



EARTH DAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Lection – Genesis 1: 11-12, 20-22, 24-26 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 11) Then God said, “Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.” And it was so. (v. 12) The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good.

(v. 20) And God said, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.” (v. 21) So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. (v. 22) God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.”

(v. 24) And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.” And it was so. (v. 25) God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

(v. 26) Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

I begin this liturgical moment for the celebration of Earth Day by calling your attention to Michael Jackson’s music video, “Earth Song.”¹ After watching this moving video which depicts the decimation, ruin and renewal of Africa’s fertile and bounteous land, an inescapable question surfaced in my mind -- what kind of world will this generation pass onto the next generation of children and grandchildren?

In an article entitled “An Altar of Earth: The Bible as Earth Book,” Robert Morris raises the level of our prophetic imagination with similar questions about our stewardship of the earth. “Will the earth be the bleak world envisioned by some, where we will live not only in the ruins of nature, but in the ruins of the civilization that ruined it? Or will the world be well on its way to the renewal of the green mantle in which we live, so compromised by three centuries of human misuse- a world of waters cleansed of poison, air cleared of illness-making pollution, and divinely-shaped animal species left to thrive in their own wild kingdom? What will be the shape of the world to come? What kind of people will it take to shape it in this direction?”²

These inquiries demand urgent responses. If the abundance of earth will bless future generations, “rethinking theology and economy for a planet in peril” is a priority for Christian stewardship in our time.³ The dangers of neglecting the urgency of this stewardship may very well ruin eco-systems for future generations. The earth’s eco-crisis points to our human disregard and abuse of the earth’s natural resources. Our insatiable consumerism for creature comforts and possession is out of control. We now know that the release of carbon dioxide gases from automobiles and industry deteriorate the intricate fabric of our ecosystems causing weird weather events, global warming, the scarcity of fresh water and the erosion of fertile top soil.⁴ These environmental crises are realities that affect our daily lives. The recognition of Earth Day is a great opportunity for black churches to join the “earth network” movement of activists committed to renewal and healing of our sacred shelter and home, the Earth especially given that what harms the entire world often harms people of color first and worst.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Genesis 1:1-11; 20-22, 24-26

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Almost daily we receive news about the ecological crisis in America; and it is not good news. The eco-system of our planet is in peril. One eco-justice writer says “we treat the earth, our sacred home, like a hotel stay where occupants leave their disposals for someone else to clean up and replenish.” We use the high seas as garbage dumps and the green lands in the South as garbage heaps. Many of these dumps in the South are located next door to economically disadvantaged African American and poor communities.

One of the first ministry actions in which I became involved as pastor was working with community leaders to shut down the Bordeaux Dump located next to a North Nashville community. I remember the miserable stench from the garbage and the high rate of reported resident illnesses due to years of breathing poisonous air created by the dump. Community activism worked and the dump was eventually closed. At the time, this local Nashville community did not realize that its environmental crisis was linked to decades of environmental injustice, abuse and neglect on a global scale.

The Environmental Justice Leadership Forum cites the nation’s environmental crisis as the most significant social and political challenge of the twenty-first century.

In our post hurricane Katrina and Rita era, we continue to bear witness to an increase in the number of severe weather events impacting communities in the United States. Whether it is the mighty Mississippi River rising along the shores of the Midwest, melting permafrost creating displacement in the Arctic, out-of-season record-breaking tornadoes in Mississippi and Kentucky, the burning hills in Sacramento and San Diego or the droughts experienced in Georgia, Tennessee and Alabama, all of these events can be linked in some way to the environmental crisis due to climate change.⁵

The most vulnerable communities, the first and worst hit from these climate events, are socio-economically disadvantaged, disproportionately poor communities. Today, we are confronted with the real possibility of climate change stealing quality of life opportunities from not just poor low-income people and persons of color in America, but for life everywhere in the world. Black churches and their communities have been on the cutting edge of calling for racial justice in America; today black church activism must join the battle for environmental justice and climate justice for renewal of the earth.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary of Genesis

The creation stories in Genesis are profound theological accounts reminding us that we are children and stewards of the earth. The poetic voice in the Genesis creation account gives a Hebrew perspective on creation’s beginning. The Spirit of God brooded and moved over a deep void of nothingness and gave shape, life, vitality, energy and existence to all that is and declared it good.

The glory of a good creation is God’s gift to humanity. The idyllic symbolism of the Genesis creation stories is the fulfillment of God’s purpose for the flourishing of every living creature in the abundance of the earth. “Be fruitful and increase,” is the Divine

word spoken to all living creatures. As it relates to the role of human beings, the scriptural phrase in Genesis 1:26, “let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the live stock, over all the earth,” should be interpreted to mean that human beings are given a stewardship of creation as caretakers of earth’s abundance.

Unfortunately, the phrase “rule over” in Western and other cultures has been understood as dominance, possession of and control of the earth’s resources. This world-view has led to both human and ecological abuse of the earth’s resources and human exploitation and oppression.

But this is not the Divine intention and purpose of human life. As the Hebrew language literally puts it, human beings were created “to serve it and keep it,” to sustain and preserve God’s purpose of creation (Genesis 2:15). In other words, we are to serve the earth, to make an altar of the whole of human life on earth in a way that honors God’s purpose and intention of a good creation.

The world and all living creatures are God’s. We are the stewards of God’s creations, and the estate agents of care and love which we are to give to each other and to the earth’s animal species, soil and water, and the fertile green lands so that God’s blessings and abundance continue to bless future generations. The stewardship implication is that if we live in ways other than God intends, such blessings are not possible.

The profound message of the Genesis creation stories is that human stewardship and righteousness and the fate of the earth are inseparably linked. The replenishing and bountifulness of the earth’s resources depend on our living as righteous stewards in love, justice and care of God’s creation.

The most challenging task facing the liberating message of black churches today is connecting this stewardship with its witness for social justice and divine justice in the world. As one theologian puts it, “the most challenging task facing humanity today is the creation of a shared vision of a sustainable, desirable and just society, one that can provide permanent prosperity within the biophysical constraints of the real world in a way that is fair and equitable to all of humanity, to other species, and to future generations.”⁶

Celebration

There are few people in American history who exemplified the caring stewardship of the earth’s resources as well as the Tuskegee University agricultural genius, scientist George Washington Carver. George Washington Carver discovered three hundred uses for peanuts and hundreds more uses for soybeans, pecans and sweet potatoes. Carver did not patent or profit from most of his discoveries and products. He freely gave his discoveries to humanity. In fact, he declined an invitation to work for a salary of more than \$100,000 a year (almost a million today) to continue his research on behalf of his countrymen. Carver changed the South from being a one-crop land of cotton, to being multi-crop farmlands, with farmers having hundreds of profitable uses for their new crops. When

asked why he did not patent many of his discoveries for his own gain, Carver is documented as having said, “God gave them to me, how can I sell them to someone else?”⁷ George Washington Carver was able to live on this high plane of stewardship because he knew his true place in God’s purposes and did not organize his discoveries around himself, but rather around what made for the well-being of the whole. Carver’s spiritual and intellectual sensibilities were fully connected with nature’s God.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sights: Plants yielding seeds; fruit trees of every kind of fruit that contains seeds; swarms of living creatures, birds flying, large sea creatures, cattle, creeping things, wild animals, humankind created in God’s image;

Sounds: Sprouting vegetation; God speaking; large water creatures such as sharks swarming in the water; birds multiplying; the noises made by creeping things; and

Colors: Gold, red, green and yellow vegetation; seed fruit of all colors; grey, black, brown, blue and gold water creatures; black, purple, white, pink, grey yellow, and red birds; the suntanned skin of the first humans whom scientist believe were born on the continent of Africa.

III. Sermon Illustration

A native African of long ago from the Ibo tribe in West Africa described the gift of an unspoiled and bountiful earth that blessed his village for many generations. “Our land is uncommonly rich and fruitful and produces all kind of vegetable in great abundance. We have plenty of Indian corn, and vast quantities of cotton and tobacco. Deliciously flavored pineapples grow without cultivation as did various spices including peppers. People enjoyed gums, honey and a great variety of other fruit. All of our work is exerted to improve those blessings of nature.”⁸ We can learn a lot from the ancient Ibo tribe of West Africa about being good stewards of the earth. The Ibo people lived with a communal ethic of land ownership. Land was not owned by an individual but people used the land for the corporate and holistic well being of the tribe.

IV. Other Sermonic Notes

Today’s video features the song titled “Earth Song” by Michael Jackson. The lyrics raise serious questions that each steward of the Earth must answer.

Earth Song

(a) What about sunrise
What about rain
What about all the things
That you said we were to gain.. .

What about killing fields
Is there a time
What about all the things
That you said was yours and mine...
Did you ever stop to notice
All the blood we've shed before
Did you ever stop to notice
The crying Earth the weeping shores?

Aaaaaaaaaah Aaaaaaaaaah

What have we done to the world
Look what we've done
What about all the peace
That you pledge your only son...
What about flowering fields
Is there a time
What about all the dreams
That you said was yours and mine...
Did you ever stop to notice
All the children dead from war
Did you ever stop to notice
The crying Earth the weeping shores

Aaaaaaaaaah Aaaaaaaaaah

I used to dream
I used to glance beyond the stars
Now I don't know where we are
Although I know we've drifted far

Aaaaaaaaaah Aaaaaaaaaah
Aaaaaaaaaah Aaaaaaaaaah

Hey, what about yesterday
(What about us)
What about the seas
(What about us)
The heavens are falling down
(What about us)
I can't even breathe

(What about us)
What about the bleeding Earth
(What about us)
Can't we feel its wounds

(What about us)
What about nature's worth
(ooo, ooo)

It's our planet's womb
(What about us)
What about animals
(What about it)
We've turned kingdoms to dust

(What about us)
What about elephants
(What about us)
Have we lost their trust
(What about us)
What about crying whales
(What about us)
We're ravaging the seas
(What about us)
What about forest trails
(ooo, ooo)

Burnt despite our pleas
(What about us)
What about the holy land
(What about it)
Torn apart by creed
(What about us)
What about the common man
(What about us)
Can't we set him free

(What about us)
What about children dying
(What about us)
Can't you hear them cry
(What about us)
Where did we go wrong
(ooo, ooo)

Someone tell me why
(What about us)
What about babies
(What about it)
What about the days
(What about us)

What about all their joy

(What about us)

What about the man

(What about us)

What about the crying man

(What about us)

What about Abraham

(What was us)

What about death again

(ooo, ooo)

Do we give a damn?⁹

In an age of needless consumption where the worship of speed and convenience produce fossil fuels whose exhaust threatens global scorching, we need stewards of the earth who love the earth and celebrate the glory God in creation. When powerful forces, both institutional and personal, resist change in our environmental habits, we need to exercise responsible and proactive stewardship for environmental justice and activism for public policy changes that reverse both individual and industrial habits that abuse of nature.

(b) Human beings are children of the earth and in death to the earth they will return. From the moment of its creation, the beauty of creation and the flourishing of the earth and its people have captured the heart of God. It grieves the heart of God when our negative dispositions led us to do things to wrecks creation (See Genesis 1:10; 6:6, 11-12).

(c) A South American Indian proverb says, “Without love for the earth there is no place for us in heaven.”

Notes

1. See, Music Video, Michael Jackson’s “Earth Song.” Online location: Youtube <http://www.casttv.com/video/qh3mv51/michael-jackson-earth-song-youtube-s-new-high-quality-video> accessed 14 November 2009
2. Corin, Robert. “An Altar of Earth in Weavings: Stewards of Creation.” Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life. 22.5 (2008): 6.
3. McFague, Sallie. Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2000. p. 93.
4. Ibid. p. 120.
5. Shepard, Peggy M. and Cecil Corbin-Mark. Environmental Justice. 2.4 (2009): 163-166.
6. Costanza, Robert. 2000. “Visions of Alternative (unpredictable) Futures and Their Use in Policy Analysis.” Conservation Ecology. 4(1): 5. Online location: <http://www.consecol.org/vol4/iss1/art5/> accessed 14 November 2009

7. See, "George Washington Carver - Pictures and Quotes." Bellis, Mary, about.com guide. Online location: "George Washington Carver - Pictures and Quotes." accessed 14 November 2009
8. See, Leith-Ross, Sylvia. African Women, A study of the Ibo of Nigeria. New York: AMS Press, 1978. p. 19-38: 277-313.
9. "Earth Song." By Michael Jackson