

Earth Day Sermon: The Green Face of God

By: Craig Benson

Introduction

Choosing a topic to preach on was easy for several reasons: 1) yesterday was Earth Day, 2) the Bible has a lot to say about Creation and our relationship to it, and 3) I am very passionate about this subject. Not only do I revere the Creator and the Creation, but this ever-evolving Garden of Eden still provides everything needed for everyone I love or ever will love. You have seen photographs of Earth from space, right? Isn't she a beauty - our blue and green Gaia Goddess home planet on its annual elliptical orbit around one of God's countless suns, set at the edge of the Milky Way Galaxy, in an infinitesimally small corner of God's ever expanding universe! Although I am a scientist by training and profession, I have come to believe more and more in intelligent design as I recognize the Earth as a "directed-to-evolve" system so alive with God's presence. I know that y'all love God. I want to find out how close your kinship is with Creation.

- How many of y'all grew up on a farm, in a forest, rural setting, or were otherwise directly affected by and closely linked to nature's cycles? Did you see God there?
- How many grew up somewhat urban dwellers but always managed to find the neighborhood creek, abandoned orchard, secret pond, or got away into nature every chance you could get? Did you feel God there.
- How many are pretty well urbanized and have little reason to venture out to where the bugs and weather are? Do you find God no matter where you are?

It sounds like we have a wide spectrum of folks who can find God hugging a tree or hugging their Hoover!

God as Holy Spirit is biblically defined as an Earthen reality. Take a look at the symbols on the altar. God as Holy Spirit appears alternately as wind/air: *ruach* and *pneuma* the life-giving breath that animates all things; as living ground from which the flowering vine emerges; as living water the Spirit quickens and refreshes all who drink; and finally as fire, the bright flame that judges evildoers and ignites the prophetic mission of the church with tongues of fire. The eco-imagery in the Bible is quite astounding. **Apart** from God in Christ, the green face of God is perhaps one of the most tangible we mortals we see.

The Bible tells us that the Creation is an abode of divinity, a habitation of life-giving spirit. If you hold the Creation dear, this will be a message that your heart has been longing for because it addresses the earth-sized place in our hearts where we intersect with all God's diverse species. And I don't need to tell you that the crossroads between humans and other species has been a bit rough and is in need of some reconciliation.

We've been discussing the crossroads a lot in our church lately, particularly the intersection of humanity and divinity: up and out. Today we're focusing on the crossroads of the Creator and the Creation: God and his earthly domain. **So, let us not** overlook on Earth Day weekend the reality that Jesus died on a cross made from a living tree and that the cross was erected in the living ground of Golgotha which shook and

cleaved at His passing. Let us recall that the sky darkened and the sun shone no more as Jesus returned to his place at the right hand of the Father. Let us remember that ours is a “deep-green” earth religion; that our God made himself flesh in His own Creation and re-affirmed the natural world a Holy place, just as it was with the Garden of Eden.

In order to remember better, let us start at the beginning with Genesis to be reminded of what God did, said, and instructed regarding His creation.

The wonder of Genesis

Our Bible starts with the story of a place we couldn't survive in: A formless void and darkness, a long way from the green planet wrapped in a shining blue bubble that we now inhabit. The picture of primordial earth painted in Genesis, awash in bitterly cold dark, is a place in which the commanding phrase “Let there be light” had a meaning beyond our comprehension. The dazzling light chases away the darkness and burns away the chill. Life, as we know it, becomes possible. The lifeless vacuum of space is a bright new canvas for our Creator who then issues forth in his mighty voice a 5-day litany of commands so awesome, one shivers to think of them. God's word booming outward across billions of miles of space, stirring the seas on our pre-dawn planet, a planet so tiny on the enormous scale of the universe, yet ordained to be so vital, so crucial to God's plan. The Creator commanded “Let there be an expanse between the waters”, “Let dry land appear”, “Let the land produce vegetation”, “Let the water teem with living creatures” “Let there be wild animals according to their kinds” and so on. And are we not overwhelmed by the stunning variety of life forms that God has created?! Lent is over, can I get ALLELUIA! Hey, even God was pleased: at the end of each day he saw and exclaimed that, “It was good”.

But that is not the end, not by a long shot! With that same breath he decided to add one more thing to the divine architecture of His Earth, (*slowly*) “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion”. Let us bask in the profound glory of this for a moment. (*to someone by name*) On your worst day, you still reflect God's glory. It is the way, you were made. (*Repeat to someone else*) My friends, how could we have ever doubted for one moment that we were loved? **Our second scripture** reading from Isaiah says it again but with even more awe, “What is man, that Thou dost take thought of him? Yet Thou hast made him a little lower than God, and Thou dost crown him with glory and majesty! Thou dost make him to rule over the works of thy hands; Thou hast put all things under his feet...”

Our charge regarding creation.

If you're anything like me, once the flush of joy subsides at being so singled out by the Creator's love, the incredible FEAR of being so singled out by God's love arises. Can you believe the awesome responsibility that God has commissioned us with by saying “And let them (that's you and me) have dominion”? Scripture tells us that God has placed us on this earth as his regents and commanded us to take care of the things that he has made. This is a big part of our original walking orders. We attempt to fulfill it as an expression of our love for him (the first great commandment). But we must not forget the second part of the order, that we maintain the attributes of God's creation that support

life on Earth in order to love our neighbors as ourselves (the second great commandment). And, just in case the God thunder isn't ringing in your ears yet, we are commanded to go beyond reverent use and actually *replenish* the Earth. Yeah, make it fuller and better than when we got it. Yeah, *Yikes!*

Have we altered the Creation story?

Let's get real for a minute about how our culture has altered the creation story. Probably no passage in the Bible has been so misunderstood and misinterpreted as Genesis 1:26, where God gave humankind "dominion" over nature and animals. This has often been mistakenly interpreted as giving humans the right to treat creation as we see fit. "Thou hast made him to have dominion over the works of Thy hands; Thou hast put all things under his feet." Yet, haven't we changed dominion to domination and stewardship to ownership? I'm certain that Adam and Eve were 100% clear that they didn't own the garden they were eating from. At what point in human history did we decide that it was all our property rather than God's? It becomes REALLY tough when we challenge our notion of ownership and accept that everything we have is Gods, not just our eternal soul, but EVERY material thing. It make tithing look like we're getting off easy.

How did human kind get this exaggerated sense of entitlement. The simplest explanation I have ever found for how things came to be the way they are is in the book *Ishmael* by Daniel Quinn. The central character in the book, who is a sentient gorilla, is talking to a man. He says, "As far as I can tell from human treatment of the Earth, the story you humans are living goes like this: The world was made for man to conquer and rule and under human rule it is meant to remain a paradise, except that you messed it up and now believe that there is nothing you can do about it." It is enlightening to hear it summed up like that, huh?

But the Bible makes clear that all living things belong to the Lord, not to humankind. Psalm 50 says, "For every beast of the forest is mine; and the cattle upon a thousand hills". And that humans are temporary caretakers is expressed in Leviticus 25:23, "The land is mine; for you are sojourners with me". That takes care of 'the world was made for man' part in the Ishmael story. The 'messed it up' part is an old story going back to Adam and Eve that has been compounding ever since. The most upsetting part of this story to me is the part where we believe there is nothing we can do about it. **We must give up the belief that there's nothing we can do about it, especially when God is ever ready to help us.** We are making progress.

Good news- green movement in the Church.

Over the last 25 years there has been a virtual revolution in the way that the faith community has begun to view, respond to, and involve itself in environmental issues. The "greening of the churches" is centuries overdue, but it IS happening. The "theology of ecology" is being espoused far and wide by Catholic, Protestant, and Greek Orthodox alike, particularly as the consequences of humankind's footprint on the planet extend to the ends of the earth and beyond...yes, we even have human litter in outer space.

Some of the most progressive leaders, are serious evangelicals like the Reverend Jim Ball founder of the Creation Care Foundation and the Noah Alliance. Rev. Ball is boldly saying “Our faith ought to declare ecological destruction as blasphemous. To reduce the glory of God’s created order through species extinction should be regarded as the gravest of sins against God”. Lest you think this sentiment is restricted to radical theologians, consider equally far-reaching statements coming from the Vatican and the Eastern Orthodoxy. In 1989 The Patriarch Demetrios, ecumenical leader of 250 million Eastern Orthodox Christians, stated “the Church continuously declares that Man is destined not to exercise power over creation, as if he were the owner of it, but to act as its steward, cultivating it in love and referring to it in thankfulness, with respect and reverence to its Creator.”

Can technology save us? (show magazine)

I have a recent edition of Sierra Club magazine. The cover title is, *Can Technology Save the Planet?* The entire magazine explains and diagrams dozens of hopeful earth-saving technologies. As a scientist I want to say, “Well, if technology got us into this problem our brightest technical minds can get us out.” As a consumer, I have few illusions about the ways people interact with technology and I doubt that global environmental problems will be solved by inventing new stuff. *As a Christian, I believe that the solution is foremost a spiritual one and I believe that divine intervention through us will be at the heart of it.*

There is a woman, named Les Ann Kirkland, who organizes people to fight pollution in Louisiana. She says, “The church may be the only institution that can alter the crash course with environmental destruction that we are on.” My brothers and sisters, the importance of our role and the church’s role can hardly be exaggerated, when roughly a third of the world’s population and four in ten Americans attend church.” Woah, there are more church-going folks in the U.S. than Americans who watch NFL football! Imagine what God could do through us if we would only respond like Noah did. God demanded his action and Noah followed in obedience.

The Abode of Divinity

In our scripture reading from Isaiah, the Lord makes it clear that He “did not make the earth a waste place, but formed it to be inhabited”. God’s original plan for us was the verdant Garden of Eden. And it continues to be up to each one of us to personally decide how green God’s face is. If for no other reason, I am standing here on Earth Day weekend to bear witness to you that it is not Pagan blasphemy to say that nature is sacred. It is not mistaken to find God’s presence in all things. To the contrary, it is a good sign that the Holy Spirit who animates the Creation is actually touching you! I am a true seeker of the power of God in the written word, but I am so thankful that I can also physically see God’s face in the silent cathedral of the redwood forest and in the glittering expanse of the stars above. I don’t know about you, but I’m still waiting for God to respond to my prayers with an audible voice. But I am content to listen to God’s speech in the crashing waves on our coast, in the screech of a red-tailed hawk, in buzzing of the bees flitting from flower to flower. Christianity, to me, is the epitome of an

earthen religion because God created the earth, animated it with the Holy Spirit, and if that weren't enough, came back to it enfleshed as a man to reconcile it to Him. My friends, in God-time, everyday is Earth day! Can I get an Amen!

Alternate to the story we're living.

Let me finish today's message by giving you an alternate to the story we are living. Just imagine... in some untold amount of years, even beyond Star Trek, sometime after man's time, a conversation happens between whatever animals are around then. They are discussing humankind, perhaps like we discuss the dinosaurs now. 'Man?', responds one animal to a question. Oh, yes, man! What a wonderful creature he was! It was within his grasp to make the world a waste place and to trample all of our futures into the dust-but he saw the light before it was too late and pulled back. He pulled back and gave the rest of us our chance. He showed us how it had to be done if the world was to go on being a garden forever."

My friends, perhaps the world doesn't belong to man. But it does need man to belong to it. I have to say that again. *The world doesn't belong to man, but it does need man to belong to it.* God has indeed given us an honored place in the world, but it is not our place to rule. God has that well in hand. Our first two Bible lessons, however, tell us that God did put man first. The sentient gorilla in Daniel Quinn's *Ishmael* suggests that just maybe it is so we can teach the other species who are capable of evolving; to be the example. Maybe after millennia of eating from the Tree of Knowledge and playing God with the future of Creation, we will see in Jesus the Light of the World and give the world back to God. Then the rest of the created will have their chance. (*place globe on altar*)

God gives us the power to respond – the response-ability. And we can renew and replenish the paradise we were given. So, Adam and Eve relinquished the garden to Satan; anyone else want to get it back? Our Bible after Genesis is in one way or another about the redemption of all things unto the Lord. On Earth day and every day, see God's green face. Let us be reborn into a belief in Eden.

Scripture Readings for the Earth Day Sermon

Genesis 1:20-24 And God said, “Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of sky.” So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living and moving thing with which the water teems, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.

God blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on earth.” And God said, “Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: livestock, creatures, that move along the ground, and wild animals, each according to its kind.” And it was so.

Psalms 8:3-8 When I consider Thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which Thou hast ordained: What is man, that Thou dost take thought of him? And the son of man, that Thou dost care for him? Yet Thou hast made him a little lower than God, and Thou dost crown him with glory and majesty! Thou dost make him to rule over the works of thy hands; Thou hast put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the wild beasts, the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea and whatever passes through the paths of the seas.

Isaiah 45:18-19 For thus says the Lord, who created the heavens and who formed the earth and did not make it a waste place, but formed it to be inhabited, “I am the Lord, and there is no one else. I have not spoken in secret, in some dark land; I did not say to the offspring of Jacob, ‘seek me in a waste place’; I the Lord speak righteousness, declaring things that are upright.”