

Church of the Crossroads
Second Sunday of Easter
Earth Sabbath
April 23, 2006
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A CRY FOR RESTORATION

Genesis 2:4b-9, 15-17

Acts 17:22-31

Matthew 6:25-33

In his little book, *A Short History of Progress*, the philosopher Ronald Wright explores the civilization that was once found on Rapa Nui, and how that civilization came to an end. Enamored by a notion of progress that involved the crafting of stone images at the expense of the natural resources of their island (most notably the island's trees), the Easter Islanders brought about the collapse of their society. At the end of his book, Ronald Wright issues a dire warning with these words. He writes,

We are now at the stage when the Easter Islanders could still have halted the senseless cutting and carving, could have gathered the last trees/seeds to plant out of reach of the rats. We have the tools and means to share resources, clean up pollution, dispense basic health care and birth control, set economic limits in line with natural ones. If we don't do these things now, while we prosper, we will never be able to do them when times get hard. Our fate will twist out of our hands. And this new century will not grow very old before we enter an age of chaos and collapse that will dwarf all the dark ages in our past.

Now is our last chance to get things right.

This morning, I want to approach this crisis from a spiritual/Christian point of view. Let us begin with the image the Apostle Paul uses in the 8th chapter of his letter to the Romans, and that is the image of the creation groaning in travail. The earth is dying due to human excess, and in its dying, the earth groans and cries out for restoration. The evidences of the earth's impending death are everywhere if we have but ears to hear and eyes to see. The most urgent crisis is that of global warming and its causes, and this large crisis is exhibited in smaller crises such as changing weather patterns. Could it be that the recent rains we have experienced here in Hawai'i are a result of global warming? Quite possibly. The rains resulted

in the failure of an antiquated sewer system and the poisoning of the ocean. We worry about the tourist trade being hurt, but what about the ocean itself and its own life? Meanwhile, those opposing an energy-efficient rail system for O‘ahu propose a double-decker highway which will only invite the purchase of more and more cars and the waste of more and more non-renewable energy. Alongside this, the development of more and more high-rises, eating up more and more energy and more and more land, goes unabated. And we have not even seen fit to establish a state-of-the-art recycling program. It seems that our island mentality refuses to learn, to really learn from the experience of communities elsewhere.

In truth, the earth cries out for its own restoration, hoping that we human beings will take heed. And now for the question that must occupy us as human beings and as Christians. What will it take, spiritually, for us to heed the cry of the earth and respond in a faithful way?

In keeping with the vision of Matthew Fox and others, and also the insights that come from indigenous cultures as well as the Judeo-Christian tradition, may I suggest this morning that it will take nothing less than a re-formation of our understanding of the nature and role of the human being in relationship to the earth, and also a re-formation of our understanding of the nature of God.

As those who locate themselves in the Judeo-Christian tradition, we must learn what Martin Luther once said. He said that there are some parts of the Bible that are more important for us than others. I would suggest that, given the earth’s cry for restoration, we would do better to pay attention to the second account of creation rather than the first. Recall that in the first creation account, God creates humankind, male and female, and instructs them to increase and multiply and subdue the earth. In the second account, God forms the human man “from the dust of the ground and breathe[s] into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man [becomes] a living being” *as part of the earth*. God then places the man in the garden of Eden “*to till it and keep it*” as a responsible steward of it, and also instructs the human man as to his limits. “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

The human being must live with limits, a truth that seems to go against the American grain. The human being must also learn that it is the human task not only to *till* the earth but also to *keep* it. More importantly, the human being must understand that he or she is not *being-over-creation*,

or *being-under-creation*, but *being-with-creation*, as Douglas John Hall reminds us in his writings on the theme of stewardship.

Until we understand these spiritual truths about our true nature as human beings, the earth will continue to descend into sure death. However, if we can come to understand our human identity as “being with” the earth rather than “being above” the earth or “being under” the earth, then we have the possibility of appreciating the unity of creation and the interconnectedness of all things. Writes Matthew Fox, “Everyone is born a mystic and a lover who experiences the unity of things and all are called to keep this mystic or lover of life alive.”

With this understanding, we may begin to live the ethic of that passage in Matthew Chapter 6 read for us this morning that stands as a judgment against the self-securing and greed of human beings and the incessant worry that results when they see themselves as beings above creation rather than beings with creation, when they deny the goodness and grace of God who provides for the wellbeing of all living things.

If in the first place we need to re-form our understanding of our true nature as human beings in order to respond faithfully to the earth’s cry for restoration, in the second place we need also to re-form our understanding of the nature of God. It is here that I want especially to honor the work of Matthew Fox, for it was he who first taught me about the philosophical/theological idea of *panentheism*, the notion that “all things are in God and God is in all things.” Panentheism is to be distinguished from pantheism (panentheism has an extra “en” in the middle). Pantheism says that all things *are* God, and God *is* all things. That is different from saying that all things are *in* God and God is *in* all things. Panentheism leaves room for both the transcendence and immanence of God. God is in all things, yes, but God is also larger and beyond all things. In panentheism, God is the indwelling Spirit that holds all things together.

However, and this is the revolutionary part of the idea, panentheism is also to be distinguished from theism, the understanding of God that is always in danger of denying God’s imminence because it views God as being ‘out there’ or above and beyond the universe. I must say I have a little fun with this, especially when people tell me they are atheists. To which I reply, “I would like to know what God you do not believe in, because if it is the God that is up there and out there and not here, then I too count myself as an atheist.” Dialogue usually then results.

My sense is that the Apostle Paul was moving away from theism and coming close to panentheism when in his sermon to the Athenians, he affirms the words of an unknown Greek poet who said that “*in God we live and move and have our being.*” If Paul had included all the living things of the earth (and that includes everything, for all things are alive), he could have been the father of Christian panentheism!

Traditional theism, simply because it pushes God out of the creation, has been harmful to the efforts to save the earth. It has tended to ignore the truth of the incarnation, that in Jesus the Christ, God has come to be with us and for us, that God is present in all of life, including the life of the earth itself. Panentheism acknowledges this truth, that God is present in all things, and is therefore an idea that re-enforces the incarnation. It also is a notion that leads to a deep appreciation for the sacredness of the earth. Writes Matthew Fox, “Fourteen billion years of evolution and unfolding of the universe bespeak the intimate sacredness of all that is.” Because God is in all things, all things are sacred.

Therefore, when we violate the earth, when we allow global warming to continue unchecked, when we fail to establish recycling as a way of life, when we fail to maintain our sewer systems, when we continue to use up the land without regard to its preservation, let alone without regard to the needs of the poor and houseless, when we continue to allow these things to happen, we violate that which is sacred. Or, as Matthew Fox declares, we continue to crucify the Christ who for the Christian is “the light in all things.” Says Fox, “Ecojustice is a necessity for planetary survival and human ethics and without it we are crucifying the Christ all over again in the form of destruction of forests, waters, species, air and soil.” Surely, our calling as followers of Christ is not to continue to crucify him but to celebrate the new life of his resurrection.

With these understandings we may become the people we were created to be, a people who love the earth as they love themselves. And the cry of the creation for its own restoration may be heeded.

My friends, let us take these truths to our hearts and our lives, and let us speak of them beyond the confines of our community, and live them as well, not only on this Earth Sabbath but each and every day. So will we honor the new life of the Resurrection with not only our lips but also with the way we live our lives. So will the earth find the restoration it longs for so desperately. May it be so. Amen.