



## **EARTH DAY**

### **CULTURAL RESOURCES**

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Lecton - Genesis 1:11-12; 20-22 and verses 24-26 (New Revised Standard Version)

#### **I. Introduction, The Key Word: Stewardship**

One of the ways in which Christians have recently defined their relationship to the natural environment emanates from the concept of stewardship. Although associated with the responsible management of personal and collective resources, especially financial resources, stewardship as a guiding value and practice asserts that humans do not own or control the environment or creation; rather humans have been entrusted by God to be good stewards. Stewardship also means the rejection of unrestrained and irresponsible uses of resources. Earth Day is an annual celebration that usually occurs during the third week of April. During Earth Day, stewardship is more widely conceived to include the notion of environmental stewardship. Environmental stewardship is a heartfelt response of gratitude to God for the gifts of creation. What has been left in human care is not exclusively purposed for the benefit of a few, but intended for the benefit of all.

Historically, African American leaders such as Frederick Douglas, George Washington Carver, Sojourner Truth, poet Maya Angelou, and Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman represent powerful voices affirming how humans, as part of creation, have the responsibility to act with compassion towards creation.

Many African Americans find that they have powerful spiritual experiences while in nature. They experience lakes, mountains, rivers, oceans, forests, gardens, or parks as places and spaces where they are able to meditate, contemplate the wonders of creation, and rejuvenate the soul. Some stewards of the earth experience a sense of “expanded communion” where they become more keenly aware of the interdependence of all forms of life. The hymn, “In the Garden” provides us with a lyrical example of expanded communion: “He speaks, and the sound of His voice is so sweet, the birds hush their singing... I’d stay in the garden with Him though the night around me be falling, but He bids me to go.” These spiritual experiences have been described as feeling at home with God and creation.

Using the concept of stewardship to explore ethical Christian praxis towards the environment is not without its problems. Some scholars have argued that within stewardship understandings of the environment, non-human creatures remain objects that humans can fail to respect or protect. Others have noted that while many Christians affirm and practice stewardship, a narrow understanding of stewardship may mean that care for creation is easily neglected against the backdrop of a multitude of church and social issues.

One thing is for sure, questions concerning our relationship and responsibility to the natural environment and future generations will continue to be relevant for years to come. Earth Day celebrations create spaces for African American communities to self-determine their eco-justice journey and to participate in community empowerment in ways that provide a powerful witness.

## **II. Resources**

### Faith-Based Environmental Organizations

Interfaith Power and Light – Online location: <http://interfaithpowerandlight.org>

Web of Creation – Online location: [www.webofcreation.org](http://www.webofcreation.org)

National Religious Partnership For The Environment – Online location: [www.nrpe.org](http://www.nrpe.org)

Faith In Place – Online location: [www.faithinplace.org](http://www.faithinplace.org)

United Church of Christ. *Toxic Wastes and Race at Twenty* reports. New York, NY: Commission for Racial Justice – Online location:

<http://www.ucc.org/environmental-ministries/environment/toxic-waste-20.html>

### National, Community-Based, and Global Environmental Organizations

African American Environmentalist Association – Online location:

[www.aaenvironment.blogspot.com](http://www.aaenvironment.blogspot.com)

Green For All – Online location: [www.greenforall.org](http://www.greenforall.org)

National Black Farmers Association – Online location: [www.blackfarmers.org](http://www.blackfarmers.org)

Sustainable South Bronx – Online location: [www.ssbx.org](http://www.ssbx.org)

People's Grocery – Online location: [www.peoplesgrocery.org](http://www.peoplesgrocery.org)

Blacks In Green – Online location: [www.blacksingreen.org](http://www.blacksingreen.org)

Growing Home – Online location: [www.growinghomeinc.org](http://www.growinghomeinc.org)

The Earth Charter Initiative – Online location: [www.earthcharterinaction.org](http://www.earthcharterinaction.org)

### **III. Songs That Speak to the Moment**

Based on a poem written by Henry van Dyke in 1907, “Joyful, Joyful We Adore You” is set to the melody of “Hymn to Joy” from Ludwig van Beethoven's final symphony, “Symphony No. 9.” The song’s lyrics speak to God’s glory as manifested throughout Creation. The joy of being in God’s presence is expressed in the song’s use of nature imagery (“Hearts unfold like flowers before You, opening to the sun above...All Your works with joy surround You...”).

#### **“Joyful, Joyful We Adore You” also known as “Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee”**

Joyful, joyful, we adore You, God of glory, Lord of love;  
Hearts unfold like flowers before You, Opening to the sun above.  
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness; Drive the dark of doubt away;  
Giver of immortal gladness, Fill us with the light of day!

All Your works with joy surround You, Earth and heaven reflect Your rays,  
Stars and angels sing around You, Center of unbroken praise.  
Field and forest, vale and mountain, Flowery meadow, flashing sea,  
Chanting bird and flowing fountain, Praising You eternally!

Always giving and forgiving, Ever blessing, ever blessed,  
Wellspring of the joy of living, Ocean depth of happy rest!  
Loving Father, Christ our Brother, Let Your light upon us shine;  
Teach us how to love each other, Lift us to the joy divine.

Mortals, join the happy chorus, Which the morning stars began;  
God’s own love is reigning o’er us, Joining people hand in hand.  
Ever singing, march we onward, Victors in the midst of strife,  
Joyful music leads us Sunward In the triumph song of life.<sup>1</sup>

Alternative songs that speak to God’s hand in nature include “How Great Thou Art,” “In The Garden,” “All Creatures of Our God and King,” and “This Is My Father’s World.”

#### **All Creatures of Our God and King**

All creatures of our God and King  
Lift up your voice and with us sing,  
Alleluia! Alleluia!

Thou burning sun with golden beam,  
Thou silver moon with softer gleam!

Refrain

O praise Him! O praise Him!  
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!  
Thou rushing wind that art so strong  
Ye clouds that sail in Heaven along,  
O praise Him! Alleluia!  
Thou rising moon, in praise rejoice,  
Ye lights of evening, find a voice!

Refrain

Thou flowing water, pure and clear,  
Make music for thy Lord to hear,  
O praise Him! Alleluia!  
Thou fire so masterful and bright,  
That givest man both warmth and light.

Refrain

Dear mother earth, who day by day  
Unfoldest blessings on our way,  
O praise Him! Alleluia!  
The flowers and fruits that in thee grow,  
Let them His glory also show.

Refrain

And all ye men of tender heart,  
Forgiving others, take your part,  
O sing ye! Alleluia!  
Ye who long pain and sorrow bear,  
Praise God and on Him cast your care!

Refrain

And thou most kind and gentle Death,  
Waiting to hush our latest breath,  
O praise Him! Alleluia!  
Thou leadest home the child of God,  
And Christ our Lord the way hath trod.

Refrain

Let all things their Creator bless,  
And worship Him in humbleness,  
O praise Him! Alleluia!  
Praise, praise the Father, praise the Son,  
And praise the Spirit, Three in One!

Refrain<sup>2</sup>

## IV. Cultural Response to Significant Aspects of the Text(s)

### Historical Lesson

African Americans developed what in modern terms might be regarded as an environmental ethos long before the environmental justice movement, before the civil rights movement, and before they were emancipated and had citizenship rights conferred upon them.

-- Mart A. Stewart (2006)

The environmental history of Africans in the Americas has only recently begun to be seriously studied by scholars. Although African Americans have been involved with environmental concerns and the environmental impact of colonialism since their arrival in the New World, their involvement has often been ignored and neglected. This is because the discussion of race in environmental history and religion and ecology literature has been fragmented or missing. By choice and by constraint, our African ancestors engaged in sustainable practices prior to and after their forced migration through the Middle Passage to the Americas.

African American environmental activism is usually intertwined with collective struggles for social justice. This has resulted in mutually beneficial relationships between African American community-based and faith-based environmental organizations. African American religious environmentalism has many forms and contexts: individual and congregational, within rural, suburban, and urban communities, and as part of larger ecumenical, interfaith, and national environmental networks.



Minister Benjamin Chavis

Low-income urban neighborhoods are often sites of toxic dumping, bad air quality, debris, waste, and violence. Benjamin Chavis was the first leader to describe this form of environmental injustice and inequity as environmental racism. Director of Sustainable South Bronx and MacArthur Genius Award winner Majora Carter describes environmental injustice communities as communities that are experiencing economic, environmental, and social degradation. Although racism shapes and shades African American experiences of the environment, racism is not representative of the whole of black experiences of creation and community life. The same sites of memory of traumatic eco-violence and struggles for environmental equity are also gathering places for family and friends, epicenters for social transformation, and spaces where hard work, compassion, laughter, and hope are abundant.



Ms. Majora Carter

Environmental racism not only involves the unequal distribution of environmental degradation and connections between race, class, and pollution, it also involves the maintenance of environmental privilege through suburban flight, gentrification, and ruthless taking of land. There are many African Americans from rural environments that earn their livelihood from the land and animals, as generations of African American farm families and ranchers were practicing sustainable agriculture before it became a popular thing to do. Today,

U.S. Black farmers engage in sustainable practices while persistently facing land struggles and discrimination from governmental and corporate institutions.

## **V. Audio and Visual Aids**

### All Around the Church

- Integrate themes from nature into the liturgy and sermon, such as water, air, food, soil/ground, animals, seasons, or the cosmos. Sounds from nature, such as flowing river water, rain, wind, birds could be played softly during prayer.
- Bring in visual aids such as fruits and vegetables, small trees, or flowers.
- Display images of seasonal change, lakes and oceans, animals, fruits and vegetables, trees, flowers, mountains, farmland, and parks in areas throughout the church. Pictures of your church during each season make for great images for bulletins or video screens during an Earth Day worship service.
- Make time to learn and share knowledge about environmental stewardship from one generation to the next by sharing stories, pictures, gardening techniques, artwork, dance, and poems.
- Sponsor a Green Film Night during Earth Week. The DVD film Renewal: Stories from America's Religious-Environmental Movement is a good selection.

## **VI. Ideas for Preaching or Christian Education (Protect, Protest and Preserve)**

Here, I offer the threefold model for African American faith-based environmentalism of protect, protest, and preserve. These themes are suggested to assist in writing sermons, planning Christian Education classes or planning worship for Earth Day.

### **1. Protect Creation from harm**

Being good stewards of the earth includes lessening our own consumption of natural resources and material goods. We can protect the environment by living simply, reducing waste, carpooling or taking the bus, making cleaner energy choices, increasing the energy efficiency of churches, businesses and homes with energy audits, conserving water, and reducing toxins such as lead and pesticides.

Living sustainably means meeting the needs of the present without jeopardizing the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Nature-themed prayers, blessings, songs, and responsive readings reinforce our shared responsibility, respect, and gratitude for creation. Suggested scriptural readings include: Lev. 25:23-24, Job 12:7-10, Psalm 24:1, Psalm 96:10-13, Psalms 104:25,30, Ezekiel 34:17-1, and Colossians 1:16-17.

### **2. Protest Environmental Inequity and Injustice**

Black churches have been instrumental in giving the environmental justice movement support to mobilize for political action and environmental advocacy. Proclaim the Gospel in light of destructive human activities like war, attitudes of self-entitlement toward the environment and

people, and the sins of environmental injustice and disregard for God's creation. Make the environmental concerns of communities of color a starting point for your theological reflection and for your Christian Education department. Topics could include community development and green-collar jobs, environmental health and asthma, environmental injustice and equity, climate change, food insecurity in low-income areas, and pathways to community empowerment for environmentally-blighted urban communities. Suggest practical ways that your congregation can participate in sustainable practices and environmental justice.

### **3. Preserve Cultural and Environmental Heritage**

This theme for Earth Day gives us the opportunity to share our stories and knowledge about nature and to learn more about African American environmental history. Sermons, Sabbath classes and Sunday school classes might include personal stories of nature and community life or highlight black environmental leaders. Other events could feature speakers from the congregation with expertise in environmental work, panel conversations with congregational elders on our environmental heritage, conversations with youth involved in environmental activism or college students studying environmental problems, or a speaker from a community-based environmental organization.

## **VII. Making It a Memorable Learning Moment**

This section offers possible congregational actions for Earth Day that bring together a vision for mission and a commitment to environmental stewardship.

### **1. Green Your Church Building**

What are some changes we can make that will make our churches green? Starting a comprehensive recycling program, switching to compact florescent light bulbs, practicing non-toxic landscaping, implementing plans to reduce paper and energy consumption, reducing waste, and installing energy-efficient windows and solar panels are among the many changes your congregation may consider throughout the decision-making process. Assess the specific needs of your church building by conducting an energy audit. If you are starting new church building construction, talk with your architect about green building projects and LEED standards.

### **2. Community Outreach**

Get outdoors and do something! This may be as simple as involving members from the congregation in landscaping or tree planting or as big as organizing community-wide activities such as debris cleanup throughout your church's neighborhood. Other activities might include neighborhood beautification projects or hosting environmental education programs in cooperation with other non-profit groups such as 4H or local elementary and secondary schools. Some churches have started to reclaim unused land and vacant lots near the church and commit resources to their upkeep.

### **3. Become a Center for Green Congregational and Community Learning**

There is no one way to be green. Collaborate with other community churches and groups to sponsor an Earth Day Fair and invite environmental groups, youth groups, green vendors, public health professionals, and nearby colleges & universities to participate. Another possibility to consider is the development of a learning center for clergy, congregational, and community learning about caring for the creation, sustainability, and organizing for environmental advocacy.

#### **4. Collaborate with Other Churches and Environmental Organizations to Solve Environmental Issues**

This may include participating in mission projects with an environmental focus on a local, state, regional, national, or global level. By collaborating or partnering with other faith-based or community-based environmental organizations, your congregation can benefit from the wisdom of others while building new friendships. See the resources section for a brief list of environmental organizations.

#### **5. Rethink Food Growth and Purchases**

Unfortunately, some of the food we eat travels thousands of miles before ending up in our kitchens. At the same time, liquor and convenience stores increasingly function as grocery stores in poor neighborhoods. Many African American neighborhoods are no longer self-sustaining because they are completely dependent upon transported food. Why not look for food grown closer to home? You can do this by supporting your local farmers, community supported agriculture (CSA), and farmer's markets. Consider cultivating new growth in your community by starting or joining a community garden. Starting your own backyard or herbal garden at home is also a way to reconnect with the soil and enjoy eating what you have grown!

### **VIII. Poetry for Earth Day**

Claude McKay's "Joy in The Woods" featured below is but one environmentally conscious poem that can be read during Earth Day or Earth Week activities. Others include Paul Lawrence Dunbar's "Sympathy." See also, [Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry](#). Ed. Camille T. Dungy, Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2009.

#### **Joy in the Woods**

There is joy in the woods just now,  
The leaves are whispers of song,  
And the birds make mirth on the bough  
And music the whole day long,  
And God! to dwell in the town  
In these spring like summer days,  
On my brow an unfading frown  
And hate in my heart always—

A machine out of gear, aye, tired,  
Yet forced to go on—for I'm hired.

Just forced to go on through fear,  
For every day I must eat  
And find ugly clothes to wear,  
And bad shoes to hurt my feet  
And a shelter for work-drugged sleep!  
A mere drudge! but what can one do?  
A man that's a man cannot weep!  
Suicide? A quitter? Oh, no!

But a slave should never grow tired,

Whom the masters have kindly hired.

But oh! for the woods, the flowers  
Of natural, sweet perfume,  
The heartening, summer showers  
And the smiling shrubs in bloom,  
Dust-free, dew-tinted at morn,  
The fresh and life-giving air,  
The billowing waves of corn  
And the birds' notes rich and clear:—

For a man-machine toil-tired  
May crave beauty too—though he's hired.<sup>3</sup>

## IX. Recommended Books and Articles

1. Bullard, Robert D., Ed. Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1993.
2. Baker-Fletcher, Karen. Sisters of Dust, Sisters of Spirit: Womanist Wordings on God and Creation. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1998.
3. Graves, Dianne D. and Mark Stoll. To Love the Wind and the Rain: African Americans and Environmental History. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006.
4. Jones, Van. The Green Collar Economy: How One Solution Can Fix Our Two Biggest Problems. New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2008.
5. Mitchem, Stephanie Y., and Emilie Maureen Townes. Faith, Health, and Healing in African American Life. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008.
6. Smith, Kimberly. African American Environmental Thought: Foundations. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2007.

### Book Chapters/Journal Articles

Cone, James H. "Whose Earth Is It, Anyway?" In Earth Habitat: Eco-Injustice and the Church's Response. Ed. Dieter Hessel and Larry Rasmussen. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001.

Gray, T. L. "Consider This." Holy Ground: A Gathering of Voices on Caring for Creation. Ed. Lyndsay Moseley. San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books, 2008.

## X. References Used

1. Stewart, Mart A. "Slavery and the Origins of African American Environmentalism." To Love the Wind and the Rain: African Americans and Environmental History. Dianne D. Graves and Mark Stoll, Eds. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006.
2. Melosi, Martin V. "Environmental Justice, Ecoracism, and Environmental Justice." To Love the Wind and the Rain: African Americans and Environmental History.
3. Glave, Dianne D., and Mark Stoll. "Religion and African American Environmental Activism." To Love the Wind and the Rain: African Americans and Environmental History. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006.

4. Harper, Fletcher. "I Believe Three Things." Love God Heal Earth: 21 Leading Religious Voices Speak Out on Our Sacred Duty to Protect the Environment. Ed. Sally G. Bingham. Pittsburg, PA: St. Lynn's Press, 2009.
5. Hessel, Dieter. "Conclusion - The Church Ecologically Reformed." Earth Habitat: Eco-Injustice and the Church's Response. Ed. Dieter Hessel and Larry Rasmussen. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001.

### Notes

1. "Joyful, Joyful We Adore You" also known as "Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee." Words: Henry J. van Dyke. Sung to music "Hymn to Joy" from the 9th Symphony of Ludwig van Beethoven. Online location: <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/j/o/joyful.htm> accessed 14 November 2009
2. "All Creatures of Our God and King." Words: Francis of Assisi, *circa* 1225 (*Cantico di fratre sole*, Song of Brother Sun). He wrote this hymn shortly before his death, but it was not published for almost 400 years. Translated to English by William H. Draper
3. McKay, Claude. "Joy in the Woods." Claude McKay: Complete Poems. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004.