

Earth Sabbath 2007

“Stop Worrying About the Earth”

An Earth Sabbath Sermon

Church of the Crossroads

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Introduction

I am a forester by training. I enter the forest wearing heavy-soled work boots and a hard hat. I carry with me a machete to clear the underbrush, a shovel to explore the soil and the roots, and a coring device to probe the depth of the trees' heartwood. On occasion, I carry an axe and a saw to cut down trees that are undesirable, that crowd out trees I wish to see flourish, and even to harvest those flourishing trees when they come of age. I do not do so randomly or carelessly but with forethought and the application of the best of my scientific knowledge and the shared experience of myself and my colleagues. And because of the forester, the logger, the sawmill operator, and the artisan, we have this handsome pulpit, this beautiful floor, these lofty beams, these inspirational carvings, and even the chairs in which you sit. Who would wish to live without these items? Who would wish to replace them with plastic or steel? And yet, many people worry about the world's forests, about the wildlife that inhabits it, about the fish in the sea, the birds of the air, and every creeping thing that crawls upon the earth. People worry about the air, the land, the oceans, the climate, the very earth itself. Everywhere we turn, the language of crisis and doom hang upon the lips of environmentalists, scientists, politicians, our friends and neighbors.

People of faith are called upon to respond to these crises, to no longer be silent, to no longer give tacit approval to the destruction of what surely we must believe is God's creation, yes? But should we lend our voices as people of faith, as communities of faith, to those who cry “calamity!” Should we worry that God's creation is in danger of being wiped out? That we may commit the ultimate sin of bringing wrath and judgment upon ourselves through destruction of what we have been entrusted to “have dominion over”? for surely if we destroy the earth, we condemn ourselves! Indeed, Earth Day was not just as a celebration of the Earth but also to call

attention to the problems of the natural world and our role in its degradation and destruction. So on this Earth Sabbath, perhaps it is proper to give voice to the worrying cries of those who feel God has abandoned us to our own sorry fates, too gluttonous and greedy to properly care for the earth, too proud to admit our shameful transgressions against it, and too slothful to take the necessary action to stop it. But as a forester and as a Christian, I say do not worry. Faith, hope, and love do abide. And worrying will not cause us to add one hour to our lives or a single hair on our heads to grow. But if we do not worry about the earth, then who will? Should anyone? How will we stop the wanton and senseless destruction and replace it with a flourishing earth, full of life and beauty? I believe our faith has an answer to this question, and to several other ideas about the earth and our relationship to it that I think it is time for us to seriously rethink and ultimately to reject as reflective of our Christian faith.

Ideas to Discard

1. The earth is fragile

At the margins, yes; if kept under constant abuse, disturbance, or degradation, yes. But we can never “destroy” the earth, only its suitability for ourselves and many other members of Creation. The Earth has survived several mass extinctions in its past, and it will likely survive the latest one that we are responsible for. As the ones responsible for the current mass extinction, we should be horrified and ashamed, but trust me, the earth is resilient enough to survive whatever abusive things we decide to do to it.

2. The theology and doctrines of Christianity have encouraged, sanctioned, or supported environmental destruction.

Beginning in the modern period (17th century onward), man justified his new and increasing technological power over nature through a misinterpretation of the concept of “dominion”. The wild and natural world was seen as a threat to agriculture and civilization, as something that had to be conquered and tamed. The religious analogy was the wild and unruly nature of the human being, whether manifested outwardly in the primitive, savage, and Godless tribes of the New World and Africa or inwardly as the temptation to stray from the orderly doctrines of the Church. But if we think hard about this attitude, it is neither Biblical nor Christian in origin. As

Wendell Berry, the farmer and essayist points out, Biblical stories, encounters with God, the words of the prophets and the parables of Jesus take place mostly outside the temple or synagogue. Most of the Jewish founders, leaders, and prophets, including Jesus himself, found inspiration, refuge, and solace away from civilization in the wilds of nature. It is only the height of naïve selfishness to assume that the rest of creation is simply here to provide us with freeways and hamburgers and lattes and an endless supply of cheap electricity and gasoline.

3. Wilderness is the ideal state of Nature

Given the positive value of wilderness in the Bible and Jewish tradition, perhaps environmentalists are right, wilderness is the ideal state of nature. But many go beyond that belief to claim that the flourishing of Nature requires a high degree of separation from man and his meddling. For them, we have neither the wisdom nor the sensitivity to use the Earth properly; thus, we should lock up as much of it as possible into nature preserves, to be gazed upon from the outside. Even indigenous cultures and forest-dwellers have been displaced from newly created national parks and wildlife preserves. Their ancient wisdom and practices are no longer relevant in the cash economy and no longer compatible with the flourishing of wilderness. Like the padlock on the refrigerator door, we can't resist the temptation to raid nature's bounty and despoil its treasures. Although this may be true, it is certainly not Biblical or Christian in origin or tradition. The earth was created to meet our needs and we entrusted to care for it. Or fall from innocence in the Garden of Eden also meant a separation from our original harmony with nature, but as believers in redemption and salvation, Christians should ultimately reject the separation that environmentalists say is necessary to preserve the earth.

4. We should tread lightly upon the earth

A corollary to the wilderness ideal is the belief that we should tread as lightly as possible on the earth, live as simply as possible, alter the earth as little as possible to meet our basic needs. This is a misguided reaction to our culpability in the degradation of the earth. To tread lightly is to resign ourselves to an asceticism that God never intended. It is to deny our essential connection and cut us off from a bountiful and life-giving earth. It is to disregard the command to "go forth and multiply", to flourish and

thrive, to rejoice in the Creation that God saw was good and that was laid before us to use and care for.

Biblical and Christian Ideas for a New Environmentalism

If these ideas are incompatible with a Biblical or Christian understanding of our environmental stewardship, with what do we replace them?

1. We are fellow creatures on this earth

From Genesis Chapter 2, the writer states that God formed us out of the dust of the earth, just as the animals were formed from the dust and breathed in them the same breath of life as in us. We are not above them but they are not more important than we. This is completely compatible with a scientific understanding of our biological and evolutionary relatedness. It also corresponds to the way many indigenous cultures have viewed their own kinship with the earth and its plants and animals, including the Native Hawaiians. These various expressions of kinship, of *ohana*, are deep and meaningful expressions of relationship, not just primitive animistic beliefs. Wendell Berry, identifying the presence of God in all of creation, condemns our destruction of the earth as not only wasteful, ugly, and irresponsible, but as “the most horrid blasphemy. It is flinging God’s gifts into his face, as of no worth beyond that assigned to them by our destruction of them.” Douglas Hall defines an egalitarian relationship between humanity and the rest of creation as “being with”; a recognition of our separate identities but our essential relatedness. The human being is not merely an animal, but then, neither is the animal merely what most humans think of them. We are all good in the sight of God; we are all filled with God’s spirit; we are all holy and sacred before God; we are all part of the body of Christ.

2. Consider the lilies of the field...

This is one of the hardest passages in the Gospels to really understand and fulfill. How can we just let go of worry, of doubt, of planning for tomorrow? How will things ever get done? Won’t things just fall apart into chaos and ruin? The Taoist or Zen Buddhist would have a nice chuckle at such consternation because this is exactly the message they also preach. Jesus was calling for a radical transformation of our outlook, to step outside of the

secular, de-humanizing and isolating system that had bound us to the law and had separated us from the goodness of Creation and of a deeper, more profound relationship with God. Paul's exhortation to transform ourselves by the renewing of our minds (Romans Ch. 2) was the essence of his salvation message, not just acceptance of the historical Jesus as a supernatural savior. It was a call to completely reshape our thinking, our attitudes, our relationships. The goal of this transformation is life and life more abundantly than we thought possible, not through the possession of things, through increased security, through domination and control over the things that may cause us harm or suffering but by letting go and letting God into our hearts. Alan Watts, the wonderful writer who expounded so eloquently upon what we could learn from eastern religions and philosophy, advocated that we open ourselves up not just to God's salvation but to all of creation and literally fall in love with both God and the world. He writes "to fall deeply in love is to enter a state where delight and anguish are at times so interwoven as to be indistinguishable." It is a realization that pain and suffering, physical death and decay are inevitable; it is the way the world works. But as luminous and spiritual beings, we can accept this as fully as we accept the glorious events of birth, of growth, of the fruitfulness of life. Suffering and death are only problems for the ego, not for the organism. For Paul, only through this radical transformation of our mind, our entire being, can we truly end the cycle of condemnation, of guilt, of spiritual suffering and death. Wendell Berry applies the idea of love, of deep connection with creation, to our use of the Earth, as well. He sees in the works of the artist and the craftsman a manifestation not just of skill and creativity but of a properly sacred use of the gifts of the earth. The cheaply made and mass-produced items of modern convenience may bring immediate material satisfaction, but it is the well-made tool, the item hand-crafted and expressive of the beauty of the raw material and the soul of the artist that is cherished and kept for generations, with no need to replace it and never a thought of discarding it.

3. Christian community, earth community

The ideal Christian community of which Paul spoke so eloquently in his epistles is the model for how we should interact with the earth. Seeing ourselves not only as fellow creatures but as fellow community members, we see that we are in this together, that our flourishing depends upon the flourishing of the earth. They are not separate; how could they be? That means we work with nature, shaping it to provide what we need but in so

doing strengthening its own flourishing and thereby deepening our relationship to it. As in a community, if we exploit others for personal gain, we separate ourselves and cut ourselves off from the relationship that made possible our own success. It is self-defeating as well as insulting and unethical and, as Berry put it, “horrid blasphemy.” The “earth community” that David Korten speaks of is grounded in a direct, sensitized, mutually beneficial relationship with the earth itself. Again, Native Hawaiians and Native Americans use the earth, cultivate it, hunt and fish, cut down trees for canoes, build homes to live in and altars for worship. But they do so with a profoundly religious attitude, a deep spiritual connection to the earth and to their relationship with it. Indeed, for many indigenous cultures, religion and daily life are inseparable. There is no concept of secular vs. sacred. From this relationship and interaction comes not just a depth of feeling but a depth of knowledge and discernment, which is the basis of wisdom. Science and technology may be clever enough to get nature to jump through a lot of different hoops, but wisdom, imbued with meaning, with value, with relationship, shows us how to live in harmony so that our own flourishing is part and parcel of the flourishing of the earth. Again, how could it be otherwise? That indigenous wisdom is inextricably bound up with a deep spiritual connection to the earth in everything we do. Thus, true environmentalism and sustainability is a religious movement, not a secular one. So, on this Earth Sabbath, I say let us live in community with the earth, fellow creatures filled with God’s presence and life-giving spirit, in love with each other and committed to our mutual flourishing not to a set of principles, practices, or attitudes that divide us, condemn us, separate us from the fullness of life and the sacred earth in all its glorious manifestations.

Amen.