

## Creation Groans

sermon digest

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Isaiah 45:5-12; Romans 8:18-25

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The public service television ad first ran on the second annual Earth Day in March, 1971. In the minute-long TV spot, a native American paddles his canoe up a polluted river through floating garbage past the belching smokestacks of an industrial plant. He banks his canoe into the trash left by careless visitors. He walks to the edge of a highway. An automobile passes by, and a bag of trash flies out of the car window and rips open at his feet. The camera zooms in on the face. A single tear rolls down the man's cheek as the narrator speaks: "People start pollution; people can stop it."

The oil gushing into the Gulf of Mexico and the dying birds and fish along the shores of Louisiana and Alabama is a reminder that we have not cleared the air—or the land and water of the pollution that has come from human civilization that we have so confidently called "progress." Catholic ethicist Daniel Maguire stated the matter succinctly: "if present trends continue, we will not" (*The Moral Core of Judaism and Christianity*, p 3).

**Is the environment a faith issue?** At the beginning of the environmental movement, why focus on the original, primitive occupants of this continent? The science of ecology as well as environmental corruption are products of modern civilization. We associate the American Indian with the good old days before smokestacks and automobiles. Also Native American nature religion valued the balance of life far beyond the traditions of Christianity. Some historians believe that the rise of science in Western culture was directly related to the dominion theology of Genesis that provided a rationale for people to subdue the earth, to exploit its resources, and to procreate without limits. In retrospect, a few theologians have registered the fact that we are far beyond fulfillment of the command in Genesis 1:28 to "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it." And, we have missed the stewardship lesson in, "have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." Our "dominion" has been exercised as a self-destructive exploitation of nature. Could there have been some implication of responsibility here?

Through the ages, Christians assumed that nature exists for human benefit. As the crowning glory of creation, humans were not only allowed, but commanded, to exploit the creation for human benefit. Judeo-Christian creation theology seemed to encourage overpopulation as well as the destruction of nature. Christians assumed an inexhaustible natural world provided by a Creator obligated to sustain our existence against all odds. We can blame science and technology for our present dilemma, but as we dig out the cause, we cannot escape the attitude fostered by Christian tradition.

In the 1960's an alarm began to sound. This was the decade of social protest linked both to the Civil Rights movement and well as the Vietnam War. The causes were often servant to the methods. The power of sheer numbers in the baby boom generation was the source of a new energy for social reform. A secular movement, environmentalism originated on university campuses. It was not space science. Anyone could calculate the accelerated growth of the human population versus declining resources and arrive at the obvious conclusion that we are driving directly into a wall. The imbalance of ecology, the natural order, threatens the existence of life on the planet. The first Earth Day in 1970 involved some twenty million people in a demonstration of concern.

**What have Christians learned?** Professor of Theology John Cobb accounts for his awakening to the place of ecology in the Christian faith in 1969. His son pushed him to read Paul Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb*. The book was alarmist, and Cobb was legitimately alarmed. He observed that no one could live in southern California without concern about the smog, but he confessed to missing any link to his faith. He, like everyone else, assumed that this was a technical issue with technical answers. Cobb coined the language *Theology of Ecology* in his 1970 book and helped set in motion a whole new way of Christian thinking about the creation. Like evolution, ecology was a fact-based scenario learned from science, but with deep theological meaning. Just as the concern for race originated in the secular political arena and was followed with a new discovery of implications for Christian morality, the concern for the environment emerged in the secular halls of learning but has developed a whole new faith perspective. We cannot live in this world with all of the tools of modern science as if we were companions of Moses or Elijah, Jesus or Paul.

A primitive, Hebrew view of the structure of the universe was shown by Galileo in 1615 to need

correction by the tools of science, but many Christians are stuck in the Middle Ages, ignorant not only of science but of the place of science in the shaping of faith.

We have not outgrown our need to hear the word in Isaiah about the Creator God, Who continues the business of creation in this world: "Thus says the LORD, the Holy One of Israel, and its maker. . . . I made the earth, and created humankind upon it; it was my hands that stretched out the heavens." If we have assumed a right to destroy the creation by superior human status, perhaps we have not read the Bible closely enough. The Jewish principle of understanding assigns clear ownership to God, "the earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof." And, humans have a stewardship responsibility. We are accountable to our Maker not only for our own behavior and existence, we are accountable for the sacred gift of life that surrounds us.

The "Left Behind" Christianity made popular in the recent novels is a major part of the problem. Christians who view salvation as being snatched out of the physical world into a heavenly existence in another dimension have a problem with the Bible. Some Christians have learned to hate the earth because of their otherworldly theology and their belief that the earth is bound for destruction by a cataclysmic act of God—the sooner the better. The Bible never pictures the Creator as the enemy of the creation. God does not hate the world that God has made. In fact, Genesis 1 repeats the refrain at every stage of creation "it was good." The Good God created the nature that sustains us and declared it "good." Beyond the destruction that seemed immanent in the political structure of the time in Daniel and Revelation, Christian eschatology looked for a new heaven and new earth—a new sky above us and a new ground at our feet.

Paul viewed the groaning of creation in contrast to the eschatology of his faith in a new creation. He heard the groans of creation as the cries of a mother in labor giving birth to a child. He looked toward a day when the creation will be set free from the bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

Redemption has been the central theme of evangelical Christians. Unfortunately, the theology of salvation has often been interpreted only as going to heaven when we die. An evangelical Baptist theologian of the last century, Walter Rauschenbush introduced the world to the neglected dimension of the Christian message—the social gospel. He created a firestorm of controversy by calling Christians to social responsibility for their neighbors in economic, social, and physical pain. He dared to expose us to a Jesus who cared that people were sick, hungry, imprisoned, and lonely.

The incarnation faith of John's Gospel stands at the center of a Christian theology of ecology. The Father did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world or because the world was garbage. John declares the central evangelical message, "God so loved the world." If John's theology of the Word become flesh means anything, it means that the world is not essentially evil to God and that the nature of God and the nature of nature are not alien to one another. All of us are made of the stuff of the world. We are more than physical, material life forms; but we are nevertheless material, biological beings. Whatever else Jesus was or was claimed to be by his followers, Jesus was a man among other human beings subject to the same suffering mortality that has been inflicted on all of us by birth.

***Does theology matter?*** I have been asking myself that question for nearly five decades of pastoral ministry. I have often been frustrated by the invasion of the secular into the spiritual community. Increasingly the models of the big corporations have been the foundation for doing church, and decisions have been made and promoted more on grounds of political and economic expediency than on the foundations of our faith. Over the years, I have learned to listen to the secular and to seek God in the secular world. Science has opened doors to understanding my faith that were never available to the people of the biblical world.

It seems that the big issue for our time is whether science, technology, our political and social structures, and our behavior are subject to the faith perspective of good theology. Does science have anything to learn from religion? That has often been the question in our Forum on Religion and Science.

Thought precedes action. The thinking of the western church has contributed to the problem. The thinking of aware Christians can be the beginning of a change of life style on the planet. Science has

contributed to my faith, but science has also contributed to the blight and destruction of our modern world. Science and religion together have led us into this valley of the shadow of death. Science and faith, hand in hand, will have to lead us out.