

# *Preaching on the Environmental Crisis: Speaking of the Crisis in God's Creation*

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Environmental crises have become part of the daily news. Authoritative reports warn that increasing population and consumption are causing climate change, depletion of marine fisheries, loss of tropical forests, development of agricultural land, the end of oil, and so on. Critics argue that the severity and timing of these crises are not yet certain. But given their collective importance, uncertainty is itself unnerving. So we begin to wonder: Should preachers join the conversation? Can churches say anything worthwhile about environmental issues?

In what follows, I will try to show that preachers and churches can greatly enrich the conversation by exploring the moral aspects of environmental issues. Most public discourse on the environment asks practical questions about the efficient use of resources and about what ways of living are sustainable. Those questions are important. But questions of our moral responsibilities to Earth's environment and to others who depend upon the environment are at least as important. A vital task of twenty-first century churches will be to ask questions like What does it mean that "the environment" is God's creation? Who should share in the benefits of God's creation? What kind of future is worth sustaining?

This article will emphasize Scripture's insistent voice that our use of God's creation must be grounded in "justice, and only justice" (Deut 16:20), and will show that just use of resources is remarkably consonant with what science tells us about the workings of healthy ecosystems. Scripture and science both insist that there can be no flourishing apart from mutual flourishing.

## *The Voice of Scripture*

Living in the land is one of the central themes of Scripture, a theme that offers a powerful way of framing contemporary discussions of the environment.<sup>1</sup> Especially in the Hebrew Bible, land is understood as a gift from God, the heart of the covenant with the Israelites. But the land was not a simple gift. The methods of farming that the Israelites brought from Mesopotamia and Egypt were useless in the Judean hills, a land of sparse rainfall and fragile soil. To realize the promise of the covenant, the Israelites had to be alert to the signs of the soil and to learn new ways of farming that responded creatively to those signs. By paying careful attention to successes and failures, they gradually learned to conserve soil and water by terracing<sup>2</sup> and to keep soil fertile by fallowing (Lev 25:2-3), by fertilization (Ps 83:10), and probably by crop rotation.<sup>3</sup>

As God made the Earth productive by ordering cosmic chaos, the Israelites learned to make the soil productive by ordering a difficult land, wisdom that they understood as God's "wonderful counsel" (Isa 28:23-29). When the rains came at the right time and the land rejoiced by producing grain, the people flourished, and, in their mutual flourishing, sensed that God was blessing them, the land, and the creatures of the land (Psalm 104). When the rains didn't come, the land was parched and barren, and the

people went hungry, and, in their mutual desolation, sensed that God was punishing them, the land, and the creatures of the land (Joel 1:2-12). That sense of mutuality in success and in failure led the Israelites to see the land as their partner in the joint struggle to live fruitfully, a connection so fundamental that it was inscribed in the Hebrew words for human ('*adam*) and soil ('*adama*).

This sense that the well-being of the Israelite people and the land were deeply entwined went well beyond the practical bond between farmer and land. Daniel Hillel, an environmental scientist who has spent many years studying land and water resources in Israel, noted that for the Israelites the land became,,, a sort of moral seismograph, an indicator of the nation's collective behavior. Its manifestations were to be watched at all times for telltale signs of the return of the desert. The fluctuating polarity of the environment imposed a kind of dialectical mind-set on its inhabitants. To the Israelites, it was not merely the land that might revert, but – in a symbolic way – they themselves. [Return of] the desert meant retrogressing to the utter destitution and homelessness that had been their condition before entering the promised land.<sup>4</sup>

Their careful attentiveness to the mutuality of success and failure taught the Israelites that the blessings of the land were for all who depend on the land, not just the wealthy and powerful. The sabbatical laws (Exod 23:10, Lev 25:3-7, and Deut 15:1) explicitly link rest for the land to justice for the poor and the wild animals. But the message of justice is tragically easy to forget. In his book *The Land*, Walter Brueggemann reminds us that at times when the Israelites felt secure in the land, they found it easy to take the land and the covenant for granted, and to see the land as property to be managed, instead of gifted partner in the covenant.<sup>5</sup> People who feel secure in the land find it natural to rely on their own ability to manage the land instead of trusting God's promise in the land. And secure owner-managers find it natural to manage the land primarily to benefit themselves and the politically powerful, maximizing productivity of the land, and giving no thought to the well-being of the land and the poor.

That pattern is clearest in the stories of David and Solomon. It began with David's transition from a king shepherding the people to a manager secure in kingly power and capable of ordering a murder to cover up his affair with Bathsheba.<sup>6</sup> It came to its peak with Solomon's institution of a bureaucratic regime and his use of conscripted labor to build his lavish palace and the temple. The temple was ostensibly a tribute to God, but it had the effect of casting God in the role of "a domesticated preserver of [Solomon's] regime," reducing the Lord of the land to the patron of the king.<sup>7</sup> But God would have none of that. Speaking through Ahijah, God said, "I am about to tear the kingdom from the hand of Solomon ..." (1 Kings 11:31). And in time, of course, despite the self-confidence of the powerful, the land was lost, the temple destroyed, and the leaders exiled to Babylon.

The Israelites responded to that trauma by thinking deeply and creatively about the meaning of land, and rewrote much of Torah in ways that reflect the wisdom that emerged in the Exile. God had given the Israelites a land rich in water, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees, a land where they would lack nothing (Deut 8:7-9). But once in the land, they had become comfortable, had forgotten to trust the giftedness of the land, and had forgotten the instruction to live by "justice, and only justice" (Deut 16:20). And so they had lost the land.

One of the major themes of the Bible is the difficulty of living creatively with the

blessings of the land. Land is the source of life, but it is also a powerful temptation, one that can lure us “to substitute for the vitality and precariousness of history the sureness, sameness, and closedness of dull existence in secure land without decision, without promise, without word, without mystery.”<sup>8</sup> And the more skilled we become at managing the land (or, in contemporary terms, the environment), the deeper the temptation to forget the insistent warnings of Scripture and rely only on our knowledge and technologies.

As the Israelites learned during the Exile, the temptation to injustice is easy to recognize when the structures of society collapse. But it is much harder to sense when the economy is booming and when we seem to be in control. Modern people, insulated from the blessings of nature by technology, by a global economic system, and by the complex structures of western civilization, are especially vulnerable to that temptation. They urgently need to hear a prophetic voice reminding them of the need to live justly and to trust and nurture the vitality of the land.

At first, this understanding of Scripture as instruction to trust God’s promise of the land seems to diverge from the New Testament message, widely taken to urge that we be indifferent to this world, and simply believe that Jesus offers salvation in a different and better place. But that purported indifference ignores Jesus’ deep concern for healing in this world, for loving neighbors in this world, his prayer that God’s will be done “on Earth as it is in heaven,” and his sense of God’s kingdom breaking into this world.<sup>9</sup> It also ignores the clear sense of the texts that Jesus and his Jewish disciples understood the land as one of the principal domains in which God worked. The importance of land in the New Testament has been widely neglected, but is beginning to be recognized by biblical scholars.<sup>10</sup> It is perhaps most obvious in the fact that five of the six parables attributed to Jesus by Mark are grounded in agricultural themes, and derive their impact from the listener’s sense of God at work in the mystery of soil fertility and plant growth, seemingly ordinary processes that are filled with wonder for people who understand the deep connections between human beings and soil.<sup>11</sup>

### *The Voice of Earth Science*

The sense of mutuality in flourishing or desolation that informed the biblical awareness of the connections between people and land is also the central wisdom that emerges from reflection on ecology. The rich ecosystems that support all life are constrained by the fact that Earth is closed to the elements essential to life – Earth can neither gain nor lose carbon, water, or nutrients like phosphorous and potassium. For nearly four billion years life on Earth has flourished only by recycling those materials, and all life now and in the future must continue to do so.

The most familiar example of recycling is the food chain, in which carbon, energy, and nutrients move from plants to herbivores, and to one or more levels of carnivores. But the food chain doesn’t stop there. Plants and animals produce a huge amount of litter – roughly two tons per acre in the forests of the Mid-Atlantic. Life as we know it would cease were it not for microorganisms, fungi, and bacteria living in the soil that consume that dead organic material and convert the carbon and nutrients it contains back into a form that plants can utilize. No complex organism can live alone; each relies on other organisms to consume the waste it produces, and to produce the materials it needs to live. Species in healthy ecosystems flourish by a balance between individual well-being and fruitful relationship with other community members—a

fertile mix of individuality and reciprocity that expresses itself in community-wide symbiosis. The ability to live in community is vital, in both senses of the word. In nature, there can be no flourishing without mutual or communal flourishing.

To continue to flourish, ecosystems must cope with disruptions. For example, the death of a large forest tree suddenly exposes the ground cover to full sunlight. Those shade-loving species cannot survive in full sun, and they die, exposing the soil to erosion. But the system has evolved a way of coping. Weeds that do well in full sun, like crabgrass and goldenrod, jump in and quickly put down roots that hold the soil in place. In a year or two, small shrubs and briars take over, putting down deeper and stronger roots; in a few more years, saplings that will eventually fill in the gap in the forest canopy begin to grow. But saplings don't do well in full sun, and deer tend to browse their tender shoots. The saplings that survive are often those that take root beneath briars or bushes that provide shade and protection from deer. In time, one of those sheltered saplings will grow into a mature tree, filling in the forest canopy. But as it does, the tree creates deep shade again, and the briars and shrubs that once sheltered that sapling die off.

Briars, weeds, and shrubs survive by finding open ground wherever it exists, and so continue to provide the resilience that enables a forest to survive for many thousands of years, though the trees that make up the forest live only a century or two. The untrained observer is unlikely to notice these itinerant species in a mature forest, but they are vital members of the community, essential to a forest's ability to propagate itself over time. Again, the reciprocity between complementary species enables the flourishing of each species and of the community.

The importance of community becomes even more striking from the perspective of geological time. At every stage from the recovery of terrestrial systems in the aftermath of a glacial period, to the initial colonization of the continents by plants, to the recovery of life from five major periods of extinction, all the way back to the beginnings of multicellular life half a billion years ago, life has required healthy communities. Only species able to live in community have survived for long.

### *Linking the Voices of Scripture and Earth Science*

There seems to be a deep connection between justice in the biblical tradition and system-wide symbiosis in ecological science. Justice and symbiosis both require mutual vulnerability and openness to the needs of the other. Neither justice nor symbiosis is compatible with the imposition of rigid control over another. Both allow all participants to respond creatively to opportunities as they see them, provided that they respond in ways that maintain just and symbiotic conditions.

The importance of justice in human communities and symbiosis in ecological communities suggests that each is profoundly fertile or creative. The creativity that has given rise to Earth's extraordinarily rich ecological systems depends fundamentally on the symbiotic character of ecosystems. From a religious perspective, it seems as if God's manner of being creative in nature is symbiotic, through and through. The mandate that humans are to pursue "justice and only justice" (Deut 16:20) might then be taken as the condition for creativity in human community, in effect instructing humans to image God's way of being creative.

Recognition of this connection between God's creation in the non-human world and creative human behavior is not new. Many psalms, prophetic passages, texts from

the wisdom tradition, and of course Jesus' parables reveal that connection. That understanding also grounds some of our best thinking on environmental ethics. Aldo Leopold, for example, expressed much the same view half a century ago in his classic book *A Sand County Almanac*.<sup>12</sup>

But, as Deuteronomy (8:11) clearly understood, the importance of justice and symbiosis is tragically easy to forget. People living comfortably in the land have always found it difficult or impossible to remember the importance of living in ways that are vulnerable and open to the needs of the other. The profound "tension between *royally secured land* and *covenanted precarious land*" was central to Israel's history.<sup>13</sup> An analogous conflict emerges in contemporary western society in the tension between confidence in the human power of technology to secure our world and allowing creation the freedom to be creative.

The nineteenth-century controversy over how to provide flood protection for New Orleans is a poignant illustration of the difficulty. One protagonist, Charles Ellet, suggested a flexible approach to flood control that would rely on relatively low levees to channel the Mississippi most of the time, but would set aside then-unused wetlands to act as reservoirs that could absorb overflow during periods of unusually high water. His rival, A.A. Humphreys, insisted that the Mississippi could be controlled by levees, and only levees, the higher the better, thereby leaving the wetlands open to development. Unfortunately, Humphreys was appointed head of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and his view prevailed, setting in place a flood-control strategy based on levees and pumping stations that, as Katrina recently reminded us, is anything but secure.<sup>14</sup> Other reminders of the dangers of relying on technology to protect us from nature are the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, the Dust Bowl of the 1930's, the current concerns about climate change, and the looming possibility of a bird-flu pandemic.

Perhaps one of the reasons why the importance of justice and symbiosis is so easy to forget is that both require that we respect the other, and authentic respect for another depends upon our personal knowledge of the other. Leopold knew that well. Before he presented his "land ethic," he took the reader on a personal, month-by-month tour of the land on his Wisconsin farm, introducing the creatures living there, one by one. He next expanded the tour to include the whole of Wisconsin, and then added five other North American ecological settings, from Mexico to Manitoba. The effect was to give the reader a deep sense of the intricacy and beauty of creation, so that when Leopold finally got around to arguing that it was essential to love, respect, and admire the land, and that maintaining the well-being of the biotic community was vital to all concerned, the reader could only respond, "Of course!"

Unfortunately, modern technologies have the effect of widening the gap between humans and the rest of creation, making it difficult for us to know creation in ways that can sustain love and respect. That gap poses a serious challenge to deep engagement with nature or creation that the churches must meet.

### *Preaching the Crisis*

So what does this discussion suggest about how we might preach on the environmental crisis? Perhaps the first thing to be said is that we should avoid speaking of an environmental crisis at all. That is the language of environmental organizations, and it too easily obscures the cause of the crisis and conveys the false impression that

the crisis lies somewhere in the background to human life. Religious communities can and should speak more directly. The crisis is in God's creation, and the crisis is a direct consequence of human failure to live by the watchwords of justice and symbiosis.

The details of the crisis are of course distinctively modern and distinctively technical. But from the point of view of the church, the reason for the crisis is the same moral failure that has long plagued people who feel themselves to be secure in their own management of the land (or the immense swath of creation now shaped by human hands), and who seek security in technologies that shape creation for human uses only, giving little thought to the needs of the land or the rest of creation, and even less thought to the needs of the poor of the world. The world urgently needs a prophetic voice to repeat, again and again, the instruction to pursue justice, and only justice; and to repeat, again and again, the need to live in symbiotic relationship with all of creation.

Finally, the church must insistently remind us that God created all that is, and that God found all of creation good. Churches can help us to learn what that affirmation really means by getting to know the rest of creation with which we are to live symbiotically and the men and women with whom we are to pursue just ways of living. We might begin by identifying particular places and communities that allow us to develop close personal relationships that can reveal the good in others, and provide a basis for the love, respect, and admiration that make mutual flourishing possible. We might end by recognizing a world that is worth sustaining.

## Notes

1. Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2003).
2. Oded Borowski, *Agriculture in Iron Age Israel* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1987), 15-18.
3. *Ibid.*, 143-51.
4. Daniel Hillel, *The Natural History of the Bible: An Environmental Exploration of the Hebrew Scriptures* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 215.
5. Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2003).
6. *Ibid.*, 74-79.
7. *Ibid.*, 80-83.
8. *Ibid.*, 54.
9. Brian McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth That Could Change Everything* (Nashville, Tenn.: W Publishing Group, 2006).
10. See, for example, Norman C. Habel and Vicky Balabanski, eds., *The Earth Story in the New Testament*, vol. 5, Earth Bible Series (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002).
11. Mark's six parables are the sower (4:3-8), the seed growing secretly (4:26-29), the mustard seed (4:30-32), the wicked tenants (12:1-11), the fig tree (13:28-29), and the doorkeeper (13:34-37). The parables of the seed growing secretly and the mustard seed are explicitly said to image the kingdom. See discussion in John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988).
12. Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972).
13. Brueggemann, *The Land*, 94, ital. original.
14. For a brief summary of this story, see Ari Kelman, "Water Damaged: Disaster History in New Orleans and on the Gulf Coast," *Reviews in American History* 34, 222-230 (2006).