

I Wish the Preacher Would Talk About...

The Lord God Made Them All: A Green Theology

Psalm 8:3-9

August 14, 2022

“The heavens are telling the glory of God...and what is God’s glory telling us? That we aren’t the only game in town.” Those very words were written in mid-July by my friend and Old Testament professor Bill Brown. The post linked to pictures of stellar nurseries from the Carina Nebula, pictures taken by the James Webb Space Telescope, pictures that span a distance of 8,500 light years. Bill’s scholarly interests form a kind of intellectual bridge between scripture and science that has always fascinated me, and his choice of words from the psalms to describe the latest scientific achievement were a witness to the continuity he expresses.

After all, the incredible efforts of brilliant scientists were providing stunning evidence of what the writers of scripture expressed millennia ago—that the beauty and reach of creation far exceed the capacity of the human mind. In fact, I heard someone from NASA interviewed about the pictures from this new telescope, and it was his humility that was most striking to me. He described how the more we learn about the nature and origin of the universe, the more questions emerge. He said the more we know, the greater our appreciation for what we do not know.

We’re not the only game in town. The writer of the psalms knew this. Lacking telescopes, microscopes, string theory, or biological classification, the community of faith could nevertheless look at the night sky, or the green shoots coming from the earth, or the birds of the air, and say, “Oh, Lord, how majestic is your name, and how manifold are your works.” They knew we’re not the only game in town.

Now, we may not be alone, but we *are* unique. Scripture is also very clear on this point. In the story of creation that our children know well, humankind is both the crowning achievement of the whole event *and* the only one entrusted and empowered to till the earth and bring forth food. The specific language of Genesis, which is repeated in this morning’s psalm, is that we are given “dominion” over the earth.

And perhaps that’s where the trouble started. As the centuries passed and human knowledge and capacity increased exponentially, that language of dominion also evolved. From the awestruck wonder of the Psalmist (who can say, “What are human beings that you are even mindful of us? When you, oh God, created all that is,”) to a presumed mastery. From compassionate care to reckless subjugation.

As far back as 1967, an historian (and Presbyterian elder) named Lynn White wrote in *Science* magazine that the roots of our ecological crisis were essentially religious, deriving especially from the Christian tradition which has taught people to see themselves, in White’s own words, “as superior to nature, contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim.”

Indeed, it is hard to argue with the history here. We must also acknowledge a tragic irony, given the sacred texts of our tradition and their consistent call from beginning to end to a symbiotic coexistence with the rest of creation. We Christians need to talk about this destructive disconnect.

At least some of you agree. Last year, as part of the silent auction to raise funds for the extraordinary

mission support provided by Women@Second, I offered the opportunity to request a sermon topic. When I spoke with the winning bidder, there was clarity without hesitation. “I would like to hear a sermon on care for the environment as part of our Christian responsibility.” Perhaps you, too, have wished that the preacher would talk about the intersection between ecology and theology.

No matter what the topic is, my starting point for proclamation is the same. I turn to the words of scripture. I ask, “How does the God we meet in this sacred book invite and command us to live in response to it?” I ask myself, “Which lessons can we draw from the words and stories of these sacred texts? And how can we, as individuals and a community of faith, put those lessons into practice?” In the case of seeking a faithful response to the gift of creation, scripture is not lacking in content to consider.

This [*raises copy of the Bible*] particular publication of the Bible was printed in 2008. A group of scholars got together to create what they called “The Green Bible.” Borrowing from the red-letter Bibles that print the words of Jesus in red text, these scholars went through all 66 books of scripture, seeking words that speak to God’s gift of creation and printing those words in green. And this Bible is filled with green words.

But scripture is not just a lifeless relic better suited to museum displays than contemporary interpretation. These old words were built to travel, and so the context of our proclamation matters as well. These words must find a home in the world if they are to be impactful and effective. And here again, I find an abundance of relevant material.

I do understand and want to acknowledge that there are those who may feel the topic of responding to our environmental crisis is outside the bounds of theology or the role of the church. Some have suggested that we have done enough damage already and should leave this talk to scientists. And others argue that the topic is more political than scriptural. But with respect, I simply disagree. It is

in the pages of scripture that I find a mandate to be faithful stewards of God’s gift of creation. It is in the context of contemporary life that I see an urgent need to respond to that call. Here I count myself among those who long for a “deep ecology.” That is, a transformation in our understanding of who we are in the fabric of creation and how we are to live.

For this, there is no better resource than the Bible. So, what do we find in the pages of scripture that might inform the practices of the faithful?

First, we discover a consistent command to honor the gifts of the Creator by honoring the gift of creation. The call to till the earth and keep it is not a license to destroy it—quite the opposite! The dominion to which we are called must be defined by God’s own practice of sharing power. “You have made us a little lower than God.” That is God, whose power is beyond description or human imagination. That God does not exercise power in destructive or tyrannical ways, and neither should we. We are to be humble about our role and our place. To the extent we exercise dominion we do so in the image of God’s own dominion—the dominion of love.

Second, scripture invites us to see and acknowledge the radical interconnectedness of all creation. The Psalmist again and again declares this in words of wonder and of praise. “When I look at the works of your hand.” The Apostle Paul, in a different way, writes of the interwoven nature of creation. In the eighth chapter of Romans, Paul observes that all of creation is groaning in labor pains, that all of creation is subjected to futility, that all of creation waits together for redemption. For Paul, this futility is related to human sinfulness, so the redemption of creation is directly tied to the redemption of humankind. We are not the only game in town. And our actions have an impact on the rest of God’s fragile and sacred creation.

Our spiritual ancestor John Calvin wrote about creation as the theatre of God’s glory. I love that. In creation we see the beauty, the majesty, the creativity, the wonder of God’s power. And in

creation, we see how intimately we humans are connected to the rest of this tapestry, how essential we are to its redemption.

When the pharisees tried to trap Jesus, tried to convince him to name where the kingdom of God was and when we would see it, Jesus said, “All you have to do is look around you. The kingdom of God is here.”

How would it shift our actions to reclaim that message? Would we live differently if we embraced God’s dominion of love and our part in the play?

Yes, creation is groaning. For many decades now, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has tracked hurricanes, fires, floods, droughts, and other disasters that have an economic impact of more than a billion dollars. In the 1980s, adjusted for inflation, the average annual number of such events was 3.1. Over the past five years, that number has increased to eighteen per year.

Creation is groaning. A personal confession. I really like drinking water out of plastic bottles. There is something about the feel, the taste, the freshness of a new bottle. I love the feel when you crack it open for the first time. So, I keep bottles of water outside my office, and I have a habit of drinking one or two of them nearly every day. Well, this summer during Vacation Bible School our two boys came up to my office at the end of the day each day before we headed home. And each day, as they drank out of their reusable water bottles that never leave their side thanks to their mother who has that same practice, Sam and Ben preached to me. “Dad you know you have a water bottle at home. You bought it, why don’t you use it? It’s better for the earth than throwing that plastic out. How many of those bottles do you drink?”

I decided to do a little research on my own. It was not encouraging. I read about the modern phenomenon of floating plastic islands. The largest is known as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. It’s twice the size of the state of Texas. These massive collections of plastic waste sit on the surface of the ocean, but their impact goes much deeper,

threatening all kinds of ocean life intricately tied to the food sources of hundreds of millions of people around the globe. Creation is groaning, and we have a mandate to care.

It struck me that my own children were mirroring a lesson we attempt to teach them. The lesson is this: our actions have consequences. Our obsession with unrestrained growth, our reliance on single-use materials, my preference for plastic water bottles, they all have consequences.

As I’ve reflected on this topic and spoken with friends as well, I’m aware of a subtle undercurrent of apathy or, perhaps more precisely, of helplessness. It tends to come up in one of two ways. The first is to discount individual acts, given the global nature of the challenge. It goes something like this: Our lives, the life of *my* family, is a thimble of water on a raging fire. And perhaps that’s precisely what it is. The other response, borne of desperation, is that it is simply too late to turn back the clock. That nothing can be done now. That we’ve gone too far. You know, I can relate to both reactions. The situation feels daunting, even overwhelming.

But then I am reminded of an apocryphal story from the Civil War. As Confederate soldiers were marching into her town, an elderly woman stepped outside. She picked up a broom and began walking toward the soldiers, waving her broom at them. Concerned for her safety, a neighbor stopped the woman and said, “Lady, they have horses and muskets and cannons. You can’t beat them with a broom.” The woman replied, “Maybe not, but at least they will know whose side I am on.”

You see, we have these words of scripture that speak to us of God’s command to care. You see, we have the promise that we are not alone in our efforts to make a better world for our children. You see, we have both the assurance of God’s ultimate redemption *and* the responsibility to do what we can right now. We may not be able to utterly alter the course of the crisis, but we are not excused from taking the actions we can that show whose side we are on.

This summer, we were visiting with some friends in the mountains of north Georgia. Their cabin was built in the early nineteenth century, and just being there feels like a journey back in time. While we were visiting, I found a booklet on one of the shelves from 1941. The booklet's title is *Suggestions for Better Living*. As I leafed through it, I found that many of those suggestions had to do with reusing items that had served their purpose. Eighty years ago, this included fabric from old sweaters used to darn socks, flour bags that could be reused by neighbors in need, rubber tires collected in support of a community effort. There was throughout the booklet a sense of stewardship, of responsibility, of belonging. We don't throw away what we can use. There was a sense of interconnectedness, that someone can use those things that we collect and send to those in need, offered to neighbors. A shared sense that the community belongs to all of us together.

This, I believe, is where communities of faith have something unique to contribute. From the time of the psalms, we've recognized that we are not the only game in town. We trust in the One who created it all, who has invited us to the dominion of love.

In the coming months, we at Second will be seeking ways to live more fully into this work together. We will share these with you and invite your creative energy and your ideas as well.

Friends, we are called to the dominion of love. To care for the precious gifts of creation. We owe it to our children, our grandchildren, generations yet to come. We owe it all those who are at greatest risk even now. Above all, we owe it to the God who made us stewards of this extraordinary world, who created from love for love. The Lord God who made them, who made us, all. Amen.