualistic idea of God being somewhere “out there” with a profound and immediate awareness of the divine presence here and now.

“And it is a strange thing that most of the feeling we call religious, most of the mystical outcry which is one of the most prized and used and desired reactions of our species, is really the understanding and the attempt to say that man is related to the whole thing, related inextricably to all reality, known and unknowable. This is a simple thing to say, but the profound feeling of it made a Jesus, a St. Augustine, a St. Francis, a Roger Bacon, a Charles Darwin, and an Einstein. Each of them in his own tempo and with his own voice discovered and reaffirmed with astonishment the knowledge that all things are one thing and that one thing is all things – plankton, a shimmering phosphorescence on the sea and the spinning planets and an expanding universe, all bound together by the elastic string of time. It is advisable to look from the tide pool to the stars and then back to the tide pool again.”

– John Steinbeck
The Log from the Sea of Cortez, (The Viking Press, New York: 1941) p. 218

Consider the lilies of the field and the porpoises of the seas – the tide pool and the stars. Being awe-struck implies a sudden experience of mystery, an awareness of beauty and power that transcends the mundane. That awareness and awe of seeing God in all things and all things in God is an integral part of the spiritual life – and pleads for a response.

JUST GET IT OVER WITH

“Your attention please. Thank you for choosing earth as your planetary vehicle. We hope you enjoy the many wonderful features of this planet as you hurtle through the cosmos. Please note however, that in the event of continued inaction in the face of global warming, your seat cushion can be used as a flotation device.

– Blue Man Group, *Earth to America*

Unfortunately, the hoped for response from some Christians has not been gratitude or responsibility, but exploitation. Long before the rise of the Religious Right in America, Colonial and Imperialist Christian attitudes have been driven by the conviction that God has granted human beings “dominion over every living thing that moves on earth.” (Gen. 1:28) Today, some rapture-oriented Christians believe that if only things get bad enough, Jesus’ followers will be taken out of the world to a better place. They believe that the divine plan is for God to dramatically and violently enter into history and remake the world. Environmentalists are obstructionist and Christians who defend the environment out of a sense of obligation to be good stewards are seen to be working counter to God’s “will.”

During a panel discussion focusing on the Endangered Species Act, former state Representative Casey Emerson (R-Bozeman) wondered aloud whether "so-called environmentalists" had read the Bible passage stating that people must subdue the Earth. He added, "There are some species that ought to be killed off to subdue the Earth."

A story circulated for years regarding President Reagan's Secretary of the Interior, James Watt. He allegedly testified before Congress that "God gave us these things to use. After the last tree is felled, Christ will come back." Although now accepted as apocryphal (and not representative of a current change of heart among many evangelicals), people were quick to believe the story as true. Watt's alleged sentiments were not far from the prevalent attitude of many who believed that, in light of the imminent return of Jesus, protecting natural resources was unimportant.

Over time, such a cavalier attitude toward the resources of creation has been typical of the anthropocentric arrogance that sees humanity as the sole purpose for creation. Our “dominion” has been interpreted as permission to exhaust

creation's resources for our own purposes, with creation serving as a mere backdrop for the human/divine drama.

Little time is given to the thought that with or without us, the cosmos will continue on its way. Creation is an on-going process and, even though humanity would like to think itself the pinnacle of creation, the mystery of the Divine continues to create and be celebrated by creation itself.

WWJE?

“Whatever my own practice may be, I have no doubt that it is part of the destiny of the human race, in its gradual improvement, to leave off eating animals, as surely as the savage tribes have left off eating each other when they came in contact with the more civilized.”

– Henry David Thoreau, in “Higher Laws” from *Walden*

For many, human “dominion” extends to controlling the ultimate fate of countless other animal species, not only the exotic and wild, but the utilitarian and domestic. The last century has seen meat production and consumption grow exponentially in Western countries. At the same time, studies have shown that a vegetarian diet is, in fact, healthier for human beings. Meat-free diets lower the rate of cancer, heart disease, diabetes, and other serious health problems. And the consequences go far beyond impact on the individuals’ health: industrial scale meat production compromises water, soil and atmosphere. The United Nations’ Food and Agriculture Organization’s 2006 report, “Livestock’s Long Shadow,” states that the production of meat generates “more greenhouse gas emissions than all forms of transportation combined.” In a concurrent study, researchers at the University of Chicago determined that moving from a meat-based diet to a vegan diet saves more energy than swapping an SUV for a hybrid vehicle.

Far from being some far-fetched made up bleeding heart liberal notion, vegetarianism is the clear, if ignored, Biblical ideal for human beings. In both the idyllic world of Eden and Revelation’s vision of the New Jerusalem, animals and humans are vegetarian. Even Isaiah foresees a return to a vegetarian world where the lion, lamb, and little child can all peacefully co-exist. While literalists dream up scenarios as to why the lions didn’t eat up the lambs on the ark (“God put them all into a trance-like hibernation for the journey,” etc.) it’s clear they haven’t actually read the text they claim to revere. According to the second creation story in Genesis 2, God gives all plants to humans and animals to eat – but does not give them permission to eat one another. So, although it has surely never reflected real human behavior, Genesis claims that humanity – along with every other creature – was created to be vegetarian. It’s only after the author of Genesis has all the animals safely off the ark that God changes the rules and permits Noah to become the first carnivore. In Genesis 9, God says,

“Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything.”

– Attributed to Yahweh, *Genesis 9*

Part of reclaiming the world will involve unlearning the notion of “dominion” as license to do whatever we want with Creation. A dominion patterned on care and responsibility will help address the unsustainable use of land, water, and energy that our culture has fallen into. As we wrestle with the depletion of resources that threaten the future of humanity, even the food we choose to eat can become a part of our spiritual discipline.

“Choosing a vegetarian diet is a powerful way of modeling God’s love through nonviolence, compassion for animals, care for the earth, care for our bodies, and responsible use of the earth’s resources.”

– John Sniegocki, Xavier University

ALWAYS BE GOOD TO YOUR MOTHER

“We just don’t know how to be good to each other or decent to each other – and we don’t treat the rest of creation beyond humanity all that hot most of the time.”

– Emilie Townes, from LtQ’s *Saving Jesus*

Robert Musil is the Professor of Global Environmental Politics at American University. He points out that if Jesus was serious when he said, “Inasmuch as you have done it unto the least of these, you have done it unto me,” then we should take seriously that more than 5 million poor children die each year from diseases related to the environment. Asthma, dysentery, cholera, and malaria are all exacerbated by pollution, poverty, war, and the disruption of our global climate. In many instances, rising temperatures lead to the spread of disease-carrying mosquitoes. Drinking water fouled by floods or hurricanes can all bear bacteria that in the belly of a poor, malnourished baby means not merely diarrhea, but death.

“The Biblical texts we need for this journey are not only those about the goodness of God’s creation, the lilies of the field, the coming of rain in the desert. The essential texts describe Jesus’ ministry, his call to heal, to bring hope to suffering humanity, to do justice, to bring peace to those – especially the most vulnerable – who are in danger.”

– Robert K. Musil,
Global Climate Change: Polar bears, Penguins and People

According to Musil, the environment is not simply some lovely, green thing outside of us, apart from us. It is in us as well. Every molecule passes through us, through the ecosystems that we are part of and which sustain us. Modern medicine has confirmed the Biblical claim that we are equal in the eyes of God, regardless of borders. From studies by Philippe Grandjean, we know that a

single molecule of mercury or PCBs released into the environment can make its way – through evaporation, rain, and the food chain – from a broken electric generator in Texas all the way to the Arctic. There, a pregnant Inuit is eating what appears to be a perfectly healthy fish. The mercury enters her bloodstream, crosses her placenta, and harms the learning and development of her unborn child.

“If we are to halt this threat to creation, we need to include coal miners, children with asthma, people who live near or work in the factories that make most of us comfortable while spewing pollution and promoting cancer. We must care and act on the injustices of poverty and war. As Christians, we care about all creation...”

– Robert K. Musil,
Professor of Global Environmental Politics at American University

Most people are beginning only now to understand the interconnectedness of all that is from a religious perspective – the sense of oneness with God, with each other, and with Creation. Matthew Fox even suggests Mother Earth as a metaphor for the crucified and resurrected Jesus; innocent of any crime, she has blessed us for billions of years and is now being killed by pollution. Even so, she rises daily to redeem us, holding out hope for a radical change in the human heart and spirit.

Awe at the beauty and complexity of creation gives us pause to consider – and perhaps compels a response: gratitude, a heightened consciousness, and constructive action. Care for the environment is not only deeply biblical and practical, but increasingly critical – for both the present spiritual life and for our collective future.

“True godliness does not turn [people] out of the world, but enables them to live better in it and excites their endeavors to mend it.”

– William Penn

DVD DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(Note: Chapter 1 of each DVD session is the introductory story)

DVD Chapter 2:

What important clarification does Rossing make about Apocalyptic End Times theology?

What implication does “peak oil” have on our Imperial way of life?

How does being compassionate as God is compassionate relate to creation?

According to Aquinas, what is the first and foremost definition of salvation? Explain.

Reflect on the implications of so much environmental destruction occurring while Christian nations have been at the apex of control.

DVD Chapter 3:

How have “the environmentalist critics of the church” spoken truly about us?

What do the church, the university, and governments need to repent of?

Fox claims that the church is called, with the prophetic Jesus, to eco-justice. Explain.

Describe how psalms like Psalm 19 & Psalm 136 epitomize a non-anthropocentric song of praise to the Creator.

DVD Chapter 4:

Reflect on some of the elements of the earth-centered vision in the final scenes of Revelation (Chapters 21 and 22).

In what ways does Revelation appear to be a conflict between two “spiritual economies,” the Whore of Babylon and the New Jerusalem?

Rossing believes one of the most important verses for us today involves the leaves from the tree of life. Why?

SPIRITPRACTICE:

“Conservation” with Barbara Rossing

Follow up with reading: *Affluenza* by John McGraf or *Deep Economy* by Bill McKibbin

Questions for Personal Reflection:

What do you find most helpful/interesting from the material so far?

What are the implications of this material for you personally? For your local fellowship? For the wider Church? For Christianity as a whole?

Consider the following questions as a group:

What has this session challenged or changed about the way you think about the Divine? People? The Church? Yourself? The relationship of all these?

PRACTICAL APPLICATION:

Estimates suggest that at least fifty percent of the trash North Americans throw away is recyclable. What efforts do you and/or your faith community make to recycle as much material as possible? If your community doesn't already have a curbside-recycling program, is there a way you can advocate for one (or educate people to use an existing program)?

Home composting is another option that requires discipline on a practical level but has rewards as a spiritual discipline, as well. Bits of kitchen waste, garden clippings, rotting flowers, egg shells, and coffee grounds decay into sweet-smelling, fertile, crumbly compost – but it takes intentional turning and working. It's not unlike the personal spiritual work necessary in the spiritual journey: if you're not intentional about doing something with your psychological/spiritual trash, it can start piling up in ways that make healthy living an impossibility. The metaphor of working a compost heap is a helpful reminder that part of caring for creation is to minimize waste and transform what some might consider worthless into something that renews the environment and promotes further growth.

Note: To help you get started, Starbucks offers bags of its used coffee grounds for composters to take home!

Be sure to follow up on this session's theme with Session 14's *Living it Out:* "A Bit of Sod" distributed by your facilitator.