

Stewardship Preaching and the Care of the Earth: The Fire This Time

D. Cameron Murchison
Black Mountain, North Carolina

I begin with texts from the Old Testament and from the New Testament that speak of the scope of God's covenantal and redemptive relationships to what God has made. In each case the italic portions of the texts have caused me to direct my attention beyond a merely anthropocentric reading of those relationships.

Genesis 9:8-17

8 Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 9 “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, 10 *and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark.* 11 I establish my covenant with you, *that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.*” 12 God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make *between me and you and every living creature that is with you,* for all future generations: 13 I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant *between me and the earth.* 14 When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, 15 I will remember my covenant that is *between me and you and every living creature of all flesh;* and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. 16 When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant *between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.*” 17 God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established *between me and all flesh that is on the earth.*”

Colossians 1:15-23

15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; 16 *for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created,* things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He himself is before all things, and *in him all things hold together.* 18 He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. 19 *For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,* 20 *and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things,* whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

21 And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, 22 he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him— 23 provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, *which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven.* I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel.

James Baldwin concluded his 1963 book, *The Fire Next Time*, with the words of

an epic slave song: “God gave Noah the rainbow sign/ No more water, the fire next time!” Of special interest for stewardship preaching that is attentive to the care of the earth is the attention that Baldwin’s words inadvertently draw to the passage above from Genesis 9. Using words from the spiritual, “Mary Don’t You Weep,” Baldwin reminds us of the great promise of God following the flood. The promise was that never again would God reject the creation as had been done in a catastrophe of water. A new covenant was offered of which the rainbow was the sign: No more water! But Baldwin, and the spiritual from which he drew the phrasing, adds the ominous phrase, “the fire next time.”

Allowing the phrase to invite us into a closer look at the Genesis passage, we discover two important things. First, it (along with most readings of the passage) restricts the rainbow sign and promise too narrowly. And second, it adds the threat of fire as an alternative means of world destruction though nothing is said about this in the Genesis passage. Thereby, the phrase gives us an ideal entrance into the concerns of stewardship preaching and creation care.

I

First, the fire next time. Though the Genesis passage does not mention anything about fire, concentrating instead on God’s promise not to destroy the creation again by the waters of a flood, the slave song composer of “Mary Don’t You Weep” was a careful student of the full sweep of scripture. She knew that 2 Peter added fire to the equation as it offered hope to those who were confronted by scoffers belittling the expectation of early Christians for deliverance in the coming of the Lord. These scoffers taunted Christian hope in God with the saying that “all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation” (3:4). But 2 Peter, remembering the Noah story, says that such scorn ignores the fact that long ago “the world...was deluged with water and perished. But by the same word, the present heavens and earth have been reserved for *fire*, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the godless” (3:6-7).

It is not hard to see why a slave song writer who was composing a ballad of deliverance rooted in scripture would pair the promise to Noah (which included a promise not to destroy the world by water) with the promise to the oppressed (which included a promise to destroy oppressors and oppression by fire). With these two passages joined, there is a consistency in God’s promising no more water, but the fire next time. Both promises are expressions of God’s determination to deliver and sustain all that God has created, consuming by fire all that stands against God’s creative and redemptive intentions. Thus it is not hard to see why “no more water, but the fire next time” was also invoked in the tumultuous civil rights struggles of the 1960s.

But what does “the fire next time” have to do with care of the earth? Just this — next time is now, and the fire in question threatens the disruption and potential destruction of earth as habitat and home. What we now know is that the fire that fuels our world is primarily fossilized sunlight that emits CO₂ into the atmosphere, trapping heat close to the earth and causing a variety of profound changes in the earth’s climate. These changes produce intensified weather patterns with excruciating draught in some places and cataclysmic flooding in others. These changes lead to a startling increase in species extinction, melting of polar ice caps, rising sea levels, depletion of water supplies, and attendant agricultural crises.

Here is the irony. The fire (in the form of fossil derived energy) that fuels our world threatens to become the fire that consumes and destroys not only human civilization, but the creaturely habitat in which it is set and on which it depends. Despite the dedicated efforts of some deniers of these trends, more recent polling seems to suggest that a distinct majority of the American public now believes that climate change is a clear and present danger, thus aligning itself with the massive scientific evidence that reaches the same conclusion.¹

Even as we begin to recognize the challenge, we are so embedded in a view of humanity's place at the pinnacle of creation with vast powers over it—made possible primarily by our use of fire over the last 250 years or so—we can scarcely imagine what we are to do, other than more of the same. Campaign rhetoric is especially telling on this point. People need jobs. The economy needs growth. So we are inclined to fight fire with fire, employing the technologies that are dependent upon continued use of fossil fuels in the hopes that we will bring a creation that is crossing its tipping point under control. One potent symbol of this dead end track the world is on is the energy with which oil companies seek to harvest the tar sands oil from Canada. It contains twice the CO₂ of conventional oil, which magnifies the warming effect of its use.² Such a response threatens to become a consuming fire, with the globe literally heating up and with nations locked in the conflagrations of war upon war to preserve access to those fuels. Not the fire next time—but the fire this time!

II

So let's return to the rainbow sign. Like virtually every commentator on the promise God makes in Genesis 9, the composer of the slave song concentrates on the promise to Noah. But readers mindful of the fire that threatens to engulf us today have more recently called attention to the fact that God's promise has a much broader audience. God says to Noah, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants *and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you* (Gen. 9:10). All our ready talk of God's covenant with Noah simply overlooks, in our human centered presumption, that God directs the promise to *all* creatures and even to the earth itself. So God continues in the address to Noah: *never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth* (9: 11). The passage adds the promise of the bow in the clouds the rainbow sign—as a sign of the covenant “*between me and you and every living creature...between me and the earth*” (9:12-13).

If we are going to respond to the challenge of the “fire this time,” we will begin with strategies that do not stress our superiority over, and set-apartness from, the rest of creation, but rather with strategies that recognize that God promises us a future *along with* the rest of creation. Nor are we limited to the passage from Genesis for such an understanding. The Colossians text that celebrates the pre-eminence of Christ describes him as the firstborn of *all creation* and celebrates him as the one in whom *all things* in heaven and on earth were *created*, in whom *all things hold together*, and *through whom God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things* (Col. 1:15-20).

We could scarcely be more explicitly directed to strategies of response that attend to “all creatures of our God and King, to all things bright and beautiful.” Instead of fighting fire with the fire of fossil fuel, we can learn from our companions in the earth and the earth itself how a sustainable world might be fashioned, one that does not have

to become a consuming fire. While there are any number of books written in recent years that rightly stress the severe difficulties that the world is likely to confront in the coming years, one in particular has recently (and more helpfully) stressed how we might refashion our technologies with nature as our exemplar. In *The Sixth Wave*, Australians James Bradfield-Moody and Bianca Nogrady say:

We tend to think that we as a species somehow stand apart from nature. Indeed, we often see ourselves as struggling against nature for our survival. However, as technology develops and our population continues to grow, we are gaining a new awareness that our survival is entirely dependent on the natural world. Even more sobering is the realisation that, when compared to nature, we are novices in the presence of a profound genius.³

Their book is an account of how a new economy will have to be fashioned that learns the lessons of the whole earth—that an often overlooked source of energy is efficiency and that nothing can or need be wasted.

In short, they say that economic growth will have to be decoupled from resource consumption and modeled on what nature can teach us. In this they join with a number of other voices, perhaps most enchantingly that of Joe Hutto, a naturalist whose delightful PBS documentary, “My Life as a Turkey,” recounts his “adoption” of turkey hatchlings who imprinted on him as their parent. For more than a year he undertook this parenting role but soon discovered that he had more to learn than to teach. As the turkeys walked daily with him through the Florida forests, Joe realized that among other marvelous things, they differentiated venomous from harmless snakes by distinctive vocal signals. Commenting on the astounding things the turkeys taught him, Hutto says: “As I leave the confines of my language and culture, these creatures seem to become in every way my superiors. They are more alert, sensitive, and aware. They are in many ways in fact more intelligent. Their understanding of the forest is beyond my ability to comprehend.”

Joe Hutto’s *WHAT?* gives a new meaning to being a turkey. He reminds us that serious people are looking to the world of nature to find sustainable answers to everything, from how we move water around to how we keep habitats cool in the face of intense heat to how the so-called waste of one organic process becomes a resource for another organic process. Bradfield-Moody and Nogrady sum it up by saying, “Like errant children, we are coming to realize that we can learn something from our parents. And, like all caring parents, Mother Nature has many lessons for us.”⁴

When God saved Noah *together with every living creature and with the earth itself*, more was involved than allowing the rest of creation to ride on the coattails of humanity’s survival. It was just as much the other way round, as we are learning. Humanity is saved with the rest of creation not merely so that humanity can take care of the rest of creation, but also so that the rest of creation can continue to exercise its ministry of the sustenance of all things—humanity included. When Colossians speaks of *all things* being created in, held together, and reconciled to God by Christ, we see again that we are woven into, rather than set apart from, the tapestry of creation. To use the words of theologian Thomas Berry, this wisdom of God speaks of “the intimacy of humans with the natural world in a single community of existence.”⁵

Conclusion

As we focus on stewardship preaching attentive to care of the earth, we face a fire this time that will be successfully fought not with more fire from our fossil fueled past, but with a recovered biblical vision of our complex relation to “all creatures,” to “all things bright and beautiful.” As both Genesis and Colossians show us, we stand not apart from, but embedded in, all that God has made. That location, coupled with our authentically human vocation of learning from the world in which God has set us, opens us to the prospect of fighting the fire of climate change with the wisdom we garner from our earthly companions, inanimate and animate alike.

Despite the likelihood of considerable social turbulence in the years ahead as we learn how to live sustainably, as humankind learns new ways of fighting the fire this time, there are deep resources of hope offered us in these passages that furnish us with a needed resilience. For God *did give* Noah—and all creation—the rainbow sign: the emphatic promise that the earth would not be destroyed. And the Christ hymn of Colossians heralds the truth that *all things* are created, held together, and reconciled to God in Christ. And as we are grasped by this hope, we are also grasped by our partnership with the rest of creation as we move toward a sustainable future.

In a book with the arresting title *Reinventing Fire*, Amory Lovins and his colleagues at the Rocky Mountain Institute take a comprehensive look at (in their words) “how to eliminate oil and coal completely by 2050, with less risk and less cost to society than business-as-usual.”⁶ They conclude with a call to leadership on the part of all of us to make the kinds of changes, small and large, personal and social, local and global that will be required to provide viable habitat for our children and our children’s children, indeed for all things bright and wonderful. Here is their challenge posed as a question: Shall we continue down the path we’re on, toward economic stagnation, rising costs, unpleasant risks, social upheaval, and an ever more dangerous world, or shall we make a bold break and start laying the energy foundations of a world without waste, want, or war?⁷

Christians whose ancient, wise, and authoritative texts include God’s rainbow sign to all creation and Colossians’ witness to God’s creation, preservation, and redemption of all things in Christ surely are made ready for the latter choice: a bold break that starts laying the energy foundations of a world without waste, want, or war. So might it be.

Notes

1 David L. Wheeler, “Social Scientists Try to Break the Climate-Change Impasse,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (May 6, 2012).

2 Cf. James Hansen, “Game Over for the Climate,” *New York Times*, May 10, 2012. (<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/10/opinion/game-over-for-the-climate.html>).

3 James Bradfield Moody and Bianca Nogrady, *The Sixth Wave: How to Succeed in a Resource-Limited World* (Australia: Vintage Books, 2010). (Kindle location, 3778-3782).

4 Ibid.

5 Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York, New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 193.

6 Amory B. Lovins and Rocky Mountain Institute, *Reinventing Fire: Bold Business Solutions for the New Energy Era* (White River Junction, VT, 2011). Kindle location, 439-40.

7 Ibid., Kindle location, 7538-39.