

Sermon - The Rev. Leah D. Schade
Reformation Lutheran Church, Media, PA
Eco-Sunday, April 20, 2008

Texts: Genesis 3:17b-19; 4:8-16; Psalm 19:1-10; Romans 8:18-25

I've been working and living in central Delaware County since 1999. I remember driving up and down the Rt. 252 corridor back then. After crossing over the lovely expanse of water known as Springton Lake, you would see a stretch of woods rising up on either side of the road until you approached the intersection of Rt. 3. But in the last nine years, those woods have disappeared. Little by little, tract by tract, the trees were chainsawed, the land bulldozed, and the housing developments, soccer fields, strip mall, office complexes and retirement estates appeared. I helplessly watched as the home of countless deer, rabbits, groundhogs, birds and all manner of foliage was cleared to make way for human progress and profit. I often wonder where these environmental refugees go, and if the people living in those homes and shopping in those stores give any thought to the beings who lost their lives and homes so that they could enjoy such a comfortable setting. And I have quietly raged and mourned the loss of this natural habitat, while fuming at the complexity of circumstances that make such environmental devastation possible.

Then a few months ago I received a brochure in the mail about a place called Hildacy Farm Natural Lands Trust located right in Marple Township. It's a 55-acre preserve that contains about 20 acres of woodlands and hedgerows and 30 acres of meadow. I shared the brochure with our church's Eco Ministry, and we arranged to have a speaker from Hildacy come and present at our Eco Fair on this Eco-Sunday. Last week I took my children there to see what it's like. I can't believe I've lived here almost a decade and never heard about this place. We drove over Springton Lake and made a sharp right onto Palmer's Mill Rd., dropping down on the north side of the lake. When we pulled into the parking lot and got out of the car, my four-year-old daughter, Rachel, took a long look around at the trees, the barn, and the marsh and said, "Mmm, I like it here. It's so peaceful and quiet."

I put both Rachel and her year-old brother, Benjamin, in our two-seater stroller with pneumatic wheels and we started down the path around the marsh. We listened to bull frogs calling to each other. We watched a Baltimore Oriole alight on a reed jutting up from the water. Then we climbed up the path through the meadow watching a blue bird making a home in one of the nesting boxes. We made our way down through a quiet stand of evergreens, whispering as our sounds were muffled by the carpet of fallen needles. Then we came out at the bottom and heard rushing water. We discovered, much to our delight, a waterfall cascading down from Springton Lake, which then flowed into the rolling waters of Crum Creek. We followed the creek all the way along the path until we came back up along the other side of the meadow and returned to our starting point.

Along the way, Rachel saw many different kinds of flowers that she wanted to pick. But I explained to her that everything that lived here wanted to stay here. Just because we saw shiny rocks or colorful flowers did not mean that we were allowed to take them with us. This was their home, and we had to respect their place in the world. "You wouldn't like it if someone took you from your home and made you live somewhere else, would you?" I asked. And she understood.

Here at last we had discovered a place where native plants and wildlife were allowed to live without fear. No hunting, fishing or trapping will threaten the animals. Picnics and camping are not allowed, so that no trash will spoil the natural landscape. The way God's hand fashioned this land is the way it will remain. Human visitors are permitted, but are to leave no trace of their visit when they're gone.

As we walked, I kept thinking of the Garden Paradise established by God for human beings in the first two chapters of Genesis. It was like we had discovered a tiny Eden oasis right there in Marple Township. And yet from nearly every vantage point on the preserve, you can see houses and the passing cars on Rt. 252 looming above - a grim reminder that the sanctity of this place is hemmed in by relentless human pressure on all sides. I knew that as soon as we got back in the car, we would drive through to the other side of the Eden story - where the ground is cursed and human beings are engaged in constant battle with the earth from which they were brought forth.

Why does God curse the ground in this passage from Genesis 3? Do you remember? It's because Adam and Eve ate fruit from the tree of knowledge. Most people see this story as the explanation for the concept of Original Sin - the doctrine that all human beings are born into a sinful state because of the fall of Adam and Eve.

But there is another way to view this story. The myth of the "fall" of human beings has specific application to the current environmental crisis. Let me explain. This story in Chapter 3 shows us that God set out limits for human beings in how they were to exist in the garden. For the good of Adam and Eve, for the good of the tree, for the good of the entire garden, God essentially said: "This far and no farther." God established a boundary for the mutual protection of the relationship between humankind and the created world.

Did the original humans respect these boundaries? No. They did not obey the limits God set for them. They ignored the warnings, flouted the rules, and crossed the line. There's almost a feeling of entitlement you sense from Eve and Adam's rationalization of their disobedience. It's as if they're saying, "This is our garden after all. God gave it to us. We should be allowed to do anything we want with it. Look, the fruit is good to eat. It will make us smarter, better, richer. God just doesn't want us to be like God. God's afraid we'll know what God knows. And why shouldn't we?"

And because of this arrogance, there is an immediate cascade of events that shatters the relationships of paradise. The humans hide from God, and are not honest with God or themselves. They blame each other, and they blame one of God's creatures for the temptation. They refuse to accept responsibility for what has happened, but the consequences are unavoidable. From that point on, their relationship with the earth is cursed: "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life." (Genesis 3:17b, RSV). All because of human beings' insistence that we can have whatever we want whenever we want it, no matter what the cost or the consequence.

Can you see the similarities to what we are experiencing today? Psalm 19 tells us that the laws, decrees, and ordinances of God are about respecting the boundaries of relationships, including the delicate balance of our ecosystems and being mindful of our impact on them. And yet we

continually cross those lines and insist that we can and should pluck the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, rationalizing that we have the right to become like God.

But just because we *can* does not mean that we *should*. The warnings are clear. Do not continue to pollute the air and the water and the soil. You'll learn good and evil the hard way when your children die from strange diseases and you can't swim or eat fish from your poisoned waters. Do not continue burning fossil fuels. You'll learn good and evil the hard way when the gasses trap heat within the atmosphere and melt your icebergs and flood your islands and coastlands and whip up catastrophic weather events. Do not continue to clear-cut the earth to make way for one more shopping mall or housing development. You'll learn the good and evil the hard way when species die out and invasive plants and animals prey on your weakened natural habitats.

There are limits as to what the earth can withstand. There are boundaries that need to be established and respected. But we have done more than just cross the line. We have decimated the entire garden. We are not just plucking fruit from the tree anymore. We're cutting the whole tree down to make toilet paper and pave a parking lot! And we are now living with the consequences of a dying earth.

A dying earth? Really? Some will balk at that phrase, arguing that the state of the earth is not so dire. There are voices all along the spectrum of environmental issues ranging from denial to anger to depression. But I'll tell you why I use this language of a dying earth. I do it because when we acknowledge the pain and suffering, this is what opens the door to healing and redemption. In the words of Tom Ravetz, in the *Journal for the Renewal of Religion and Theology*, we "can accept the reality of the situation without flinching because we see its place in the development of the world. We see, too, where we can help to redeem it, letting its deeper meaning shine forth. We can accept the reality of the dying earth, because we know that we are engaged in its re-enlivening."

This is why I find these words of Jesus in Matthew 12:40 so profound: "... for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth," (NRSV). The Greek phrase here is *en kardia ge*, literally in the heart of the earth. And "heart" here does not just mean in the center of the earth. Jesus is saying that he is going to that place within the earth that is the seat of physical life, just like a human heart. This is extremely important for our concept of the created world. Jesus is acknowledging that earth is a living entity, for one thing. And that the earth has a center of spiritual, intellectual and physical life.

This is a revolutionary change in attitude from Genesis 1:26, which tells humans to, literally, stomp on top of the earth as if it were grapes in a winepress. Squeeze the most out of it you can. Subdue it, bring it into bondage, keep it under your feet. Instead, Jesus is saying that he will not rule over earth, but allow himself to be taken in by it. His crucifixion and resurrection, therefore is not just for the salvation of human beings, but for the very earth itself.

And that's why Paul can declare in Romans this hoped for vision of reconciliation between earth and humanity: "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God . . . in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the children of God," (Romans 8:19-21, NRSV). This is why we have

established an Eco Ministry in this congregation and do everything we can to promote environmental education, recycling, good earth stewardship, and preservation of natural habitats, including the land adjacent to our church. It's why we want everyone to attend our showing of the movie, *The 11th Hour* this coming Friday.

You see, this movement is more than just "grass roots" - it's tree roots, flower roots, everything living thing that has its connection to the "Ground of Being". This must be sown into the soil of our theological discourse in order for it to be drawn up into our daily lives, like clean water absorbed up through the root system to nourish the tree. If we do not allow ourselves to be used by God to be channels of an "eco-resurrection" - the bringing back to life of the dying earth - then everything else is for naught. Ecology affects all areas of justice - children, women, the poor, minorities, and developing countries. If we work to save "the least of these", the ones with no voice on the natural level, it will then move us to save the least of these on a human level.

Hildacy Farm is a beautiful example of human beings finally obeying the command of God in the Garden of Eden - this far and no farther. And every time another tract of land or waterways is saved through the Natural Lands Trust, it means that the wildlife, plants, water and soil of that place can never be destroyed. No bulldozer will rip an ancient oak tree up from its roots. No luxury home will displace a den of foxes. No mown soccer grass will supplant a field of goldenrods, asters and black-eyed Susans. No parking lot will ever be paved over a wetland that absorbs and filters the rainwater from the surrounding hillsides.

Sometimes there is great blessing in establishing boundaries and protecting them. Sometimes the benefits of changing your lifestyle or business practices to reduce your carbon footprint outweigh the initial sacrifice of entitlement. Sometimes foregoing profit in order to preserve a natural legacy reaps rewards far beyond monetary wealth. And sometimes acknowledging a dying earth is the only way to save it. Because only after coming through the scorched land of crucifixion can God bring us to the resurrection in the new Eden - the garden of Easter morning. Amen.

Sources:

Tom Ravetz, *Journal for the Renewal of Religion and Theology*, December, 2006
<http://www.renewtheology.org/articTRav1206.htm>

Lynn Townsend White, Jr, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis", *Science*, Vol 155 (Number 3767), March 10, 1967, pp 1203-1207