

Earth's Crammed With Heaven

Proverbs 8:12, 22-31
John 1:1-5, Acts 17:24-28

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*Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God,
But only he who sees takes of his shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.*

I have always liked this poem by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. In recent years, however, it has new meaning for me as I think about religious faith in the context of global warming and the environment. I will confess to having a divided heart. On the one hand, I am glad that an ecological view of Christianity is no longer seen as a fringe position, one having no place in mainstream congregations.

I am grateful that there are a host of ecumenical voices speaking from the pulpit about the care of creation. There are many congregations, including our own, who are responding to a call from Interfaith Power and Light to preach about global warming this month. Interfaith Power and Light has the support of many North Carolina congregations as it works with faith communities to address the causes and consequences of climate change.

I am glad that today's churchgoers, at least in moderately progressive circles, aren't afraid to be viewed as environmentalists; most are happy to recycle, buy low-emission vehicles and fluorescent light bulbs. Our own congregation can be proud of our Green Committee and the good work they are doing offering educational activities that help us stay informed about environmental issues. You won't want to miss the Family Night event next Sunday! There will be seeds and cuttings to plant and some delicious cheeses from local dairy farmers, as well as fun activities for children and adult's alike. It will be a great event!

Still, in spite of the positive things so many folks are doing, I still find myself with a divided heart. Much of the time I have to admit that I feel quite pessimistic about how Christians are living out our vocation as stewards of the earth. In the larger scheme of things, our ecological consciousness has produced only mild responses to the problem at hand.

What seemed at first to be a spiritual awakening now often feels more like a false start, or at best, a very small beginning... too little, too late. We talk about earth having an intrinsic holiness, but our actions belie our words. While we give lip service to an “earth crammed with heaven” in which every rock, tree, and creature reflect the glory of God, we often act as if we were simply plucking blackberries from a drooping world devoid of transcendence.

Why is this? The Bible clearly affirms a *world* that is holy, not just its human inhabitants. The world was created inherently good, and God’s creation is ongoing. As Wendell Berry writes, “We are holy creatures living among other holy creatures in a world that is holy. Some people know this, and some do not. Nobody, of course, knows it all the time. But what keeps it from being far better known that it is? ...How can modern Christianity have so solemnly folded its hands while so much of the work of God was and is being destroyed?” (Wendell Berry, “Christianity and the Survival of Creation,” *Earth and Word*, ed. David Rhoads, Continuum, 2007, p. 52.)

I believe that one reason many modern churchgoers are content to pick blackberries instead of throwing off their shoes in awe of the burning bush is because many still hold tightly to the “Fall and Redemption” model of religious belief. For several hundred years, much of the church did not see the earth as good or important. To them, the earth was only a background stage upon which the drama of private salvation was played out. In the Fall and Redemption model of Christianity, there is an obsession with sinfulness. The doctrine of Original Sin is accepted and understood as the predominant paradigm. We were born “bad to the bone”, and Jesus’ death had the purpose of redeeming us from our innate evil core, saving our souls for eternal life in a heavenly realm somewhere far away.

Many of the hymns that you and I grew up with, the ones I call “the blood hymns”, reflect this theological view. Little or no reference is made to the world in these songs except as a negative influence which causes one to sin. And wow, is there a lot of sin! One must be "washed in the blood to be made clean".....only amazing grace could "save a wretch like me.”

But throughout history there have been Christians who have renounced the Original Sin paradigm. In fact, the words, “original sin”, never occur in the Bible. Jesus did not teach this concept. Rather it was a theological doctrine introduced several hundred years after the birth of Christ by Irenaeus and

Augustine, based on their interpretation of some of Paul's writings. Many Christians today find themselves opposed to the Fall and Redemption model. Yes, human beings do bad things. But that should not be the starting point of our theology. As Matthew Fox puts it, before Original Sin there was "Original Blessing".

Let me share with you just a little of my own faith journey. When I was a child of 4 or 5, my father was the pastor of a church in rural Virginia outside of Richmond. I have memories, although fuzzy ones, of that little congregation. I remember Vacation Bible School on hot summer mornings. Of course there was Kool-Aid in little paper cups, Bible stories, and songs. We sang "Climb, climb up sunshine mountain, heavenly breezes blow" and we would all move our hands like we were climbing. I liked that line. I could picture this happy mountain with a path leading up to a giant sun.

Then there was my favorite: "All Creatures of our God and King, Lift up your voice and with us sing, Alleluia, Alleluia." I loved the way that this poem by St. Francis of Assisi personified the different elements of nature: "Thou rushing wind that art so strong....Ye clouds that sail in heaven along... O praise God, Alleluia".

This was a joyful hymn, and also one of the few I could understand. It made me feel good. It made me feel connected to creation. It seemed to say that nature joins with human beings in praising the Creator who sang us both into being.

Among the aboriginee people of Australia there is a creation myth in which God sings every creature into existence. It reminds me of the book, The Magician's Nephew, by C. S. Lewis, which describes the creation of Narnia in similar terms. The great golden lion, Aslan, walks through the darkness singing life into birth. As a child, I could see and understand this. My religious beliefs could be summed up not in terms of "original sin" but in the lyrical notes of what Matthew Fox calls "original sing".

As I grew older, I felt increasing discomfort with the Christian paradigm I saw in many churches, one that presumed the doctrine of original sin and which seemed too much focused on the drama of private salvation. I found myself cherishing the Biblical texts and writings of philosophers and poets which resonated with the God I experienced, a God who called all creation "good", and who loved and blessed it.

We are connected to the beauty of the earth, to the love which lies over and around us, and to hill and vale and tree and flower. We are connected because the same divine energy flows through all of us.

This active, creating mystery which gave birth to the world is also known as Jesus. Jesus was present with God from the beginning, participating in creation. Listen again to the opening words of John (1:1-5):

*In the beginning was the word
The word was with God and the word was God
He was with God in the beginning.
Through him all things came to be,
Not one thing had its being but through him..
All that came to be had life in him
And that life was the light of all persons,
A light that shines in the dark,
A light that darkness could not overpower.*

This lively, loving word of God was also described as Wisdom in the Old Testament. It is that creative, joyful part of God which speaks in the verses we heard this morning from Proverbs (8:22-23,30,31)

*God created me when God's purpose first unfolded,
Before the oldest of God's works,
From everlasting I was firmly set,
From the beginning, before earth came into being...*

*I was by God's side, a master craftsman,
Delighting God day after day,
Ever at play in God's presence,
At play everywhere in God's world,
Delighting to be with the sons and daughters of humankind.*

When we see God's creative energy in the world around us, then that world becomes transparent and a sacred space. Paul sensed this truth when he wrote in Acts: *It is in God that we live, and move, and have our being.* (Acts 17:28) When we can see holiness in this way, then we take off our shoes and stop picking blackberries.

But this way of seeing is something that is still missing in many mainline Christian congregations. And this is where my divided heart tempts me to feel despair. Without a sense of wonder built into our theological hard drive, we respond only weakly when our world is threatened.

Bill McKibben, environmental writer and scholar in residence at Middlebury College, writes that the time is past for words, for philosophical, scientific and theological debate. “The time is so short, and the task so large,” he says, “that eloquence seems almost frivolous.” He goes on to say that although he has been writing about global warming since 1989, he is now doing more than writing and is trying to organize. Why? Because the climate crisis is bearing down on the world faster than most people realize. We have much less time to act than we thought, and that action has to be dramatic.

Our earlier guesses about gradual global warming were wrong. One study after another now shows that the speed of change is much faster than predicted. And what’s worse, it seems that one problem magnifies another. For example, melting arctic ice leaves greater areas of open ocean to absorb more of the sun’s heat, amplifying the warming.

I just returned from a wonderful visit to New Zealand, a gorgeous and mostly pristine country of clear skies, rolling hills, beautiful coastlines and spectacular mountains. However, New Zealand is also one of the many places on earth that is directly impacted by climate change. As you may know, New Zealand is in the southern hemisphere and is relatively close to Antarctica. Over the past 30 years, ozone levels over Antarctica have dropped by almost 60 percent, and a ‘hole’ in the ozone layer is clearly visible in satellite observations. Now, ozone plays both a good and bad role. When too much of it is at ground level, air quality is bad. However, ozone is very important when it is high in the atmosphere. Atmospheric ozone blocks the sun’s harmful ultraviolet rays from reaching the earth.

The ozone hole over Antarctica has caused ozone-depleted air to move into New Zealand. New Zealanders now find themselves at increasing risk of skin cancers, cataracts, and suppressed immune systems.

Global warming affects all of us, although some will feel the pain more than others. Scientists tell us that the poor, elderly and infirm in the U.S., and people in the poorest countries least able to adapt, will be most affected by the climate crisis. Experts have concluded that climate change is already

contributing to a host of problems including poverty, environmental degradation, and the weakening of national governments. Their assessments warn that the storms, droughts and food shortages predicted from a warming planet are currently occurring and will worsen in coming decades. (www.ncipl.org/uploads/file/NCIPLBulletinInsert2_8_10.pdf).

As McKibben states so bluntly, this means that “we need to change light bulbs- but we also need to change laws.” (McKibben, “Meltdown”, *The Christian Century*, Feb. 20, 2007). But the world’s governments won’t move more quickly on global warming unless it becomes a priority for more of us.

We as Christians should be at the forefront of this new and bigger environmental movement, unafraid to call for sweeping changes, no longer content to clap approvingly for small, slow, and incremental victories. Our vision must be bigger, for “without a vision, McKibben says, “the effort will perish, and with it the blooming, buzzing, mysterious, cruel world we were given.”

My daughter sat at the kitchen table not long ago, tears streaming down her face. She had graduated from UNC with a degree in environmental science and just returned from a year in Peru working with on conservation issues in the rainforests of the Amazon. But, she did not return with her idealism intact. “What if it is too late?” she asked me. “What if everything we do now doesn’t really matter?”

Thomas Berry writes that we live in a moment of significance far beyond what any of us can imagine, a moment of grace that combines crisis and opportunity. I still have a divided heart. But on my good days, my faith gives me hope that what we do will matter. I pray that it will be so, but even more, I will choose to act as if it is so. I can do no less. For earth is indeed crammed with heaven and every common bush afire with God. And that is a blessing- in fact, an original blessing!