



Interfaith Power & Light

A Religious Response to Global Warming

The Earth is the Lord's

A sermon by Reverend R. Charles Grant, D.Min.
Delivered at Bon Air Presbyterian Church, Richmond, VA
April 29, 2007

Scripture references: Psalm 8, Psalm 24:12, Genesis 1:1-5, 26-31, Romans 8:19-24

It's hard to believe an entire GENERATION has passed since the first EARTH DAY some 37 years ago. That first Earth day ushered in the environmental age: prior to the original Earth Day ecology was a minor field of study and environmentalists were generally viewed as "kooks" at best and alarmist extremists at worst. 37 years later, a documentary on global warming won the Academy Award for best documentary. Two months earlier, even a President who has long expressed his severe skepticism that global warming is actually occurring, much less is a problem, acknowledged in his State of the Union address that changing global climactic patterns are the cause for real concern.

Today the "mainstreaming" of environmental concerns runs from Wal-Mart to Wall Street. Businesses large and small want to cash in on being "for" the environment: even MacDonal'd's, under whose golden arches have blown a trillion wrappers and Styrofoam containers, is on the environmental bandwagon. Green is in.

There are of course, still environmental controversies and economic trade offs to resolve: how to manage toxic wastes, how to reduce the effects of global warming without crushing economic development, and so on. But all in all, Earth day is a mainstream, middle America focus for the 21st century. The question you may be asking is, "*But what does any of it have to do with Christian faith?*"

In a word, EVERYTHING. The Psalmist of old wrote, "**The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof; the world and those who dwell therein.**" What does the environment have to do with religious faith? The Psalmist would reply, "**what is there that does NOT have to do with religious faith?**" Religious faith is inclusive of ALL things, all things living and non living, "all things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small, all things wise and wonderful: The Lord God made them all."

For this world is not ours. "This is our *Father's* world". Before the universe was so much as a twinkling in God's eye, it was God's. God brought this world into being. God is the source of all life. The world and all living beings are related to God as creation, creature, and CREATOR. The earth is *the Lord's*.

The earth is the Lord's, AND THE FULLNESS THEREOF. Nothing we do, nothing we feel, nothing we believe, falls outside of God's interest, God's compassionate care, and God's will for his creatures and creation. Including the way the Creator's creatures use or misuse the creation.

The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. And, the psalmist would add, *HUMANITY HAS A*

UNIQUE STATUS IN THE ORDER OF CREATION. Men and women stand BETWEEN God and her world.

Again, the Psalmist's writes: "When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which You have made; what is WOMAN that You are mindful of her, MAN that You care for him? Yet, You have made humanity little less than God...You have given humankind dominion over the works of your hands..."

A LITTLE LESS THAN GOD. As the first creation story emphasizes, humanity is the crown of creation, and as the second creation story puts it, men and women have dominion, power and authority over the other creatures and the rest of creation. We are created a little less than God.

The Lord has given the earth to men and women for their use and enjoyment, but the earth is still the LORD's. Traditionally stated, we are the STEWARDS OF GOD'S CREATION: managers of the assets of an absentee landlord. A familiar image in the church, but I think a more apt image is we are CREATIVE PARTNERS with a CREATIVE GOD.

I am reminded of that old story about the city preacher who went to call on one of his parishioners who was a farmer. As he stood with him admiring his spread, the preacher said, "You certainly have been a good steward of what God has given you. You and God have done a beautiful job with this farm." Unimpressed with his city preacher's theology, the farmer replied, "Maybe so, but *you should have seen the place when God was working it alone.*"

Understanding ourselves as God's creative partners reminds us that we are created in the image of God, a CREATIVE God. The environment is impacted by our presence: As God created the world out of nothing, we create culture and our social world out of the world God shares with us.

As partners with the divine creator we are also reminded of the mutual accountability that exists between God and humankind. We are not EQUAL partners, to be sure. But we are partners. COVENANT partners is the biblical term, parties bound to one another. In the myth of the fall we realize that we have FAILED to hold up our end of the covenant of creation established by the God who walked with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day. Humankind's continuing sin led to the great flood in which God cleansed the earth - and gave us the rainbow covenant-PROMISE to PRESERVE the EARTH FOR EVERMORE. God has and continues to hold up his end of our partnership. God is faithful in the covenants offered to us. As God's partners, then, it is our duty to hold up OUR END of the partnership: *to faithfully conserve the creation God preserves for us.*

So far I have focused on our relationship with God. But what about the EARTH ITSELF? I think Earth day draws us to reframe our picture of what the earth is - and who we are in relationship with the earth.

Since the industrial revolution, we have construed the earth as a MACHINE: a complex, highly productive working machine. Some of the parts wear out, but they are replaced and the earth machine keeps going like the Energizer Bunny. The earth is here to SERVE us-which is what machines do.

A better picture of the earth, a more theological view of the earth, a BIBLICAL view of our earth, is that of the **earth as a moment of grace.**

Think about it. Within just our own universe, earth, and earth alone, is not too large, not too small. Just the right distance from the sun to support life. Abundant water. As eco-theologian Thomas Berry

observes, earth, and earth alone **"was the chosen planet, the planet with a destiny beyond all expectation, a planet that was shaped by a thousand fold series of graces that enabled the Earth to fulfill its special mission in the universe."** (LP2/2/12) The earth is a most gracious gift to us.

We need to move beyond a mere scientific view of the world as a mass of minerals, flora, and fauna, and to see the earth as an extension of God's very self. Sallie McFague suggests we view the world through the lenses of Martin Buber's famous distinction between I/THOU and I/IT: the world is not an "it", not merely a tool in human hands to be used and then discarded. The earth and humankind stand in an I/THOU relationship, in which we appreciate the earth as earth and fellow expression of our creative God. (LP2/2/32)

McFague goes so far as to portray the earth as the BODY of God. Not that the EARTH is a God or GOD is the earth, but to remember how precious the world is to God: She writes, **"If the entire universe, all that is, and has been, is God's body, then God acts in and through the incredibly complex physical and historical-cultural evolutionary process that began eons ago...to trust in a God whose body is the world is to trust in a god who cares profoundly for the world."**(ibid) Or, as John 3:16, says, to trust in the "God who so loved the WORLD..."

The earth as God's gracious gift is portrayed in Native American cultures by the metaphor MOTHER EARTH. And expressed in the simple piety of St Francis who each day greeted brother sun and sister moon.

The earth is the arena for God's grace - and **the earth is also the arena for God's judgment.** All of the Biblical visions of the end time speak of it in terms the earth: Isaiah says the day of the Lord will bring a shaking of the foundations of the earth. Paul speaks of the entire creation GROANING for God. In Revelation, the end of time will bring a complete renewal of creation and a new heaven and a new earth. And after that will come the judgment.

For it is in the world that God is working his purpose out. And there are indeed consequences for our actions here on earth. Consequences in the here and now. And those prophetic words of chief Seattle haunt us more today than they did 150 years ago: **"The earth is precious to God, and to harm the earth is to heap contempt on its Creator...Continue to contaminate your bed, and you will one night suffocate in your own waste."**

The earth as gracious gift. The earth as arena for God's judgment. Earth and humankind in living relationship. God and humankind in partnership. "The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof; the world and those who dwell therein." What does all of this mean for everyday living? Most of us are already recycling and environmentally sensitive. What is the next step?

Corporately, our Session has decided the next step is to look at the impact our church building, activities, and ministries have on the environment, and to ask, "How can we be better partners with God in managing God's good creation? Can we reduce our church's consumption of carbon based fuels and products?" The Session has formed a *caring for creation team*, chaired by elder Ernie Wright. Listen to them as they begin their work. And when invited, JOIN the "green team" for the good of God's good creation.

And individually, I challenge each of us to examine our personal stewardship of the earth and the earth's resources. Some of the things we can do are as easy as changing the light bulbs in our houses, or adjusting our thermostat settings. Other areas of our stewardship, such as looking at the vehicles we

drive or how often we drive them, may be more challenging. But whether the questions we ask ourselves are easy or hard, the time has long since arrived for us to be prayerfully asking them.

One of the products of the earth day movement was a little booklet entitled 50 SIMPLE THINGS YOU CAN DO TO SAVE THE EARTH. It has never been a best seller: Amazon says 475,000 titles have out sold it. The booklet lists simple, mundane things YOU can do for the preservation of mother earth. Its 50th suggestion may be the best: "spread the word". Share ideas with others about how together we can serve, preserve, and conserve God's creation. How we can live faithfully with our partner the earth and in covenant communion with our Creator God.

Dear friends, SPREAD THE WORD! With God be a faithful partner of the earth God entrusts to our care. Enlighten the path of your brothers and sisters. For what YOU DO does make a difference! SPREAD THE WORD! The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof; the world and those that dwell therein!" AMEN.

Genesis 1:1-5, 26-31

1In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, 2the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. 3Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. 4And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. 5God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day...

26Then 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." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. 28God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." 29God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. 30And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. 31God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Psalm 8

- 1 O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.
- 2 Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.
- 3 When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
- 4 what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?

- 5 Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor.
- 6 You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,
- 7 all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,
- 8 the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Romans 8:19-21

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; 20for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

Psalms 24:1-2

- 1 The earth is the LORD'S and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it;
- 2 for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers.