

'EVERY LIVING CREATURE WITH US' THE ENVIRONMENT

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR B

Lectionary Texts: Genesis 9:8-17 Psalm 25:1-10 Mark 1:9-15 I Peter 3:18-22

Focus Text: Genesis 9:8-17

⁸ Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹ 'As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, ¹⁰ and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. ¹¹ I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.' ¹² God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: ¹³ I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴ When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵ I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶ When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.' ¹⁷ God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.'

NRSV

Additional Texts

God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together [God] called Seas. And God saw that it was good.
Genesis 1:10

[God] raises up the poor from the dust; [God] lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor. For the pillars of the earth are the LORD's, and on them [God] has set the world.
I Samuel 2:8

The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; for [the Lord] has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers.
Psalm 24:1-2

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers -- all things have been created through him and for him.

I Corinthians 1:15-16

SCRIPTURE COMMENTARY AND PASTORAL REFLECTION

by Dr. Thomas W. Mann, Ph.D.
Parkway United Church of Christ, Winston-Salem, NC

[Additional suggested texts: Psalms 19; 104:10-30; 148; Job 38-39]

The lection from Genesis is the Priestly author's conclusion to the flood narrative that begins at 6:1. The Noahide covenant is the first in a series that will include the Ancestors (Abraham/Sarah et al.), the Exodus community (Sinai covenant), and the Davidic monarchy (2 Sam 7:11-17; Ps 89:3-4). The beneficiaries of these covenants narrow increasingly from the whole world to a single dynasty. Here the covenant is universal and unconditional: God makes the covenant "between me and the earth" (v 13), and the covenant applies to "all future generations" (v 12).

God promises never to destroy the earth again by a flood. The sign of the covenant is the rainbow, symbolizing God's weapon. Just as the rainbow comes at the end of a storm, so it is a sign of the end of God's "arrows" of lightning, part of the weaponry of a storm deity (Ps 18:14; 77:17). The great storm that destroyed all breathing things except the ark's occupants is over.

The story of Noah is a favorite for children, but the story raises some troubling adult questions about God and about the relationship between humans and other animals. At first sight, there is an irony in our use of the story to talk about protecting the earth when the story portrays God as destroying the earth. Why did God destroy all breathing creatures, and not just those wicked humans? Why should all the birds and bears and beetles have to die? The answer seems to be hinted in 6:11-12. A literal translation: "Now the earth had destroyed itself in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw that the earth had destroyed itself, that all flesh had destroyed its way on the earth." As a result, God vows to destroy "all flesh ... along with the earth." Here there is no focus on humankind (contrast 6:5-7); "all flesh" has gone astray. What could this mean?

There are two possibilities: the animals could have devoured plant life to the point of denuding the land (note what locusts can do!); or the animals could have eaten carrion or killed and eaten other animals (hence the "violence"), contrary to God's way (Gen 1:30).¹ We cannot be sure, but it is clear that all breathing animals have joined with humankind in self-destruction that has engulfed the earth itself. "All flesh" has somehow stepped beyond their natural limits in a way that is suicidal, ruining the elegant balance and symmetry of the creation that God pronounced as "very beautiful" (1:31, alternate translation). Indeed, the introduction to the flood narrative (6:1-4) posed the same problem: "the sons of God" (heavenly beings) mated with human women to produce a race of giants, a miscegenation that threatens to transcend human finitude (cf. 3:4-5; 11:4). In these primeval stories, humans consistently try to be superhuman rather than super humans.² When God destroys the earth, therefore, God is simply completing a process that was already underway.

Recognizing the mutual culpability of "all flesh" (note that sea creatures are not included!) is important if we want to understand the full ecological dimensions of the story. To take the story literally or historically is to ruin it. The story is a myth, strikingly similar to other flood stories of the ancient Near East. Whether there could have been a time when humans and all animals were strict vegetarians is beside the point. Rather, one meaning may be that over-consumption proved to be self-destruction. Since it would take three Earths to provide for everyone the resources that North Americans use, there is an obvious lesson here!

If "all flesh" is at fault for the flood, it is also true that "all flesh" is a partner in the covenant. In our passage, "all flesh" appears five times. The Noahide covenant community is not just human; it includes all animals who are "with us" on the earth (v 10), "every living creature" (vv 10, 15, 16). With such numerous repetitions, the author underscores the interdependence of all living

things. That interdependence (including plants) is demonstrated by the modern science of ecology as well as ancient religious stories. To take one example, in the biblical worldview all creatures “have the same breath” because we are created by the breath of God (Eccles 3:19; Psalm 104:27-30). From science, we know that we rely on the process of plant photosynthesis to provide us with oxygen, just as we provide them with carbon dioxide. As one author says, “This exchange of gas is what the word spirit means. Spirituality is essentially the act of breathing.”³ When we destroy a rainforest, we are cutting out part of the Earth’s lungs—and therefore our lungs.

Poet Mary Oliver points to our refusal to acknowledge the Noahide covenant community: “we are all / one family // but we love ourselves / best.”⁴ Those of us in the Christian community need to confess that such self-centeredness is rooted in our biblical tradition. Boasting of our status as the “image of God” (Gen 1:27), we have declared ourselves the “measure of all things.” Instead of seeing ourselves as stewards of God’s creation, we have acted as if we own the place. We have acted as Master rather than Major-Domo. We have “subdued” the earth (Gen 2:28) in ways that reflect the brutal connotations of that word (e.g. rape, warfare). One need only look back to the preceding passage in Gen 9:1-7 to see the ambiguity of our role. There God says that all the other animals (we are animals too!) will live in “fear and dread” of us. Moreover, God now grants to humans the right to kill and eat other animals, ending their vegetarian restriction. So another irony appears: the animals who are our covenant partners are also our food, an element of the story that does not appear in children’s books!⁵

“We are all one family but we love ourselves best.” In the flood narrative, God orders humans to protect all species—even those that are ritually “unclean” (7:2). While the history of the earth has known five periods of mass extinctions, only now are we in the midst of one that is largely caused by humans. We are causing extinctions at a rate of one thousand times the historical rate. Between 10% and 15% of mammals, amphibians, birds, and conifers are threatened.⁶ Many will be sent the way of the passenger pigeon—into oblivion. In the Noahide covenant, God promised never again to destroy the earth by a flood. The African-American Spiritual says “God gave Noah the rainbow sign: no more water, the fire next time.” Is global warming the fire next time? Will we destroy the earth, like our antediluvian ancestors, or will we live according to the covenant in which we are united in a spiritual community that includes all creatures? Another song is called “All God’s Critters’ Got a Place in the Choir.” May we have the wisdom and the justice to make space in the loft.

¹ See Anne Gardner, “Ecojustice: A study of Genesis 6.11-13,” in *The Earth Story in Genesis*, ed. Norman C. Habel & Shirley Wurst (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2000), 118-122.

² See Sallie McFague, *Super, Natural Christians* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

³ Lynn Margulis, “Talking on the Water,” *Sierra* (May/June, 1994), 72.

⁴ “Clamming,” in *Dream Work* (New York: Atlantic, 1986), 24. See my study, *God of Dirt: Mary Oliver and the Other Book of God* (Boston: Cowley, 2004).

⁵ See John Olley, “Mixed Blessings for Animals: The Contrasts of Genesis 9,” in *The Earth Story in Genesis*, ed. Norman C. Habel & Shirley Wurst (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2000), 130-139. See also Daniel Cowdin, “The Moral Status of Otherkind in Christian Ethics,” in *Christianity and Ecology*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2000), 261-90.

⁶ *Ecosystems and Human Well-being* (Washington: World Resources Institute, 2005).

WORSHIP AID – 'EVERY LIVING CREATURE WITH US'

Responsive Reading

When we are blind to the mystery of our landscape,
And forget it is God's handiwork;
When we are careless with its plants and animals,
And forget they are God's creatures;
When we are unkind to those who work with us,
And forget they are God's children;
When we are careless about our work,
And forget we are God's co-workers;
When we mistreat the earth,
And forget we are God's stewards;
God, forgive us.
Amen.

(from Robert B. Kruschwitz, A Creation Study Guide, The Center for Christian Ethics, Baylor University)

Prayer of Confession

Creator of the earth and all living things, maker of the sky and the air and the breath of life, God of all that is: we are your servant people, created out of the clay of the earth itself. We forget that we are your creatures and we play at being gods. We neglect the work of stewardship that you have provided for our occupation and our joy. We have used, abused, and abandoned those things that you have created for your delight. You have created a fragile world in a perfect and delicate balance. Thinking too much of our own importance we have upset the balance. We ask your forgiveness, Holy and Righteous God. We yearn to join with the mountains and valleys, the rocks and the birds of the wild ocean waters in singing your praises.

Amen.

(from John Mark Ministries, 'Environment Day Liturgies,' <http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/1343.htm>)

Suggested Hymns

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| ✓ This Is My Father's World | CH 59/BH 43/PH 293/MW 456/AM 47/CM 34 |
| ✓ Mountain Brook with Rushing Waters | CH 690 |
| ✓ Praise to the Lord Almighty | LW 444/BH 14/MW 530/AM 3/CM 8 |
| ✓ I Sing the Almighty Power of God | UMH 152 |
| ✓ Touch the Earth Lightly | CH 569/MW 655 |
| ✓ For the Beauty of the Earth | BH 44/MW 538/AM 578/CM 20 |
| ✓ All Things Bright and Beautiful | PH 267/MW 467/AM 434 |

Additional Prayers

The Earth is the Lord's

The Earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and all that dwells therein. We live in God's world, we are not alone. We share this life with the heavens and the earth, with the waters and the land, with trees and grasses, with fish, birds, and animals, with creatures of every form, and with all our brothers and sisters.

Together we form strands in the web of creation woven and held together by God our creator.

Together with all creation we join in praising God.

Amen.

(from John Mark Ministries, 'Environment Day Liturgies,' <http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/1343.htm>)

w Hymnal Legend w

- † UMH – United Methodist
- † CH – Chalice Hymnal (DOC)
- † NCH – New Century Hymnal (UCC)
- † BH – Baptist Hymnal
- † PH – Presbyterian Hymnal
- † LW – Lutheran Worship
- † MW – Moravian Book of Worship
- † AM – African Methodist Episcopal
- † CM – Christian Methodist Episcopal

We Are a Part of Their Community

Creator God, you gave life to us and to the inhabitants of the earth. We are a part of their community, and they are a part of ours. And yet, in our human sin, we degrade this community.

In pride, selfishness, possessiveness and ignorance, we have lived in greed, far in excess of our need. Forgive us, Lord, for we have not lived according to Your will. Your Word calls us to preserve creation's fruitfulness, to practice "shalom," and to serve and to keep creation. Help us, Lord, to be protectors, restorers, replenishers, healers, servants and lovers of Your creation. Help us to make the standard for our decisions a love for you, a love of our neighbor, and a love for all creation. Help us to care for your earth so it may continue to stand in praise to You and sustain Your creatures. Help us to love as You love, and to be obedient to You. We look to You, O God, for healing for your earth and ourselves. Thank You for the life You have given us in Jesus Christ, Who is in all things, before all things, and in whom all things hold together.

For it is in Christ's Name that we pray these things, Amen.

(adapted, from Sister Earth, http://arb0rv1tae.typepad.com/sisterearth/2005/05/a_prayer_of_tha.html)

ADDITIONAL HELPS

Lenten Material

Lenten Hymns

- ✓ When I Survey the Wondrous Cross
BH 144/NCH 224/LW 114/CH 195/TH
474/PH 100/MW 350/AM 147/CM 80
- ✓ Great Is Thy Faithfulness
PH 276/CH 86/NCH 423/BH 54/MW
460/AM 84/CM 153

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- † NCH – New Century Hymnal (UCC)
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- † AM – African Episcopal Methodist
- † TH – The Hymnal 1982 (Episcopal)
- † LW – Lutheran Worship
- † CM – Christian Methodist Episcopal
- † CH – Chalice Hymnal (DOC)
- † MW – Moravian Book of Worship

Responsive Reading

ONE: God, we come to you in confession. More than we seek you and your will, we seek our own comfort and advantage. We have allowed ourselves to become blinded to the needs of our brothers and sisters so that we can enjoy our privilege; we have similarly become blinded to the willful destruction of our environment as we use it to our benefit.

MANY: Disturb our peace, O God. Give us clear eyes to see the suffering around us on all sides and the courage to ask what you require of us. Allow us to see the degradation of our environment as a failure to be good stewards of your creation.

ONE: We confess that we protect our hearts from pain by judging those in need, although we have not walked life's paths in their shoes.

MANY: Give us the true humility to know that we do not know the hearts of those we judge. Give us a glimpse of your love that sees us all as your beloved children, and your creation as a gift for your children.

ONE: And we confess that we would rather talk about what your teachings mean than be taught by the struggles of trying to live them.

MANY: God, help us to trust you enough to follow you into a life of loving. Give us brave companions for the journey into hope.

(by Sherry Castello, '98 Seeds Lenten/Easter Worship Packet, <http://seedspublishers.org/lentenconf.html>)

Quotes

The environment is everything that isn't me. Albert Einstein

We don't inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children.

David Brower

Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed.

Mahatma Gandhi

The Earth is not dying - it is being killed. And the people who are killing it have names and addresses.

U. Utah Phillips

Personal Vignette

Reconnecting

I have always been an environmentalist. My earliest recollections include a deep concern for nature and for other animals. But as a human animal I was strongly influenced by my own environment – a consumer culture in an economic system that requires constant expansion and extraction of resources. So conditioned by cultural programming, I set my passion aside and sought my fortune in the world. I soon realized that the pursuit of the American Dream is an ecological nightmare, and that my livelihood was contrary to my spiritual energy.

This realization became quite clear one late November evening as I was stopped at a railroad crossing near an electrical power plant. For twenty-five minutes I watched as a stream of coal-laden hoppers made their way to the facility. Held captive by this ongoing flow of fossil carbon, I recalled topics of recent newspaper articles: complaints about soot from the plant, mercury levels of the fish in the nearby lake, and air pollutants measured in tons! I reflected on my complicity, as an energy consumer, in the degradation of Creation.

When the train passed, I continued home, driving through a park already dressed up the holidays. Garish displays of colored lights adorned every tree and every bush. Any open space was filled with free-standing light images depicting Santa Claus in every conceivable scenario – on a chimney, with sleigh and reindeer, even in a helicopter! – always with a bagful of toys.

I wondered first, what is the electricity cost and how might the poor be served for the same expense? Then, how much pollution is generated by holiday season power usage? And finally, is this the true spirit of the holidays?

I reflected on the many “disconnects” in our society: the disconnect of the religious and spiritual from our festivals and celebrations; the disconnect of personal actions, consumption, and energy use from their consequences – pollution, deforestation, species extinction, global warming, and even war; and the disconnect of modern humans from the natural world – God’s Creation.

Our culture views Creation as “the environment.” It is separate from us. It is “out there,” ready to be used and abused as we please. This is a severe corruption of our spiritual relationship with Creation, and with God.

I resolved personally to reconnect, to live more mindfully and spiritually, and less materialistically. My wife and I began our major life transition. Most of our precious possessions – our “stuff” – went to charity. We went from two cars to one. A home energy audit led to conservation and efficiency. We gave up our careers for a simpler, more earth-friendly lifestyle.

We now live in a much smaller house. We grow our own food. Our water supply is a mountain

spring. The sun provides hot water, electricity, and winter heating. We are in tune with the natural world and the seasons. And we have time for activism. Our activism is among people of faith.

In the past, people of faith have led the way to significant cultural transformations – abolishing slavery, expanding voting rights, and upholding civil rights. Once they become aware and inspired, faith communities will lead the way to another cultural transformation – a spiritual reconnecting of humans to Creation, as both dependents and caretakers of this marvelous gift.

Kim Carlyle and his wife, Susan, live near Barnardsville, NC. He is active with the North Carolina Council of Churches' Climate Connection Committee.

Contacts & Other Resources

- ✝ www.nccouncilofchurches.org/areasofwork/committees/climate_connection/climate_connection.html - North Carolina Council of Churches' "NC Interfaith Ecojustice Network" webpage.
- ✝ www.nconconservationnetwork.org - North Carolina Conservation Network, "a statewide network of over 120 environmental, community and environmental justice organizations focused on protecting North Carolina's environment and public health."
- ✝ www.epa.gov - Environmental Protection Agency, the governmental agency that "leads the nation's environmental science, research, education and assessment efforts."
- ✝ www.globalresponse.org - Global Response, an organization that works with indigenous peoples and grassroots organizations to empower "people of all ages, cultures, and nationalities to protect the environment by creating partnerships for effective citizen action."
- ✝ www.earthsharenc.org - Earth Share of North Carolina, "a federation of environmental non-profits working to keep our state's rivers clean and our communities healthy – and to foster ecotourism for a strong North Carolina economy."
- ✝ Thy Kingdom Come: A Call to Prophetic Ministry: a small-group study guide produced by the Office of Missions (NC Conference, United Methodist Church) in conjunction with the North Carolina Council of Churches. Accessible at www.nccouncilofchurches.org.

The Earth is not dying - it is being killed. And the people who are killing it have names and addresses.

U. Utah Phillips

KEY FACTS

DID YOU KNOW?

- Q The U.S. produces 25% of greenhouse gas emissions (which contributes to global warming) and we have only 4½ % of the world's population.¹
- Q About 25% of the world's automobiles are on U.S. roads.²
- Q Americans now use automobiles for more than 90 percent of their daily trips. An average person travels more than 9,000 miles a year by car, compared with less than 4,000 miles four decades ago. The average driver spends 443 hours a year behind the wheel.³
- Q According to the Environmental Defense Fund, Americans throw away enough aluminum to rebuild our entire commercial fleet of airplanes every 3 months.⁴
- Q The EPA reports that about 80% of what Americans throw away is recyclable, yet our recycling rate is just 28%.⁵
- Q About 94% of the materials extracted for use in manufacturing become waste before the product is manufactured; 80% of what we make is thrown away within six months of production.
- Q According to 'BRING Recycles' (2003), one year's worth of American greeting cards would fill a football field ten stories high.
- Q On average, 50% to 70% of home water is used outdoors for watering lawns and gardens, according to the American Water Works Association (2003).
- Q According to the above association: "If all US households installed water-saving features, water use could decrease by 30%, saving an estimated 5.4 billion gallons per day. This would result in dollar-volume savings of \$11.3 million per day or more than \$4 billion per year."
- Q "According to the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services, in all waters south and east of Interstate 85, citizens are advised to limit consumption of certain species of fish to a few meals per month; pregnant women and children are cautioned to avoid eating some fish completely. The concern is mercury. While there are no postings in western North Carolina to date, and the fish there are safe to eat, mercury is a problem even in the mountains."⁶
- Q "Mercury is one of the most prevalent environmental contaminants generated by hospitals and medical facilities. Because of this, Duke University's Safety Committee adopted the American Hospital Association's (AHA) goal to eliminate mercury-containing waste streams by the end of 2005."⁷

¹ North Carolina Council of Churches, Thy Kingdom Come: A Call to Prophetic Ministry, 41.

² Ibid.

³ Christian Science Monitor, 10/15/03, found at www.bikeroute.com/EnviroFacts.htm.

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, this and the following facts are taken largely (and/or copied directly) from 'Eco-Facts 2004,' provided by Eco Cycle, "one of the largest non-profit recyclers in the USA"; www.ecocycle.org/.

⁵ The following graph is from the NC Department of Environment and Natural Resources' Division of Pollution Prevention and Environmental Assistance, www.p2pays.org.

⁶ North Carolina Division of Pollution Prevention and Environmental Assistance, Focus (Winter 2003), 1. vol. 12 # 2; <http://daq.state.nc.us/quick/mercury>

⁷ Ibid, 4.