

SUSTAINING CREATION
A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
February 10, 2013

This weekend is the National Preach-In on Global Warming,ⁱ sponsored by Interfaith Power & Light, one of the local charities to which we regularly dedicate Sunday morning offerings here in the Stanford Memorial Church. Although Interfaith Power & Light started right here in the Bay area, it now has chapters in 38 states. As part of this national effort in many churches, synagogues, mosques, temples, shrines and other religious communities, I'm preaching this morning on "sustaining creation." My sermon is divided into three parts: Christianity's problems with environmentalism, Christianity's contributions to environmentalism, and what we personally can do now.

Starting with the problems: First, as you may have noticed when Peter read part of the biblical creation story from Genesis,ⁱⁱ human beings, male and female, are said to have been created in the very image of God and are told by God to fill the earth and subdue it and to have dominion over every living thing that moves upon the earth. There are conservative Christians, like the late Rev. Jerry Falwell, Southern Baptist preacher, televangelist, and co-founder of the Moral Majority, who insist on human dominion over nature as divine command. He claimed that "The whole [global warming] thing is created to destroy America's free enterprise system and our economic stability."ⁱⁱⁱ It is a Satanic myth,^{iv} he said, and "a trendy issue of limousine liberals and Hollywood elitists."^v The National Association of Evangelicals, however, has taken global warming seriously, and recent surveys have found that 75% of evangelicals nationwide believe that climate change is real and will impact their

lives,” and “84% believe that the Congress should pass a mandatory limit on greenhouse gas emissions.”^{vi}

Yet, the problem goes deeper in Christianity. As explained by the late Thomas Berry, a Catholic priest and for many years an historian of religion at Fordham University, “As heirs to the biblical tradition, we believed that the planet belonged to us. We never understood that [the earth]...had its own laws that needed to be obeyed and its own revelatory experience that needed to be understood.”^{vii} Theologian Sallie McFague has reminded us that there’s not much in Jesus’ teaching about nature, either, “and it is futile to rummage about with fig trees and hens, trying to make Jesus into a nature-lover.”^{viii} I would like to point to this morning’s gospel lesson from Mark^{ix} as demonstrating Jesus’ appreciation and understanding of nature - - describing the kingdom of God as like a seed growing into the greatest of shrubs in which birds can make nests. But in truth the passage is just a parable or analogy about a kingdom to come on earth that’s primarily about redeemed human beings, not about the natural environment of which they are a part.^x

So those are some of the problems with the Christian tradition as we face global warming. What are some ways that Christianity can contribute to a solution? Thomas Berry, for starters, describes the universe itself as “the supreme manifestation of the sacred.” He explains that “This notion is fundamental to establishing a cosmos, an intelligible manner of understanding the universe or even any part of the universe. That is why the story of the origin of things was experienced as a supremely nourishing principle...in the earliest phases of human consciousness... We must remember that it is not only the human world that is held securely in this sacred enfoldment but the entire planet... The sacred is that which evokes the depths of wonder.”^{xi}

Sally McFague asks us as modern Christians to use our imaginations to extend Jesus' parables, "which overturn conventional human hierarchies" -- about rich and poor, resident and alien, oppressor and oppressed -- to overturn the conventional hierarchy of humans over nature. Likewise, Jesus' "healing stories can be extended to the deteriorating ecosystems of our planet." McFague asserts that surely God as creator and as redeemer "cares also for the other 99% of creation, not just for the 1 percent (actually, less than 1 percent) that humans constitute." She wants us also to see how the story of Jesus' resurrection can give us hope in symbolizing the triumph of life over death: "Jesus' ministry to the oppressed resulted in his death on the cross...Jesus did not invent the idea that from death comes new life. We see it in nature; for instance, in the 'nurse' logs on the ground in old-growth forests which, in their decaying state, provide warmth and nutrients for new saplings."^{xii}

Roman Catholic theologian and seminary professor Rosemary Radford Ruether takes us back to the creation story in Genesis to remind us that it talks about more than human dominion over nature: "In Genesis, God is described as both working and resting and thereby setting the pattern for all humans and their relations to land and animals in the covenant of creation... On the seventh day of each week, not only the farmer, but also his human laborers and his animal work force are to rest."^{xiii}

Another Catholic theologian, Elizabeth Johnson, who teaches at Fordham, reminds us that in the Psalms we have images of meadows singing with gladness and stars shouting out for joy, with the earth being the Lord's in all of its fullness. Now, in the face of the immensity of global climate change and the earth's distress, Johnson insists that "We must develop religious thought and ethical action [as] having a tangible and comprehensive ecological dimension... We need to recognize that the destruction of this vibrant, complex natural world

is tantamount to sacrilege.” In distinction to thinking we are here to subdue the earth and have dominion over every living thing, “we need to fathom that the human species is embedded as an intrinsic, interdependent part of the magnificence of this universe, not as lords of the manor but kin in the community of life, charged with being sisters and brothers, friends and lovers, mothers and fathers ... co-creators and children of the earth that is God’s good creation... Losing creation...is not an option. The quest to find creation, this generation’s great intellectual religious adventure, is a matter of life or death.”^{xiv}

So, what can we do now? The main things, I think, are not to feel overwhelmed and not to lose hope. *The Consumer’s Guide to Effective Environmental Choices* names the use of automobiles as the single most environment-damaging consumer behavior. So, some steps we could take are to buy more fuel-efficient cars, drive less, and take public transportation or bike or walk more. Incandescent light bulbs use three to four times more electricity than energy-efficient ones, so we can buy and use fewer incandescent light bulbs. Recycling really matters, so we can pay closer attention to how and what we’re throwing away.^{xv} So far, we’re all probably trying to do as much of this as possible. And we don’t want to burn out or stop paying attention, so we do need to pace ourselves in what we feel we’re ready and able to do.

But as the Reverend Fred Small, a Unitarian Universalist minister in Massachusetts, has written, “Changing a light bulb is good. Changing a member of Congress is better.”^{xvi} Along with changing our individual lifestyles, it’s critically important that we work to change systems. Advocating publicly for legislation to combat global warming – like lobbying to make cars much more fuel-efficient -- or at least being informed about how we vote is part of the mix of what we can do now.^{xvii} Thanks to its voters and legislators and the then-governor,

California has the nation's most ambitious global warming solutions law, now in effect, which limits green house gases.^{xviii}

Starting in our own backyard, so to speak, by helping Interfaith Power and Light is also something we can do, as this church does by regularly supporting it as a charity in our Sunday morning offerings. More than a thousand dollars have been raised in the last two months for this organization from you who attend this church. It began in 1996 with a program of going church door to church door asking Episcopal parishes in California to switch their electricity provider from the local utility (which often produced power from dirty-burning coal plants located primarily in poor communities) to a green provider. After three years, they had convinced 60 parishes to buy power generated 100% by wind from a provider named Green Mountain. When Green Mountain left California during the energy crisis of 2000, the organization turned its focus to energy efficiency and conservation. The base was dramatically expanded to other denominations and other religions to become Interfaith Power and Light in 2000, and their mission is to have a presence in every state in the nation. 12 to go. The founder is Episcopal priest Sally Bingham,^{xix} who preached here in Memorial Church in May of 2010. We have switched out a lot of our incandescent lighting in Memorial Church over the last few years, as has Stanford campus-wide, among other energy efficiency and conservation measures.

Mary Evelyn Tucker, who has appointments both at the Yale Divinity School and the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, has written that “While religions have been late in responding to environmental issues, and despite the historic problematic issues often connected to religions, they are clearly gaining traction. This is because they have the ability to change from within and to spark change from without.” She explains how religions

have inspired movements for social change, like the abolition of slavery, worker's rights, civil rights, and women's rights. "In each case, as the moral dimension of these issues became more evident, shifts in attitudes and behavior occurred."^{xx}

Thomas Berry has noted as invaluable and urgently needed: "More careful use of our resources, a diminishment of the pollution we are causing, and a reuse of waste...[as] pragmatic efforts at establishing a viable way into the future." But he reminds us that the basic problem and solution lie "deeper in the human mind and emotions than is generally recognized... If the reorientation of mind is not effected, then whatever remedy is proposed will not succeed in the purposes that it intends. So far, we have not been able to effect a major change of inner attitude that would enable us to return from our extractive, nonrenewing, industrial way of life to an organic, ever-renewing, land-based way of life... We thought we had established ourselves beyond the controls and limitations of Earth's natural systems. But that wonderful interplay between ourselves and those natural forces of the Earth experienced as ever-renewing presences is what needs to be fostered more than ever before." Gus Speth, Dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies from 1999-2009, has said that "Thirty years ago, I thought with enough good science, we would be able to solve the environmental crisis. I was wrong...I now see that we need a cultural and spiritual transformation."^{xxi}

So, it's up to us as religious people to recognize how we've been part of the problem of global warming and how we must lead in its solution. As the Rev. Sally Bingham preaches, sustaining creation "is as central to the Christian faith as love, justice and peace... If we don't protect creation, how can we possibly expect others to? Moral leadership sits right here with us."^{xxii} Let's not fail, for it's literally a matter of life or death.

BENEDICTION

(In the words of Father Thomas Berry:)

There is now a single issue before us: survival.

Not merely physical survival, but survival in a world of fulfillment,

Survival in a living world, where the violets bloom in the springtime,

Where the stars shine down in all their mystery, survival in a world of meaning.

All other issues dwindle in significance.

NOTES

ⁱ See <http://www.preachin.org/>

ⁱⁱ Genesis 1:24-31a.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://mediamatters.org/research/2007/05/16/you-speak-16-words-and-what-do-you-get/138872>

^{iv} http://rodonline.typepad.com/rodonline/2007/02/falwell_global_.html

^v <http://www.wnd.com/2007/02/40332/>

^{vi} Richard Cizik, “What If?” in Sally G. Bingham, *Love God, Heal Earth* (Pittsburgh: St. Lynn’s Press, 2009), p. 5.

^{vii} Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality, and Religion in the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 173.

^{viii} Sallie McFague, “An Ecological Christology: Does Christianity Have It?” in Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (eds.), *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 35.

^{ix} Mark 4:26-32.

^x See “Kingdom of God” and “Kingdom of Heaven (Judaism)” in Jonathan Z. Smith (ed.), *HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), pp. 627-628.

^{xi} Berry, *Sacred Universe*, p. 176.

^{xii} McFague, “Ecological Christianity,” pp. 35-36.

^{xiii} Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Eco-Justice at the Center of the Church’s Mission,” in Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (eds.), *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well of Earth and Humans* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 607.

^{xiii} Mark 4:26-32.

^{xiv} Elizabeth A. Johnson, “Losing and Finding Creation in the Christian Tradition” in Hessel and Ruether, *Christianity and Ecology*, pp. 5, 18.

^{xv} Jim and Susan Vogt, “Was Jesus a Tree Hugger? Ecology and Faith,” in *Everyday Catholic* (April 2008), <http://www.americancatholic.org/Newsletters/EDC/ag0408.asp>

^{xvi} Fred Small, “The Greater Sacrifice,” in Bingham, *Love Earth, Heal Earth*, p. 17.

^{xvii} Vogt, “Was Jesus a Tree Hugger?”

^{xviii} National Resources Defense Council, “A Golden Opportunity: California’s Solutions for Global Warming,” <http://www.nrdc.org/globalwarming/ca/ca.asp>

^{xix} Bingham, *Love God, Heal Earth*, pp. iii-iv.

^{xx} Mary Evelyn Tucker, “Renewing Hope,” in *Love God, Heal Earth*, pp. 191-192.

^{xxi} Gus Speth, as cited in Cizik, “What If?” p. 9.

^{xxii} Sally Bingham, Sermon at St. Mark’s Lutheran Church