

Preaching on the Environment

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The Christian faith is a religion for people. The twin commandments of biblical faith are to love God and neighbor. Israel is to be a holy people, a righteous nation; Jesus calls disciples to a more abundant life, who gather together into a church; and the principal focus of biblical faith is not nature, but culture. At the same time the Bible is full of constant reminders of the natural givens. The fauna is included within the covenant. "Behold I establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you" (Gen. 9.9-10). In modern terms, the covenant was both ecumenical and ecological. However, the ecological dimension is usually forgotten; recalling it is worth a sermon.

Biblical Land Ethics

A test of the abundant life in a promised land, as we inherit biblical faith today, is whether a people can see the whole commonwealth of a human society set in its ecosystems, developing an environmental ethics. It is not simply what a society does to its slaves, women, black people and other racial minorities, handicapped people, children, or future generations, but what it does to its fauna, flora, species, ecosystems, and landscapes that reveals the character of that society.

Biblical faith originated with a land ethic. Within the covenant, keeping the commandments, the Hebrew people entered a promised land. "The land which you are going over to possess is a land of hills and valleys, which drinks water by the rain from heaven, a land which the Lord your God cares for; the eyes of the Lord your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year" (Deut. 11.11-12). Justice is to run down like waters, and the land flows with milk and honey. The land is blessed, but that blessing can be received if and only if the land is inhabited justly and charitably.

That connection between a productive land and the equitable and loving distribution of its produce is worth a sermon, titled something like "Justice, Milk, and Honey." No people can live in harmony with their landscape, in a sustainable relationship with their natural resources, unless there is social justice. If that is a truth that the Hebrews learned in Palestine, it is one of their truths by which "all the families of the earth shall bless themselves" (Gen. 12.3).

Later on, both Judaism and Christianity, emerging from Judaism, became more universalist and less land-based. In the Diaspora, the Jews were a people without a country; and, though this was widely regarded as tragic, Judaism remains a faith that transcends residence in Palestine. Christianity has often been regarded as more spiritual and less material, more universal and less provincial than its parental Judaism. Both these movements out of a geographically particular promised land, which are sometimes thought to make the land irrelevant to faith, can as well make every people residents of a divinely given landscape. Christianity needs again to become a land ethic, to couple "justice, peace, and the integrity of creation."

In that sense the vision of many nations, blessed in Abraham, is inclusive, not exclusive. The American landscape with purple mountains' majesties, its fruited plains, its fauna and flora from sea to shining sea is divinely created, no less than Canaan from the Negev to Mount Hermon. The divine imperative continues, addressed now both to Earth and to the humans who reside there, "Let the earth bring forth vegetation and every living creature." If this command was first biological, addressed to creation, it now also is ethical, addressing human duty. What *is* the case, *ought* to be so: Earth is a promised planet, chosen for abundant life.

Viewing Earthrise from the moon, the astronaut Edgar Mitchell was entranced: "Suddenly from behind the rim of the moon, in long, slow-motion moments of immense majesty, there emerges a sparkling blue and white jewel, a light, delicate sky-blue sphere laced with slowly swirling veils of white, rising gradually like a small pearl in a thick sea of black mystery. It takes more than a moment to fully realize this is Earth ... home." Mitchell continued, "My view of our planet was a glimpse of divinity."¹ The astronaut Michael Collins recalled being earthstruck: "Earth is to be treasured and nurtured, something precious that *must* endure."² "The Land of Promise and the Planet of Promise" is your next sermon title.

Nature and Spirit; "This World" Versus "The World"

Jesus says, "My kingdom is not of this world." Teaching as he did in the Imperial Roman world, his reference in "this" is to the fallen world of the culture he came to redeem, to false trust in politics and economics, in armies and kings. God loves "the world," and in the landscape surrounding him, Jesus found ample evidence of the presence of God. He teaches that the power organically manifest in the wild flowers of the field is continuous with the power spiritually manifest in the kingdom he announces. There is an ontological bond between nature and spirit, from mustard seed to saving grace. "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground, and ... the earth produces of itself ('automatically')" (Mk. 4.26-28). Take some time with a concordance, and the sermon title now is: "'This world' versus 'the world'."

The natural world is disenchanted; it is neither God, nor is it full of gods, but it remains sacred, a sacrament of God. Although nature is an incomplete revelation of God's presence, it remains a mysterious sign of divine power. The birds of the air neither sow nor reap yet are fed by the heavenly Father, who notices the sparrows that fall. Not even Solomon is arrayed with the glory of the lilies, though the grass of the field, today alive, perishes tomorrow. There is in every seed and root a promise. Sowers sow, the seed grows secretly, and sowers return to reap their harvests. God sends rain on the just and unjust. Divinely given, earthen nature is the original act of grace. "Grace and Nature; Grace in Nature" will make another sermon in this series.

Both the words "nature" and "spirit" are complex, with tapestries of meaning. Etymologically, "nature" goes back to Greek and Latin roots, *gene (g)nasci, natus, gi(g)nomai*, to give birth, to generate. The word "spirit," Latin, *spiritus*, contains the root idea of "breath," with parallels in both the Greek and Hebrew languages, naming the unseen air that inspired life. In their origins nature and spirit are surprisingly similar, nature being the creative, generative powers on Earth, spirit being the animating principle that raised up life from the ground. Thus, in the Hebrew scriptures, the Spirit is the giver of life, animating the dust and generating the swarms of creatures.

Early peoples, understandably, found this creativity sacred.

The natural world inescapably surrounds us, wherever we reside and work, and yet the built environment, necessary for culture, is increasingly difficult to escape. Culture is and ought to be superimposed on the landscape, but not everywhere, and not so as to extinguish wildlands and wildlife. This duty arises because of what the fauna, flora, and landscapes are in themselves, but it also arises because of human welfare. Humans need, in differing degrees, elements of the natural to make and keep life human. Life in completely artificial environments, without options for experiencing natural environments, is undesirable. A society attuned to artifact forgets creation. Life without access to the divine creation is ungodly. A challenging sermon title would be: “Artificial and Natural Christians.”

Christians and Environmental Policy

Consider a sermon on: “Christian Faith and Environmental Policy.” Despite the twentieth century trend toward privatizing religion, likely to continue now in the twenty-first century, national policy toward landscapes must involve collective choice. Some ethical choices are made by individuals, but in other cases citizens must choose together. Unless landscapes, whether public or private, are protected by national, state, and local policy, they will be inadequately protected. In setting policy, citizens, including Christians who join other conservationists, can help do in concert what private persons cannot do alone. Christianity is thus forced to join in shaping the public ethic.

The landscape cannot and should not be entirely wild; but neither should it be entirely cultural. An environmental policy insists that there be domains “where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man is only a visitor who does not remain.”³ For many persons today, especially in an increasingly urban society, the principal opportunities to experience wildlands and wildlife take place on public lands—national forests, parks, wilderness areas, seashores, grasslands, wildlife refuges, lands under the Bureau of Land Management, state or county parks and forests.

Values carried by wildlife and wildlands, like the values for which Christians stand, are in critical part non-economic. Christians have often and admirably focused on economic values where humans have been unjustly deprived of these (jobs, food, shelter, health care). But in wildland decisions, where wildlands are proposed to be sacrificed to meet human needs, Christians should insist that these values be met instead on non-wild lands, on those enormous sectors of the continent that have been domesticated, and which are more than adequate to meet these needs, given a just distribution of their produce. The values that Christians wish to defend on remaining wildlands are often the softer, more diffuse ones, and also deeper ones essential to an abundant life. Without these experiences, the land cannot fulfill all its promise.

“Nature as a Spiritual Resource” would make a provocative sermon title, preferably this one preached out-of-doors. A pristine natural system is a religious resource, as well as a scientific, recreational, aesthetic, or economic one. But the last point should be that it profanes such experiences and nature alike to see a wildland as merely resource-for-us, something like seeing God, or parents, or the sacraments as a resource. A forest, a mountain, a prairie is more than resource, instrumental to civilization, more than even a religious resource. It is primeval, wild, creative source.

Maybe the sermon title should be: “Our Sources and Our Resources.”

Christians in the Wilderness

Christians can bring a perspective of depth on wildland conservation. They will see forests as a characteristic expression of the creative process. In a forest, as on a desert or the tundra, the realities of nature cannot be ignored. The forest is both presence and symbol of forces in natural systems that transcend human powers and human utility. Like the sea or the sky, the forest is a kind of archetype of the foundations of the world, presence and symbol of the timeless natural givens that support everything else. The forest as a tangible preserve in the midst of a culture contributes to the human sense of duration, antiquity, continuity, and identity. In the primeval forest, or on the desert or tundra, humans know the most authentic of wilderness emotions, the sense of the sublime. We get transported by forces awe-full and overpowering, by the signature of time and eternity.

“The trees of the Lord are watered abundantly; the cedars of Lebanon which he planted” (Ps. 104.16). With forests, America is even more of a promised land than is Palestine. John Muir exclaimed, “The forests of America, however slighted by man, must have been a great delight to God; for they were the best he ever planted.”⁴ Such forests are a church as surely as a commodity. The forest is where the “roots” are, where life rises from the ground. Trees piece the sky, like cathedral spires. Light filters down, as through stained glass. The forest canopy is lofty; much of it is over our heads. In common with churches, forests invite transcending the human world and experiencing a comprehensive, embracing realm.

Indeed, forests can serve as a more provocative, perennial sign of this than many of the traditional, often outworn, symbols devised by the churches. Muir put this so provocatively that you might want to correct him: “The clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness.”⁵ You may find that those regularly seated in your pews get goose pimples more often on a mountain top than they do inside your church. Such experiences the churches should welcome and seek to preserve. Did not Jesus himself often retreat to the wilderness in search of God? Jesus also said, “He who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14.9), and this is the central Christian proclamation. But it should be centered in a worldview in which nature is God’s good creation, as Jesus preached. With this combination of nature and gospel perhaps some of those who have on Sundays more often been in the woods than in church will choose to hike on Saturday instead.

“Christians in the Wilderness?” would phrase this issue provocatively. Senior Christians will recall from their childhood learning about the “children of Israel wandering in the wilderness,” hoping to enter their promised land. Those were troublesome times for Israel, but one presence they did constantly recognize there was that of Yahweh. Later, after they have come to live in their promised land, a frequent prophetic threat is that their fair land of Palestine, with its cities and fields, should again become desert and wilderness. The collapse of cultural life in the promised land is indeed a tragedy, and in that sense a relapse to the wild is sometimes used in the Bible as a symbol for judgment. Jackals roam the land, destroyed in punishment for sin. Such wildness is a tragedy only in foil to failed culture. Additionally, a peaceable natural kingdom, where the lion lies down with the lamb, is sometimes used as the symbol of fulfillment in the promised land. This, too, is a cultural metaphor and cannot

be interpreted in censure of natural history.

Taken for what it is in itself, prior to using it to symbolize human hopes and disappointments, wildness in the Bible is never a bad thing. “Who has let the wild ass go free? Who has loosed the bonds of the swift ass, to whom I have given the steppe for his home, and the salt land for his dwelling place? He scorns the tumult of the city; he hears not the shouts of the driver. He ranges the mountain as his pasture, and he searches after every green thing” (Job 39.5-8).

“Who has cleft a channel for the torrents of rain, and a way for the thunderbolt, to bring rain on a land where no man is, on the desert in which there is no man; to satisfy the waste and desolate land, and to make the ground put forth grass?” (Job 38.25-27). God not only sends rain on the just and the unjust; God sends rain to satisfy wildlands. God not only blesses humans; God blesses the desolate wastes. These fierce landscapes, sometimes supposed to be ungodly places, are godly after all. God does not want all these places subdued and cultivated; rather, God delights in places with no people!

Christians, too, can delight in the wilderness. Being among the archetypes, wild lands bring us about as near to ultimacy as we can come in the natural world—vast scenes of sprouting, budding, flowering, fruiting, passing away, passing life on. Mountaintop experiences, the wind in the pines, solitude in a sequoia grove, autumn leaves, the forest vista that begins at one’s feet and disappears over the horizon—these generate experiences of “a motion and spirit that impels ... and rolls through all things.”⁶ We feel life’s transient beauty sustained over chaos. Christians recognize God’s creation, and others may find the Ultimate Reality or a Nature sacred in itself. A forest wilderness elicits cosmic questions, differently from town. Christians have particular interest in preserving wildlands as sanctuaries for religious experiences, both for Christians and others inspired there.

The Creator’s love for the creation is sublime precisely because it does not conform to human purposes. That God is personal as revealed in interhuman cultural relations does not mean that the natural relationship of God to hawks is personal, nor should humans treat hawks as persons. They are to be treated with appropriate respect for their wildness. “Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars, and spreads his wings toward the south? Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up and makes his nest on high? On the rock he dwells and makes his home in the fastness of the rocky crag. Thence he spies out the prey; his eyes behold it afar. His young ones suck up blood; and where the slain are, there is he. ... Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God, let him answer it” (Job 39.26-40.2).

“The high mountains are for the wild goats; the rocks are a refuge for the badgers. ... The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God. ... O Lord, how manifold are thy works! In wisdom hast thou made them all; the earth is full of thy creatures” (Psalm 104.18-24). The meaning of the words “good” and “divine” is not the same in nature and in culture. Are you up to a sermon entitled: “God of the Eagles and Lions!”?

Just as Job was pointed out of his human troubles toward the wild Palestinian landscape, it is a useful, saving corrective to a simplistic Jesus-loves-me-this-I-know, God-is-on-my-side theology to discover vast ranges of creation that now have nothing to do with satisfying our personal desires, and that there were eons of evolutionary time that had nothing to do even with satisfying human desires. What the wildlands do “for

us,” if we must phrase it that way, is teach that God is not “for us” humans alone. God is “for” these wild creatures, too.

A principal insight that biblical faith can contribute is a forceful support of wildlife refuges or “sanctuaries” in national policy. A wildlife sanctuary is a place where nonhuman life is sacrosanct, that is, valued in ways that surpass not only economic levels but even in ways that transcend resource use in the ordinary senses. In that sense Christian conviction wants sanctuaries not only for humans, but also for wildlife. The sermon title is: “Wildlife Sanctuaries.”

Earth Ethics: Facing the Environmental Crisis

Concluding sermons must focus on the environmental crisis. Respect and care for the environment is opportunity to celebrate God’s creation; that is the positive message. But a degrading environment looms as major threat. If we do not care, perhaps we should start with fear—or at least with our human self-interest enlightened by realization of our entwined destiny with our landscapes, a sustainable biosphere, a liveable planet. It is hard to have an abundant life, a healthy economy in a sick environment. In other centuries, critics complained that humans were alienated from God. As we pass from the twentieth into the twenty-first century, critics are complaining that humans are alienated from their planet; the two could be related. We face an identity crisis in our own home territory, trying to get the human spirit put in its place.

In the global picture, the late-coming, moral species, *Homo sapiens*, arising a few hundred thousand years ago, has, still more lately in this century, gained startling powers for the rebuilding and modification, including the degradation, of this home planet. Facing the next century, turning the millennium, the four most critical issues that humans currently face are peace, population, development, and environment. All are entwined. Human desires for maximum development drive population increases, escalate exploitation of the environment, and fuel the forces of war. Those who are not at peace with one another find it difficult to be at peace with nature, and vice versa. Those who exploit persons will typically exploit nature as readily—animals, plants, species, ecosystems, and Earth itself. Preaching on the environment—you may have thought when you began—is marginal, preaching about the chipmunks and daisies, sermons for canoe freaks and tree huggers. Not so; environmental responsibility is right at the center of challenges of the new millennium.

“What on Earth are we doing?” is a concluding sermon title, commencing a century. Section I: What are we on Earth for? Section II. What on Earth is going on? Section III. What on Earth ought we to do? The first commandment of God to the human pair was: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion ...” (Gen. 1.28). Yes, you will need to preach on this now notorious dominion text, too; and here above all, the text needs to be kept in context. Maybe the New Testament reading to join with this Old Testament text is: “The Meek inherit the earth.” Biblical meekness is the controlled use of power, disciplined by respect and love.

Bill McKibben says, interestingly, that this first commandment is also the first one to be completed.⁷ The sermon title could be: “The First, Finished Commandment.” No more filling up of the Earth with people, or increased dominion over it is needed. Check that one off the list. But don’t throw away the list; look down it and see what

comes next.

The biblical context includes a nearby, second commandment: “And the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till and keep it” (Gen. 2.15). The word “till” can equally well be translated “serve.” “Caring for creation” is integral to this dominion; the promised land (and planet) can be inherited only in justice and in love. And notice, when human iniquity brought tragic judgment on earth, that Genesis also relates the first recorded Endangered Species Project—Noah and his ark!

“Christian Ecology?” could open up the larger question of science and faith. Biology and religion are not always easy disciplines to join. One place they have increasingly joined in recent years is in admiration for this marvelous Earth. No other species can be either scientific or religious toward this planet, but *Homo sapiens*, learning natural history, reaches a responsibility that assumes spiritual dimensions. Like it or not, we do have a dominion here; we have to learn to handle ourselves and to manage our cultures and the supporting environment. In a planetary, environmental age, spirituality requires combining nature and grace at new levels of insight and intensity.

Earth is the only planet “right for life,” and ethics asks about the “right to life” on such a planet. Certainly it seems “right” that life continue here; life is, in the deepest sense, the most valuable phenomenon of all, with its prolific history since its origin three and a half billion years ago. Science is not ethics, nor ethics science, but each needs the other. This is more true than ever with environmental science and environmental ethics, where what *is* the case and what *ought* to be are intimately coupled.

What does it profit to gain the world, only to lose it—to gain it economically, to fence it in, pave it over, harvest it, only to lose it scientifically, aesthetically, recreationally, religiously, as a wonderland of natural history, as a realm of integral wildness that transcends and supports us—and perhaps even to lose some of our soul in the tradeoff? Earth is a kind of providing ground, where the life epic is lived on in the midst of its perpetual perishing, life arriving and struggling through to something higher. The line between respect for life and reverence for life is not always easy to recognize. If anything at all on Earth is sacred, it must be this enthralling generativity that characterizes our home planet. If there is any holy ground, any land of promise, this promising Earth is it.

Notes

¹ Edgar Mitchell, quoted in Kevin W. Kelley, ed., *The Home Planet* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1988), at photographs 42-45.

² Michael Collins, “Foreword,” in Roy A. Gallant, *Our Universe* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 1980), 6.

³ U. S. Congress, *Wilderness Act of 1964*, sec. 2(c). Public Law 88-577, 78 Stat. 891.

⁴ John Muir, *Our National Parks* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1901), 331.

⁵ Linnie Marsh Wolfe, ed., *John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1938), 313.

⁶ “*Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*,” 1798, in William Wordsworth, *Selected Poems and Prefaces*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 110.

⁷ Bill McKibben, *Maybe One: A Personal and Environmental Argument for Single-Child Families* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998).

Further Reading

These are important places to start, in an enormous literature

- Baken, Peter W , Engel, Joan Gibb, and Engel, J Ronald, *Ecology, Justice, and Christian Faith A Critical Guide to the Literature* Westport, Conn Greenwood Press, 1995
- Nash, James A , *Loving Nature Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility* Nashville, Tenn Abingdon Press, 1991
- Northcott, Michael S , *The Environment and Christian Ethics* Cambridge Cambridge University Press, 1996
- Rasmussen, Larry L , *Earth Community Earth Ethics* Maryknoll, N Y Orbis Books, 1996
- Sheldon, Joseph K , *Rediscovery of Creation A Bibliographical Study of the Church's Response to the Environmental Crisis* Metuchen, N J , The American Theological Library Association and The Scarecrow Press, 1992