

# “Earth’s Disciples”

Psalm 19  
Romans 8:18-23

Earth Sunday, April 20, 2008  
St. Mark Presbyterian Church, Portland  
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If the length of time that Planet Earth has been in existence were measured out on a timeline stretched out on Terwilliger Blvd. every inch would represent about 80,000 years and the line would stretch from the I-5 overpass to the driveway of St. Mark. The existence of human life on this blue green marble would be represented by only the last inch at our driveway. Humanity has hardly lived here long enough to call the place “home!” We’ve barely just moved in! Considering how long our host has been here and how much she has done for us already, it seems odd that only one day out of 365 each year should be set aside as “Earth Day.”

It is bizarre that so many of us communities of faith set aside only one, if any, Sundays as Earth Sunday each year and that those spiritual groups that do consider the earth’s powers and gifts more often than that are often considered the most pagan.

The fact is, thinking about ecology, environmentalism, even stewardship of the earth, seems like more of a secular task; the interest and work of scientists, organic farmers, and hippies. Isn’t church supposed to be about our inner spiritual lives, our moral framework, our relationship with the divine, rather than what we eat, what car we drive, how often we recycle?

People of faith cannot and will not even begin to live as responsible stewards of the earth until we understand the integral role that our faith and religious beliefs play in caring for our planet; until we see how our faith story is deeply connected, entwined into the web of all life and all matter around us.

People of faith cannot wait until society shows us the way, as the Church has done in the past, often lagging behind on issues of gender, racial or sexuality equality, for instance. Scientists and secular leaders are convinced that a particular religious worldview, and a way of life in keeping with it, when armed with the powers of modern technology, will do us in. People of faith, therefore, are in a unique position to change the course of environmental destruction. When it comes to healing this planet, people of faith, are being called up to take the initiative and lead the way. (Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*, New York: Orbis Books, 1996 p. 182).

Thirty-five years ago anthropologist Gregory Bateson wrote, “If you put God outside and set him vis-à-vis his creation and if you have the idea that you are created in his image, you will logically and naturally see yourself as *outside* and against the things around you. And as you arrogate all mind to yourself, you will see the world around you as mindless and therefore not entitled to moral or ethical consideration.

The environment will seem to be yours to exploit. Your survival unit will be you and your folks (and also, perhaps, species such as your own,) against the environment of other social units, other races and the brutes and vegetables. If this is your estimate of your relation to nature and you have an advanced technology (at your disposal), your likelihood of survival will be that of a snowball in hell.” (Bateson, Gregory, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, New York: Random House, 1972)

Over fifteen years ago, 34 internationally renowned scientists led by Carl Sagan and Hans Bethe issued, “An Open Letter to the Religious Community.” After detailing what, in religious language, is called “crimes against creation” the letter went on to say, “Problems of such magnitude and solutions demanding so broad a perspective must be recognized from the outset

as having a religious as well as a scientific dimension. Mindful of our common responsibility, we scientists urgently appeal to the world religious community to commit, in word and deed, and as boldly as required, to preserve the environment of the Earth.”

Protestant theologians of the last century may have been skilled at articulating faith in the midst of various historical crises, but they did not have much grasp of cosmology or ecology. They set us up to understand nature as submissive objects at the disposal of the more creative subjects, human beings. Francis Bacon, for instance, wrote in 1879 that we are called to “enlarge the bounds of human empires, to the effecting of all things possible, by using nature as the ‘anvil’ on which humans ‘hammer out’ a world.”

Even for the most profound of our religious thinkers like Kierkegaard, Bultmann, Barth and Niebuhr, nature and history were divorced, and all that humanly counted was the making of history. Culture and history was what humans did *to* nature to give it meaning and render it serviceable. As author Larry Rasmussen writes, “The heart of the Christian ethic – love of neighbor and justice – never included five to ten million other species of God’s fecund imagination not to mention the inanimate resources of air, water, and land.” (Rasmussen, p190.)

Do we even need to mention the destruction that has resulted and continues to result from such human alienation from and attempt to dominate nature? A couple minutes on the NY Times website reveals hundreds of shocking articles. Let me mention just a few:

- There is abundant evidence that economic stress and crop failures — as climate scientists anticipate in poorer countries — can lead to violence and upheavals. A drought one year increases by 50 percent the risk that an African country will slip into civil war the next year.
- Nearly a third of the world’s reefs have already been lost and some 58% of what is left is under direct threat
- Flooding river bottoms to grow hay sustains the economy in many western US states but means less water in the rivers for wild fish. This competition for water is not new, but it is intensifying as the climate gets warmer and drier. Last year sections of 20 rivers in Montana were closed to fishing because of warm water temperatures, while in 2001 none were closed.
- Deforestation began thousands of years ago for building ships and houses. But over the last 20 years alone more than 300 million hectares of tropical forests (an area larger than the size of India) have been cleared for plantations, agriculture, pasture, mining, or urban development. Today forests cover only half of the area they did when the age of agriculture began.
- Sandstorms in northwest China are reducing sections of the Great Wall to mounds of dirt and may cause them to disappear within 20 years. Extensive farming in China since the 1950s together with the effect of climate change, has sapped underground water and harmed the local ecology. About 25 miles of the wall has already disappeared in one NW province.

Perhaps we must look at the stories of our faith with new eyes. Perhaps Psalm 19, for instance, should be read as a song of the earth. This ancient hymn sings of earth’s days and nights teaching God’s ways, of the sun rising around the world with joy and strength like a bridegroom coming out of his wedding canopy.

We often use the phrase “day by day” as little more than 24 hour periods of time that we have to use, as *our* time; time that exists for us. But what if every rotation of the earth, every sunrise to sunset, contains the breath and heartbeat of God and we are simply guests of the day, fortunate even to sit in the audience for 24 hours? What if we were to consider ourselves only listeners, students of each day’s performance.

It is the earth which reveals God’s will and ways to be perfect, sure, right and clear, more desirable than gold, sweeter than drippings of the honeycomb. It is in the earth’s speaking to us

that our souls are revived, that simple minds are made wise, that hearts rejoice and eyes are enlightened. It is the earth that gives warning and reward to her servant disciples. This ancient earth song ends with a plea made by some of those earth disciples, that they might recognize their mistakes, that their pride might not have dominion over them, and finally that their words and hearts might be acceptable to the Creator, who is their rock and redeemer.

Paul's letter to Disciples of Jesus, the Christ, in Rome, may contain earth wisdom that Paul never imagined. The letter speaks of creation waiting, longing eagerly for the children of God, the earth's disciples, to be revealed. Paul writes that the Creator subjected creation to futility in the hope that earth's disciples would free her from her bondage to decay so that the earth might become free with all of God's children someday.

Together, all the earth and all humanity wait for adoption and redemption, as if groaning in labor. We wait together, not for the redemption of our souls, but the redemption, as Paul writes, of our bodies, our earthly existence. We wait *together* to be redeemed. Neither of us can be redeemed, saved, healed, completed, without the other. The earth cannot be healed until we are made whole and we can not be redeemed until the earth is healed.

Human beings, one final inch of creative history, may indeed destroy much of the life on this billion year old planet and are surely the only ones who can change this course of destruction.

This is going to be the most difficult struggle for justice that people of faith have ever faced. When we fight for gender and racial equality, there is much to gain and little to lose. The same is true with our work for inclusivity for the GLBT community, for an end to military violence, for gun control, for health care. True, there are some who make great sacrifices in these struggles, and there are real sacrifices we may still need to make, but most of us have given up very little for most of our causes. We have learned how to defend justice in many arenas, but we have not learned how to fight against ourselves, we have not learned how to sacrifice our own comfort, lifestyles, or pleasures.

The world is looking to people of faith, finally, to lead the way out of this present darkness and the journey is not going to be easy. We have to reform our biblical theologies (always a hotbed for the Church). We have to rescue our cosmologies from the inadequate understanding of previous generations without placing guilt as we humbly embrace new truths. We have to renew our spiritual connections with all of the earth, organic and inorganic, and redefine our own identity. And, most importantly, we have to respond with prophetic voices and personal sacrifices on the behalf of many in this world who may not yet care and who may not yet believe. May those who have eyes to see, see, and those who have ears to hear, hear.