



EARTH DAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, April 20, 2008

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Lection - Genesis 2:15 (New Revised Standard Version)

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

On April 22, 1970, 20 million people gathered across the country to show their support for the environment on the very first Earth Day. In New York City alone, 10,000 people gathered for concerts, lectures and rallies. More than 2,000 colleges and universities switched from their ongoing anti-war protests to join in pro-earth celebrations. Even Congress recessed for the day. Earth Day was credited with putting environmental issues on the political map and launching the environmental movement in the United States.

In 1990, Earth Day became a global event. Two hundred million people around the world staged dramatic displays of environmental support. In 2000, Earth Day entered cyberspace, with e-mails and live Web events bolstering participation.

Many groups have engaged in activities around, or on, the actual date slated for Earth Day, and used them to further sound environmental efforts and education. The goal of Earth Day is to

pursue environmental education and action plans by encouraging people of all races, creeds, religions, nationalities, and ideologies to become active participants in the preservation of the earth's natural resources.

As people of faith, we must seek to redirect the energies of governments, industries, and individuals away from destruction, waste and pollution of the physical environment, toward the development of products and services which will protect, enhance, and improve the condition of the earth, which includes the seas, and thereby benefit the citizens of all nations.

Earth Day encourages and increases the awareness of earth life through exposure to nature's wonders and through individual reflection, meditation, or prayer—seeking attitudes and conduct that will foster unity and cooperation in the love and care of the Earth.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Genesis 2:15

Part One: The Contemporary Context of the Interpreter

Becoming a psychologist and a pastor in the African American community afforded me the opportunity to make a significant, positive difference in this segment of society. I was satisfied that I was completing my calling until a couple of years ago, when I was invited to view a film entitled The Great Warming. As far as I was concerned, the invitation was just another event which was sponsored by a group of “environmental alarmists” attempting to solicit support and raise funds. But, since I was invited by someone I highly respected, I reluctantly consented to attend.

On May 18, 2006 my total perspective on environmental issues and life in general was drastically altered. I became a converted devotee to doing everything in my power to speak truthfully about human exploitative behavior which is literally destroying the environment which God created for us to live in, enjoy, and have our being.

What was so EARTH-shattering about that fateful day in May? I learned, for the first time, about the carbon dioxide which is not being absorbed by trees because we have cut them down, therefore less oxygen for healthy air is being emitted. I was shocked to see and hear about our self-serving demands that lead to massive fossil fuel burning. Yet, we continue to dig for more and more coal, rather than seek alternative energy sources. This depleting and defoliating simply fuels our greedy overuse of precious natural resources.

So, what does all of this mean to an African American pastor in Atlanta, Georgia, who is concerned every day with the elimination of poverty, curtailing homelessness, improving and providing health care, decreasing unemployment, lessening teenage pregnancy, reducing crime, curbing violence, eliminating racism, and trying to assist people through another day? The faith community consistently prides itself on being in the prevention and healing business. If we are serious about what we teach and preach, our message must speak clearly and boldly to:

1. What we can do to reduce levels of energy consumption;

2. Learn how to effectively unite forces with those who are more knowledgeable about improving environmental conditions; and,
3. Address health issues, weather conditions, economic concerns, and the negative impact of global warming which are all connected to how the environment is regarded. We must discuss these issues in sermons, seminars, workshops, and lectures.

This has everything to do with the community in which I serve, because my community is part of the larger globe community. We will perish together unless we all live differently together.

It became crystal clear to me as I watched The Great Warming that, environmental concerns must become an integrated active part of the life-sustaining messages that others, and I, send forth in the African American community. Further, these essential messages must be mandatory teachings throughout all faith traditions, if we are to survive.

Earth Day efforts should result in educational programs, seminars, and research throughout the world for the purpose of providing data to individuals and institutions who are joining the movement. They should also encourage and implement an earth care ethic. The stewardship and care of the earth requires action to produce and use materials and services that help nurture, conserve, and recycle, without destructive pollution to the organisms and nutrients of earth's web of life.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Chapter 2 of the Book of Genesis allows us to see God's marvelous handiwork of perfection as the earth and heavens were formed. God created light, sky, water, land, vegetation, sun, moon, stars, fish, birds, and animals. God placed all of this in a garden. God owned the garden or earth (Psalm 24:1; 50:10; 89:11; Haggai 2:8). However, God decided that the earth needed a steward, a caretaker, or manager, so man and woman were created. Their specific responsibility was not ownership, but to take care of the earth, dress it up, keep it up, tend to it, and work to make sure that it would remain pure.

God gave them dominion," or rule, which makes it crystal clear that God never relinquished ownership of earth (Genesis 1:26-28). There can be no grounds for misreading this text to justify selfish exploitation of God's assets. Adam and Eve were doing fine until they started to act as if they owned what God had created.

God expects us to be accountable, high-level caretakers of God's awesome earthly assets. From the Book of Genesis, as in the rest of the Bible, there is not even a small hint of God granting the earth to humans, nor did God ever release them to do with creation as they pleased. The text says, "God put man/woman on the earth to work it and take care of it." God remains God, and we are responsible to the Creator. Clearly there is nothing in the Bible to support the dangerous myth that the first garden was simply a place of pleasure, without responsibility. We may want to believe that popular myth more as an excuse for our own failure to always care for, improve and protect the Creation.

By any measure, the earth still belongs to the Lord. King David states as an inspiring exclamation of worship in Psalm 24:1 “The earth is the Lord’s.” Since the earth belongs to the Lord, and humans are mere caretakers, we must treat the earth in ways that honor and please God or there will be tragic consequences that we will have brought upon ourselves.

As human beings, we disapprove of spoiled, selfish children who try to run their parents’ homes. Yet, we, the children of God, continue to do what we want with God’s earth. We act as if we are not accountable to the God who created and provides it all. We are appalled at belligerent dictators and aggressive nations that wantonly take over and exploit the territories of other people, and yet nearly every human being since Adam and Eve has trampled over some portion of God’s good earth under the spiritual delusion of either absolute ownership or just callous carelessness. Our greed, consumption, over utilization of the earth’s natural resources, burning of fossil fuels, and a general insensitivity to destroying God’s earth has resulted in environmental disasters, extreme climate changes, a myriad of negative health conditions, and in general a less productive way of life for all.

We have unfortunately fallen into the trap of believing we “own the earth,” because we have papers, documents, and titles which say we own parcels of land, condominiums, houses, cars, boats, planes and such. All this “ownership” talk really means is that (1) in the economic realm we have a financial stake in property, and (2) there are papers in a real government file that say we are the owners. This in no way revokes God as the ultimate owner of all things.

Challenge

We can channel our responsibility, as good stewards, of God’s earth by:

- A. Choosing modern technology to reduce our use of fossil fuel;
- B. Driving smart, well-tuned cars with properly inflated tires and by driving less;
- C. Writing political leaders now and charging them to raise fuel economy standards to 40 miles per hour;
- D. Supporting clean, renewable energy;
- E. Replacing incandescent light bulbs with compact fluorescent bulbs in places of worship, homes, and office buildings;
- F. Sealing up our houses—caulking, insulating, and maintaining thermostats at one temperature all year;
- G. Using energy-efficient electronic devices and appliances and unplugging them whenever possible;
- H. Planting a tree, protecting a forest;
- I. Reducing! Reusing! Recycling!
- J. Mounting local congregational campaigns against global warning; and

- K. Trusting God for the increase. For God said that if we would “humble ourselves, pray, and change our ways, we would hear from heaven and God would heal our Land!” (2nd Chronicles 7:14).

Descriptive Details

Although our text does not indicate sights, sounds, colors, or textures, they can be found within the second chapter of Genesis in which our text is contained. Some are:

Sights: Every plant of the field (v. 5); every herb of the field (v. 5); the mist that watered the earth (v. 6); the dust from which man was formed (v.7); God breathing life into the nostrils of man (v. 7); the garden in Eden (v. 8); trees that are pleasant for sight and good for food (v. 9); the tree of life (v. 9); the tree of good and evil (v. 9); the river that went out of Eden to water the garden and became four other bodies of water (Pishon, Gihon, Hiddekel and Euphrates) (v. 10); gold and onyx stones; (vv. 11-12); every beast of the field and every fowl of the air (v. 19); woman being formed from the rib of man (vv. 21-22)

Sounds: The mist watering the earth; God breathing into man’s nostrils; trees blowing in the wind; the flowing of bodies of water; sounds made by the beasts of the field and the fowls of the air; God forming woman from the rib of man

Textures: The roughness of tree barks; the smoothness of leaves and pedals of flowers; the smooth feathers of birds; the grainy feel of the soil of the earth

Colors: The red, black, white, and blue beaks of birds; the green leaves; yellow, blue, red, white, purple and green flowers; brown cattle; blue water; yellow gold; and the black and white bands contained within an onyx stone

Note: Much of the information provided in this lectionary commentary was taken from a message I previously prepared for The Great Warming website in an article titled [Save the Earth from Us](#).

References

1. Nelson, Gaylord. “How the First Earth Day Came About.” [EnviroLink.Network](http://earthday.envirolink.org/history.html).
<http://earthday.envirolink.org/history.html> accessed 21 Dec. 2007
2. “History of Earth Day.” [Earth Day Network](http://www.earthday.net/resources/history.aspx).
<http://www.earthday.net/resources/history.aspx> accessed 21 Dec. 2007
3. “About Earth Day Network.” Earth Day Netowrk. www.earthday.org. accessed 21 Dec. 2007

External Links found at Wikipedia.com

- The Earth Day Network
- International Earth Day – The Official Site – Spring/Vernal Equinox
- Earth Society Foundation – Official organization arranging annual equinox Earth Day celebration at the United Nations
- Earth Day Network – Coordinating worldwide events for Earth Day
- United States Earth Day – The U.S. government’s Earth Day site
- Keep America Beautiful – Keep America Beautiful hold Earth Day cleanup activation in communities nationwide. The organization launched the famous Crying Indian campaign on Earth Day, 1971.