

Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year C: Ecological Reflections

For April 28, 2013

Texts: Acts 11:1-18, Psalm 148, Revelation 21:1-6, John 13:31-35

We live in a time when Christ's Earth is changing very quickly, and changing into a new Earth. Bill McKibben has written a very good book on the subject, called *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet*. He includes the extra 'a' in the title because "The world hasn't ended, but the world as we know it has—even if we don't quite know it yet...It needs a new name," (McKibben, 2). Global climate change is transforming our Earth into a new, barely recognizable place, a place that is much less hospitable, much less fertile, much less livable than now.

I realize that many of those who read this do not believe that humans cause climate change, or that climate change is actually a problem, or that if it is a problem it should be addressed from the pulpit, or that if climate change is actually a problem there is any thing we can do about it.

I will not try to convince the first group of the overwhelming scientific consensus that the Earth is warming because of human activity. To the others, I offer a way to address the themes of Earth Day by appropriating them in our Easter proclamation, which must govern and inform any other topic we choose to address in our sermons. What follows is a suggestion on preaching about Earth Day during the Easter season.

I realize that by the time you read this, it may already *be* Earth Day, or even that Earth Day may have already passed. But in light of the events in Boston over the past week, I thought it best to wait and offer this for the following Sunday. And anyway, as we shall see, it's never too soon or too late to preach about Earth Day.

So, the first rule of preaching about Earth Day is this: don't preach *about* Earth Day. Or rather, remember, when preaching about Earth Day, that this Earth is Christ's. And, as these Easter pericopes from Year C have taught us, Christ rules. So the second rule about preaching about Earth Day is don't preach about Earth Day: preach about Christ and his rule and our life in his reign.

So what should we do? If we waited for straightforward passages that say, "Don't burn fossil fuels," we would probably be waiting a long time for the perfect text. But part of the God's challenge to the church is to expand our preaching to encompass the totality of God's creation, and this Fifth Sunday in Easter will help us do just that.

In other words, when we preach Christ, we ought to preach a cosmic Christ as much as a personal Christ. Joseph Sittler worked on this very theme perhaps most memorably in his address to the World Council of Churches in 1961. Using Colossians 1:15-20 as his theme, he said, "[Christ] is not only the matrix and *prius* of all things; he is the intention, the fullness, and the integrity of all things; for all things

were created through him and for him. Nor are all things a tumbled multitude of facts in an unrelated mass, for in him all things hold together.” Precisely because Christ rules, and because in Christ all creation coheres, Sittler says, “redemption is meaningful only when it swings within the larger orbit of a doctrine of creation. For God’s creation of the earth cannot be redeemed in any intelligible sense of the word apart from a doctrine of the cosmos which is his home, his definite place, the theatre of selfhood under God, in corporation with his neighbor and in caring relationship with nature, his sister.” In other words, not only we humans but also creation, in which God shall one day be all in all. And if Christ redeems us, Christ also redeems the theater of God’s glory.

Which is why we can come to the third rule of preaching about Earth Day: every time we preach Christ, we preach about Earth Day, because in Christ, every day is Earth Day, just like every day is Love Your Neighbor Day, just as every day is Independence from Sin Day. Christ rules, Christ reigns, Christ saves—the Earth, along with us.

John 13:31-35

This particular pericope may be divided in two parts: the first tells of glory, and the second of love. The first tells how the one who so loved the world gave his only Son, so that all who believe in him will have eternal life. Following Raymond Brown, we hold that Christ’s glory is past, present, and future, viewed from the eternal viewpoint of God (*The Gospel According to John, XIII-XXI*, 610). This glory is the incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, who reconciles all things to God. This reconciliation is total, and for all things. For all things came into being through this reconciler, and without him not one thing came into being.

As God so often does, God gives grace and commands at the same time. “Only the believers obey,” Bonhoeffer wrote, “and only the obedient believe,” (*Discipleship*, 63). Here in John Christ commands his followers to love one another. Brown writes, “Yet love is more than a commandment; it is a gift...The love that Jesus has for his followers is not only affective but effective: it brings about their salvation,” (*Gospel*, 612).

We can therefore say that the good news of salvation only becomes clear when it becomes visible and incarnate in our obedience to the commands of Christ, as we are empowered by the Holy Spirit. Chief among these visible and incarnate signs of love is the way that we love one another in the church, the way we lay down lives for one another, the way that we trust in Christ enough to follow him to the Father.

We know, for instance, that global climate change is already affecting the poorest and most vulnerable parts of the Earth, and that it will likely affect least the wealthiest parts of the Earth. But precisely here our faith in Christ impels us to love: those affected are our brothers and sisters, who come to the very same table and eat of the very same feast as we do. To love them is to lay our lives down as Jesus does—if we truly want to help the poorest of the world, we must listen to what God

is telling us to change here; rejecting fossil fuels and the exploitation of the earth, and turning to new forms of energy and stewardship of the Earth.

There is good news here: we have, in our lifetime, in this very moment, the command of Christ to love, and the grace that God has provided us a time and the means to do it. We have a challenge worthy of our calling as sons and daughters of God. We can stop climate change; at the very least, we can stave off the worst excesses. But it means that we ourselves will change.

So preaching God's love for the Earth in this text:

1. Christ's command to love one another is a gift and command: Christ gives us the power to love our brothers and sisters, and in Christ, we are part of God's reconciling love for the world.
2. When we live under Christ's reign, we know that God calls us to great glory, and great things. One of those things is stopping global climate change through the love we have for one another. Doing this through love is not only good for our planet, but a powerful, incarnational, and evangelical witness of God's love for humankind and all of Creation.

Acts 11:1-18

Usually, we spend a lot of time explaining the buffet Peter saw in his vision. And it is true that the eating of meats was a flashpoint in the early church—just as it was also true that the place of the Gentiles in God's plan of salvation was also a flashpoint. Part of the greatness of this text is its impulsion towards inclusion. In other words this is a text of reconciliation—between Jews and Gentiles, but also of reconciliation of God and Gentiles through the gift of repentance.

Who are we that we can hinder God? For certainly God will not give up on this Creation, which God formed and loves. We shall see in Revelation that destroying all of Creation would be impossible for God: for all God created is good, and to destroy it would be to negate the goodness of God's own act. We human beings do that. Thus this pericope ends in repentance, for God will change us. God will also give us the gift of repentance.

To our ears, this may be the hardest part of this pericope. We have spent a lot of good work talking about reconciling groups, of including all people in our communion table. But we must also recognize that the Gentiles were not included here unconditionally: they, too, were called to repentance and to a new way of life in Christ.

Even so for us. The vision for our time is a vision of fuels and energy and the use of the non-living things of creation. Even here God calls us to repentance. But repentance is a gift, just as faith is a gift, just as Creation itself is a gift. We are called to be people of God to a new life and new ways of living.

The relationship of this text to the Earth:

1. Repentance is a gift of the Spirit that leads to newness of life: as we repent of our destruction of the Earth, we will discover the wonderful life God intends for us.
2. Nothing can hinder God. This is both terrifying and exciting. It is terrifying if we resist God's will, but exciting when we accept it. And now God reaches out to us to tell us to step into what appears impossible, and follow him into newness of life. Care of the Earth is the great moral question of our time—shall we be silent, or shall we say, "Surely God is giving us the repentance that leads to life."

Revelation 21:1-6

As Barbara Rossing definitively showed in *The Rapture Exposed*, this pericope is about God coming down to earth and dwelling in it. There aren't many passages of Scripture better suited to preaching about God's love for the Earth than this.

Still, we must also note that God will make his home with mortals, and at the same time renewing all things. There is no destruction here, but renewal and comfort and healing.

The church is here to welcome the holy city, and to live knowing that we are already under the reign of its monarch. We live knowing that the first things—death, sorrow, pain, separation from God—are passing away, but God's love is will never pass away. Rather it will grow continually until God dwells with us completely. The repentance that leads to life leads us to this city, and it is the culmination of our new life Christ: life with God as God dwells among us.

The relationship of this text to the Earth:

1. The Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, is in control, and it is God who will renew all things. While wait for the end, we still live under God's reign, and we still can turn to renew the Earth as we are able.
2. God quenches the thirst of those who yearn for true life: we can taste of that spring as we trust Christ and follow Christ, the Christ not only for human beings, but the Christ that reigns over all things. To work for the good of the Earth is to work in Christ's reign.

In the end, it is not too late to stop the worst effects of climate change. That moment is coming very quickly. But right now, today, as you read this, that moment will still not have passed. And it will not pass, because Christ tells us to get up.

We are sinsick people: the final rule about preaching about Earth Day is this: although Christ is cosmic, although the story of redemption is a story in Creation, it is we who are ill and dying, and it is we who need the good news that things don't have to be the way they are.

For after all, it is not the Earth that is burning fossil fuels. It is not the Earth that continually chooses to shut its ears to the prophetic voices of climatologists for 25 years. If we are healed, we can heal the Earth.

And don't we have a healer? Don't we have someone with power to change us and renew our lives? And don't we have someone who will help us persevere?

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