

The Eighth Day of Creation

Romans 8:19-25

sermon digest

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Next week as the world marks the 38th annual celebration of Earth Day, some estimate that a billion people will participate in international festivities ranging from Washington, D.C., Chicago and New York to Buenos Aires, Barcelona, Tokyo, Togo, India and Russia. Increasingly, faith communities are stepping forward to participate in the festivities and assume responsibility in addressing the global threats confronting us. The national network of the Interfaith Power and Light, Earth Ministry, the Religious and Faith Communities Outreach of the Earth Day Network, the Evangelical Environmental Network and, locally, the Lindquist Environmental Appalachian Fellowship (LEAF) give expression to increasingly widespread concern and action within faith communities and specifically within the Christian faith community.

An outcry over diluting its national political agenda caused a serious rupture within the powerful National Association of Evangelicals a couple of years ago when its vice president sought to extend the organization's agenda to include global warming. Yet a recent survey shows that 76% of moderate evangelical are completely (24%) or mostly (52%) convinced of the seriousness of the issue; and 48% of more conservative evangelicals are convinced. More recently, a group of forty leaders of the conservative Southern Baptist Convention released a statement calling the evidence of global warming "substantial" and pronouncing the denomination's previous stands as "too timid." The leaders observed, "Our cautious response to these issues in the face of mounting evidence may be seen by the world as uncaring, reckless and ill-informed. We can do better."

According to the National Academy of Science, over 90% of the world's accredited scientists are convinced of the serious implications of global warming. Are the world's religions and specifically Christians moving in the direction of a consensus? And even if we are a long way from consensus, is movement toward concern for the environment evidence that we are moving out of our rightful arena of concern into so-called "secular" or, worse, "political" concerns?

What business has the church meddling in the environment?

God's good gift of creation is in danger. Concerned that the church might tilt over into worshipping nature, some insist on maintaining a distance from the environmental movement. While it distinguishes God from the world of nature, the church's Bible celebrates nature as God's good gift. The opening affirmation of Genesis, "In the beginning . . . God created" is a song of praise for God's generosity. Not once, but four times the story of creation repeats, "It is good, it is good, it is good, it is very good." Pronouncing God's blessing upon the plants and animals, birds, fish and humankind, Genesis' story of creation becomes, in the words of Walter Brueggeman, "a litany of abundance," "an orgy of fruitfulness" as everything multiplies and replenishes itself as an expression of the overflowing goodness of the Creator who calls it into being [*Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope*, 69].

The Bible, however, goes on to tell another story. The Creator's gift of abundance becomes subservient to humankind's myth of scarcity. From Man and Woman grasping for the fruit of immortality to Cain's jealousy of Abel to Jacob's embezzlement of his brother's birthright and Pharaoh's paranoia before the growing tribe of Joseph, the gripping fear is the same. "There's not enough to go around! Let's get it all." And creation, given from the hand of a gracious God, is subverted for selfish dominance and gain.

Far from quaint stories of a simple people of long ago, the biblical stories are the story of Everyman and Everywoman in Everytime. With the psalmist we can praise the wondrous abundance of creation. Recalling the simple chorus of the Jewish Seder, we can look out on creation and sing, *Dayenu*—any one of God's good gifts would have been "enough," but there is so much more. The intricate beauty, the rhythm of the season, the expanse of oceans, the soaring of the mountains, the spectacular display of the heavens, the provision of plants for food and animals for companionship—any one would have been enough to call us to praise; and yet the list goes on and on.

The tragic continuation of the story is also reflected all around us. The fear that there is not enough to go around and the conviction that we must grasp all we can subverts the beauty and goodness of all God has given. Substitute the names of modern political and economic players for the names of Cain and Jacob and Pharaoh and the consequences are breathtakingly tragic. The State of the World Reports issued annually by the World Watch Institute paint a disturbing picture of the clamor for natural resources endangering our future.

- The world's forests are being cut down at the rate of 50,000 square miles a year, leaving almost a third of the world's surviving forests seriously degraded. Deforestation accounts for approximately one-fifth of global greenhouse gas build-up and is responsible for significant species loss worldwide.
- In 2006, the world used 3.9 billion tons of oil. Fossil fuel usage in 2005 produced 7.6 billion tons of carbon emissions, and atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide reached 380 parts per million. While concern is growing for rising emissions in China and India, the United States remains the largest contributor, accounting for over 21 percent of global emissions in 2005.
- Rising costs in fuel and competition for basic food grains for meat production is resulting in soaring food prices.

Information released this month by the Food and Agriculture Organization indicates that food prices have risen 45% in the last nine months; and in the last three years the prices of staple foods have risen by 80%, dealing a crushing blow to the world's poorest people. Already, under-nutrition contributes to almost half of all child deaths and more than 20% of maternal deaths. Because hunger and malnutrition have strong links to economic productivity, educational outcomes and the ability to fight disease, rising food prices threaten to undermine poverty reduction efforts across the board.

- The impact of rising food prices is concentrated largely in urban areas, where 1 in 3 of today's 3 billion urban population lives in abysmal poverty. The resulting hunger is fueling social unrest in some of the world's poorest and most fragile countries. In addition to the violent protests in Haiti, World Bank President Robert Zoellick warns that 33 nations are at risk of social unrest due to the rising cost of food.

Taking into account just these few indicators, the future of our world looks bleak. The question is, "Is it hopeless?"

Christ's resurrection marks the first day of God's new creation. Hope, including the Christian hope, does not reside in turning our eyes from that which is troubling. Hope resides in looking the darkness of our world square in the face and finding the courage to continue to move forward anyway. The Apostle Paul could have been standing in the middle of our century, listening to the news and reading the papers that we read. The creation he observed was filled with longing; it was hounded by a sense of futility. Held in the grip of bondage and decay, it groaned in deep pain. Its source of hope? That the children of God would stand up and act like God's children.

Early Christians spoke of the day of Jesus' resurrection as "the eighth day"—the first day of God's new creation. Just as the Gospels noted that the cosmos itself darkened and quaked at the death of Jesus, the resurrection had cosmic—not just historic—implications. It marked the beginning of a new world in which the suffering of not just human beings, but the suffering of the world-at-large would be brought to an end. And now, Paul insists, even as the early believers themselves were in the midst of suffering, the creation looked to them as the harbingers of a hope that though yet unseen, hopes still.

As Walter Brueggemann puts it, "From broken Friday bread comes Sunday abundance." Far from being just about spiritual things, resurrection hope transforms how we see the world. No longer restricted to a hand-to-mouth existence, we find ourselves submerged in an orgy of grace, guided more by an economics of doxology than human greed.

Will it work? Does our Christian commitment have any practical implications for the ecological crisis in which we find ourselves? Just this: the world in which we move is infused with its creator's generosity and thus overflowing with resources and abilities and practices and procedures through which we can work. What is needed is our resolute hope and commitment, our investment of our best creative energies to turn creation's suffering in the pangs of hopeful birth into a new age. How about it? Can we do it? Will we?