

Church of the Good Shepherd
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God So Loved the World...

Mountains have long been a place where I feel close to God. I know I'm not alone in this. The Scriptures are full of people meeting God on mountains—Abraham on Mt Moriah, Moses on Mt Sinai, Elijah finding God in the still small voice on Mount Horeb, Jesus giving the Sermon *on the Mount*. For me though, it's a bit more personal. Ever since my great-grandfather bought a place up in Highlands, NC, my family has been making a pilgrimage to the Smokey Mountains each summer. More than a refuge from the heat, though, those mountains were a kind of secret garden to me growing up. I would spend my days playing in the mountain streams, turning over rocks to see what critter would scurry out, or wandering in the woods, hoping to come across a waterfall or overlook or abandoned homestead. It's a truly special place.

I was standing before those mountains—well, one of their northern neighbors—a few weeks ago. Brendan and I had decided to go fishing and had chosen one of the reservoir lakes outside Charlottesville. The scene was just perfect—clear skies, the afternoon sun giving the mountainside leaves a golden glow, so quiet you can hear the plop of another fisherman casting his hook on the other side of the lake. It's times like that you just have to pause and reflect and marvel at the beauty and glory of God's creation.

It just so happened that earlier that week I had heard a report on the state of the nature, that is, on the health of the environment. It detailed the continued destruction wrought by mountaintop removal, where mining companies dynamite and bulldoze whole mountains to get at the coal. This leaves the earth stripped of vegetation and the valley streams polluted with toxic heavy metals. The report also mentioned the train derailment this past year in East Palestine, OH that spilled toxic chemicals for miles, and the huge “red tide” algae blooms in the Gulf Coast this past summer caused by fertilizer runoff from farms and lawns up the Mississippi. There's also the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, a man-made island, 620,000 miles square, composed of discarded plastics that break down into tiny particles which slowly make their way up the marine food chain. The oceans themselves are already under stress by overfishing, bottom dredging, and invasive species.

And I haven't even mentioned the controversy of carbon emissions and the associated efforts to curtail them. For “green technology” is not really “green” when you consider what goes into solar panels, windmills and lithium batteries: whole forests being razed for balsa wood to put into windmill blades, huge numbers of migratory birds like bald eagles killed by spinning windmill blades and whales beached by the offshore wind farms; toxic, water-intensive mining of lithium in the Argentinian desert which robs the area of what little rain the area gets, cobalt mines in the Congo that employ children in dangerous hand-dug shafts, solar panels that are chucked into landfills after 20 years to leach chemicals into groundwater. No one's hands are clean; directly or indirectly, even so-called environmentalists are complicit in the destruction and pollution.

Of course, that doesn't stop people from casting blame. It's the fault of oil and mining companies! It's greedy corporate executives and shareholders! It's corrupt politicians who protect the corporations that fund their campaigns. Even the Church has come under attack. Back in the 1970s, Lynn White wrote a famous and influential essay in which he claimed that the historical roots of our ecological crisis can be traced to Judeo-Christian "beliefs about nature and destiny," where humanity is the center of the world and the rest of the world exists to serve human needs. Out of this belief grew science and technology, which have enabled such a huge and destructive impact on the environment. Because of these, White concludes, the real culprits of the environmental crisis are not the polluters themselves or the regulators that allow the pollution, but rather Christianity, says White, for the church has theologically underwritten the destruction.

Now, there are *plenty of reasons* to contest this argument, historically and sociologically, yet we have to concede we Christians haven't done much to counter this perception. To most people who are concerned about the environment, Christians, and in particular evangelical Christians, are a large part of the problem. I'm speaking of those brothers and sisters who proudly bear bumper stickers that read, "In case of Rapture, this car will be unmanned." These Christians can't wait for Jesus to return and get them out of this world. Because this world is destined to be destroyed when Jesus comes back, they believe there's no reason to worry about taking care of it. The earth is disposable. It's there for our use and when it's used up, we can throw it away, figuratively speaking.

If this is indeed the Christian witness, then yes, we can understand why environmentalists would see us Christians as obstacles, if not enemies. Fortunately, for us and for the environment, that "disposable" view is not the only view Christians have of the environment, nor, I'll argue, is it a truly biblical view. Such an attitude is only possible if we forget what the Bible says, if we lose sight of the biblical plan of salvation and how the theme of the *redemption of the world* runs throughout the Old and New Testaments. That is to say, this throwaway worldview is only possible if one doesn't read the Bible.

Indeed, even for those of us who are biblically literate, it's helpful to be reminded of the story of God's dealings with the earth. The story begins, well, at the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth. Out of nothing, God created the stars and the moons, the mountains and the oceans, the rivers and the sky, the grasshopper, the ox, and the kangaroo. The world God created was intended to be a reflection of God's glory and a suitable habitat for God's creatures, particularly for us humans, the greatest of His creatures.

As we read in the second chapter of Genesis, before He created anything, God had humanity in mind. He planned for us and created the world as a garden, a place of beauty and pleasure and sustenance, where humans could flourish and could enjoy the Creator and the gifts of creation. Even with that special place in creation, humanity was given a special responsibility, a special role which no other creature had. "The LORD God took the human and put him in the Garden of Eden *to till it and keep it*". Other translations have that we are "to cultivate and conserve," or "to work and to preserve," or even "to protect and serve," like the motto of the police. That's the first and original purpose of humanity, what we are here for, according to Genesis 2, our primary

vocation, our first job—to tend the garden, to protect and serve the earth God has given us, to be God’s stewards, his representatives on earth.

There was just this one rule they had to obey—don’t eat the fruit from a certain tree in the garden. All other trees were fine to eat, but not this one tree. Well, we all know how that turned out...Like defiant children, our primordial ancestors did exactly what they were told not to do. What they did wasn’t simply a matter of disobeying a rule, though. Going against God’s command was a rejection of creation as a gift of God, as a sign of God’s provision, as something that pointed to God’s goodness and through which they had communion with God. With their disobedience, creation ceased to be transparent to God, and became opaque, dead, a thing to be used and abused and exploited as we see fit. So, the fall wasn’t just about our falling out with God, it was also a break with creation, our alienation from the earth, from the land that sustains us. Accordingly, Adam’s punishment for his sin was a curse upon the land and on his labor: “in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and by the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread.” That’s an important verse for gardeners and farmers...it explains the reason for Canadian thistle, chickweed, and crabgrass—it’s a punishment for sin! Remember that when you are weeding your garden!

In the generations that came after, God watched as humanity made a mess of the earth, overgrazing and overloading the land and conquering other peoples to take their land. God saw that this could not continue and called together a people, the Israelites, who would be a “light to the nations,” a blessing to all peoples, showing the world how to live rightly with God, with their neighbors and with the earth. God gave them explicit instructions of how to survive on the fragile ecosystem that is the Promised Land, how to work the land and bring forth its increase, not becoming greedy and overworking it, destroying the fertility of the land, but to allow for fallow years, Sabbaths, to restore the soil as well as give rest to workers. Bet you never thought of Israel’s calling that way—as witnessing not only to God but also an environmentally-sound agricultural practice! But just look at Leviticus and Deuteronomy—in the same book you’ll find commandments concerning murder right beside commandments regarding how to farm, laws about making sacrifices to God next to laws requiring the practice of fallow years.

Yet even this approach, the calling of Israel, didn’t work out. The Israelites saw what the other nations were doing, how they were able to exploit the land and create hoards of food, how they could then feed armies to conquer other nations, how they would use slaves as cheap farm labor and how they would offer sacrifices to gods of fertility to keep it all going with a good harvest—and Israel wanted to be like them. They stopped trusting in God’s providence, but trusted instead in themselves, in the work of their hands, the manipulation of the earth, and if that failed, in the manipulation of the gods.

Throughout this time, the land—creation as a whole—remained a victim of human exploitation and destruction, “subjected to futility...in bondage to decay,” as Paul says in our second lesson, suffering human abuse and also causing human suffering, as overproduction, overconsumption and overstress laid waste to the land, causing famines, drought, and disease. Paul says that creation itself waited throughout this time, as a prisoner waits for release from prison, as a mother awaits the birth of her child. Creation longed for the appearance of a different sort of people, a people who would no longer despoil creation, who would once again recognize and

respect it as a gift of God, as a means of communing with Him. It waited for a people Paul calls “the children of God.”

This waiting, this longing of creation found its fulfillment in the coming of Christ. Seeing how the holy experiment of Israel was unraveling, God decided to take a new approach, to make one final attempt to redeem the world, by sending his Son, to live as one of us, to show us a new way to live and to restore us to right relationship with God and God’s good creation. As John writes in our gospel lesson, Jesus “came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.” You catch that? Jesus came to shepherd into the world the “children of God,” us Christians, who have been reborn by the Holy Spirit in baptism. Creation, subject to evil and death, has been waiting for *us*—for our arrival on earth, waiting for us to come to show the world a better, righteous way to relate to creation. Jesus came not just to get us into heaven, but to restore our relationship with the earth, to reclaim our calling to cultivate and conserve and care for God’s good creation. And that calling, that hope remains today.

I know that for many of you, talk of the environment and environmental protection smacks of a left-wing, progressive, anti-business agenda. But caring for creation is not about being left-wing or right-wing, liberal or conservative; it’s about being faithful to God, about accepting the gift and responsibility that God has given us, embracing our role in redeeming the world. And let me be clear, I’m not advocating any particular policy or approach, saying that Christians have to believe in global warming, for example, or install a solar panel on your roof. I *am* saying that as Christians we have an innate interest in the health and flourishing of creation. As Paul’s letter suggests, rather than looking *at* us as obstacles, the world should be looking *to* us for answers, for a better, wiser, more holy way to live in the world. Instead of watching the goings-on of the UN Climate Summit or governmental “green initiatives,” the world should be watching us Christians, as we show how to live at peace with the natural world, in harmony with God’s creation. For, believe it or not, like it or not, we are what the world has been waiting for—we are “the children of God.” God grant us the grace to fulfill that promise, for the sake of the world. Amen.