



EARTH DAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, April 22, 2012

(See section VII of the Cultural Resources unit for ways that your church can MOBILIZE its surrounding communities for Earth Day 2012.)

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Lection – Psalm 148:3-10 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 3) Praise him, sun and moon;
praise him, all you shining stars!

(v. 4) Praise him, you highest heavens,
and you waters above the heavens!

(v. 5) Let them praise the name of the Lord,
for he commanded and they were created.

(v. 6) He established them for ever and ever;
he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.

(v. 7) Praise the Lord from the earth,

you sea monsters and all deeps,
(v. 8) fire and hail, snow and frost,
stormy wind fulfilling his command!

(v. 9) Mountains and all hills,
fruit trees and all cedars!

(v. 10) Wild animals and all cattle,
creeping things and flying birds!

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

April 22, 2012 marks the 42nd anniversary of what many consider the birth of the modern environmental movement in 1970. According to the National Earth Day Network, the 42nd anniversary of Earth Day will focus on building the environmental movement and engaging new environmental activists around the globe. By facilitating relationships with new communities, the Earth Day Network will bring together an unprecedented number of individuals and organizations alike to celebrate the environment.¹ The theme for 2012 is **MOBILIZE THE EARTH**.

By in large the African American church has not celebrated Earth Day or been part of the environmental movement; however, it is part of our legacy. We have always believed that “the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof...” We have also long suffered from the viciousness and toxicity of environmental racism; many poor black communities were and are the dumping grounds for hazardous waste. These reasons alone make the case for the African American church to become more involved in the environmental movement and give liturgical recognition to Earth Day. Why not make 2012 the year we mobilize to help save the earth!

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Psalm 148:3-10

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

On May 3, 2011, a ribbon-cutting ceremony was held on the roof of the Florida Avenue Baptist Church as we became the first African American church in the DC metro area to install a solar energy power system. We are one of only a handful of churches in the country with a solar energy power system.

The decision to install the system was primarily a financial one, not an environmental one, but we quickly came to realize how closely the two are tied together. Savings on our electric bill enable us to do more ministry. It will reduce the greenhouse gases (CO²) we emit by 8 tons a year, which is the equivalent of planting 50 trees a year. Furthermore, it has raised the awareness of our members concerning the cost of electricity and led to some members retrofitting their own homes, and it increased conservation and recycling in our church. We have become more conscious of our physical health as we have become more aware of the connection between stewardship of God’s creation and environmental illnesses that affect us.

Most importantly it has led us to confess that we have not been good stewards of the extraordinary gift of God’s creation. Our pledge is to do much better.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Psalm 148 is one of the five psalms of praise that close the book of Psalms. It is the midpoint of the crescendo that culminates in Psalm 150 and anticipates its final exhortation “let everything that breathes praise the Lord.”

The formula for these psalms is an exhortation to praise followed by the reasons for that praise. Psalm 146 begins with an exhortation to the individual. Psalm 147 begins with an expanding exhortation to the wider population of Jerusalem. Psalm 148 calls for praise to come from the heavens and calls on the angelic beings to praise the Lord. At verse 3 the natural progression takes a turn from sentient beings to insentient objects. The sun, moon, stars, and rain are exhorted to praise the Lord. Obviously this is not meant to be taken literally but is a metaphor. It is a vehicle that has been used before (Psalm 19, “the heavens are declaring the glory of God...”). The psalmist of 148 is making the same statement that although these insentient objects do not have voice, their very existence is a testimony of the wondrous creative powers of God and for that alone God deserves our praise.

In verse 4 the psalmist explains that the reason for the sun, moon, stars, and rain to praise the Lord is that they were created by God’s command. In verses 5-7 there is further listing of those objects and creatures all created by command of God and all by their existence a proclamation of praise to God. The implication is that if those objects and creatures created by command praise God, certainly we who are created by his hand ought to praise God in our existence. Because of God, we his people, his creatures, and his creation are all connected.

For those who originally used these psalms in worship and up until the age of modern science, the sense of a connection between God and creation were readily apparent in everyday life. The sun, the moon, and the stars were a mystery. Rain, thunder, hailstones, and fire were feared, for when they occurred the environment seemed out of control. Agrarian-based societies dependent upon that which they could not control were quicker to sense the connection and more apt to live in awe and with respect for God’s creatures and creation.

As societies became industrialized and urban, that sense of connection waned and our lack of control of nature slipped into the background of our consciousness. It only resurfaces in the wake of great natural disasters such as Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma in 2005, and the recent tsunami and earthquakes in Japan and Haiti.

Because of the ubiquitous nature of our electric lights, for contemporary readers the wonderment of the evening sky is gone because we are only able to see a scant portion of the stars. Less awe leads to less of a sense of connectedness to God’s creation and more abuse of his creatures and creation.

The number of species known to be threatened with extinction has topped 16,928. Their ranks include familiar species like the Polar Bear, hippopotamus, sharks, freshwater fish and Mediterranean flowers. Marine species are proving to be just as much at risk as their land-based counterparts. One in four mammals, one in eight birds, and one in three amphibians are among the list.²

For most of us it is easy to disengage ourselves and deny that we had anything to do with the extinction of species. That is like denying that America financially benefitted from slavery.

Verse 6 of Psalm 148 contains a statement that also serves as a warning about creation: “he has fixed bounds which cannot be passed,” or, as in an alternate translation, “he set a law that cannot pass away.” There are consequences for our actions, and the ecological system thrown out of balance will rebalance itself in ways that we cannot imagine. God’s creatures, his creation, and our stewardship of the earth all matter greatly. Their preservation is our own preservation. Caring for God’s creation and his creatures is caring for ourselves.

Challenge

African Americans have generally been detached from the ecological and green movement. However, many of our health disparities, such as asthma and certain cancers, can be traced to abuse of the ecosystem and the dumping of waste products in our communities. Much of this occurred because we were not aware. That is no longer an excuse. There are too many resources available and we can see for ourselves some of the affects of global warning. The financial cost of non-sustainable energy use, pollution of air and water, and a shortage of resources such as water, fish, and wood will affect our communities first because we are the poorest and the least involved in the ecological movement. Earth Day can be presented in our churches as a day to increase our awareness of our connection to God’s creatures and creation, and the start of our rightful claim and show of responsibility as environmental stewards. The question to be asked is will our children and their children’s children rise up and call us blessed for the actions we take now? Let’s **MOBILIZE** for Earth Day 2012, and all days beyond, so that they will.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sights: Sunset; sunrise; the sun at noon; the moon in various shapes (crescent, full, $\frac{3}{4}$ moon); stars in various constellations; rain clouds; towering mountains above and below the tree line; fruit trees; fire; hail; snow on trees or swirling in the air; frost on meadows; wild animals; birds; small and large fish;

Sounds: Thunder; rain falling; fire causing crackling of wood completely engulfing trees and throwing sparks in the air; a crushing tsunami; a hurricane;

Smells: The earth after the rain; the burning of wood; the odors of fresh evergreens, cedars, fruit and fruit trees; and

Colors: White snow-capped mountains; green hills; and barren brown meadows.

III. Resources

- There are many resources available to help your church learn about Earth Day and the global environmental movement. A simple internet search will give you a plethora of results.

- The DVD An Inconvenient Truth (2006) is widely available and can be a good starting point of discussion in Sabbath and Sunday School classes and Bible studies.
- A new book worth exploring is Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions by Kimberly N. Ruffin. University of Georgia Press, 2011.

Notes

1. Contact Earth Day Network at earthday.org to obtain more information about Earth Day 2012.
2. Online location: http://cmsdata.iucn.org/downloads/species_extinction_05_2007.pdf