

**Sermon: Towards an Ecological Theology**  
**Scripture: Genesis 1**  
**Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans**  
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As you look through the scriptures, the New Testament in particular you don't necessarily find a lot of teaching overtly about care for the creation. For one thing, the Hebrew people out whom the scriptures came lived in more of a true balance with the natural world around them. In fact, written into the laws of Leviticus and Deuteronomy were very clear restrictions, boundaries and regulations that were there to ensure a healthy use and care of God's created world. Sometimes the Judeo-Christian tradition gets a bad rap for teaching a domination-over-nature mentality but to read the Hebrew scriptures accurately is to find just the opposite. It wasn't until the Jewish tradition and the Jewish followers of the Jewish Christ met Rome in all its triumphalism and Greek philosophy and its teaching of the corrupt nature of matter and the pure nature of spirit that you could say the Judeo-Christian tradition became tainted with a domination mentality that has then led us all these 2000 years later into a relationship with the natural world that has reached a crisis point.

It was the Jews with their understanding of God who maintained stop-gaps around the human tendency towards domination of the earth. This stop-gap centered around the notion of the sacred number 7 as a resting period so that every 7<sup>th</sup> day was to be a Sabbath from working the land and every 7 years the land was to lay fallow and that after every 49 years there was to be a jubilee year when all land was to be returned to the original owner. These measures kept the Jews from over-producing and burning out the land and it made it impossible for one person or family to amass too much land and wealth leaving others destitute. Really a remarkable system that also made the building of an empire next to impossible and left the Jews vulnerable to being dominated by the massive empires around them who had no such laws of balance and respect in relation to the earth.

Eventually, as history unfolded the most massive and dominant empires would become Christian, would rise and fall, right up until the current dominance of our own American Empire. But these empires became nations of dominance over land and people

not because of their Jewish-Christian roots and philosophy, but despite it. There is nothing in Jewish sacred texts and later Christian texts that invites or excuses a relationship of dominance over either one another or the earth despite the witness in Christian history in particular.

Think of these most basic and fundamental Christian teachings, that, I might add, flow naturally out of the teachings of the Jews, and consider how we as Christian nations have justified our misuse and dominance of the natural world and impoverished nations for our benefit. If there is one teaching that is at the heart of the Judeo-Christian tradition it is that the one **God, Yahweh, the Creator of all, is the only true Dominant One** to whom we as humans owe our allegiance, praise, worship and gratitude, in fact our very lives. And explicit in that human-divine relationship is that our small capacity for transcendence over nature – the fact that we ourselves can be little creators – gives us even more responsibility to be caretakers and not abusers of this world that God created and so loves. There is nothing in Jesus teachings that suggest that the power we have been given is there for any kind of dominance over others. Jesus is all about power being rightly used always and only in a position of servant-hood. And who should we serve, one might ask? Should we serve the kings and princes, the wealthy in their mansions, the amassers of land and great fortune? Are we called to be servants in their homes? No, of course not, we are called to serve the least of those among us, those who are most in need, most marginalized, most disenfranchised, the voiceless ones be they human or creature or vegetation. There is nothing in the gospel, is there, about having the freedom to use the world's resources and others for the sake of our own ascendancy. Jesus pushed us towards descent if anything, towards being in service to the world, not transcendent over it. For example, from a gospel perspective, I'd suggest that when we created penicillin to help the sick we were acting appropriately out of our creator status, our ability to transcend the natural world, but when we split the atom and exploded a bomb to protect our empire over another we were abusing our transcendence over the natural world. That's the difference from acting out of God's grace or choosing to act out of our own sinfulness.

And there's another fundamental Christian teaching that should inform our commitment to the work of ecological healing and that is the doctrine of original sin. I

know many of us have burnt out on the concept as such a shaming and negative thing that somehow we are inherently wicked. However there's more to the teaching of original sin not least of which is that it levels the playing field in a critical way. We are all sinners, our religion proclaims far and wide. You're a sinner and I'm a sinner and there's no more qualification necessary. We are all original sinners. It's not like you are a better sinner than I am or I'm a worse sinner than you or your sin is more original than my sin or mine more original than yours. It doesn't work like that. With the teaching of original sin, sin is sin and you sin and I sin, end of story. But then the teaching that follows from that is that since we are all sinners on a level playing field we are all in the same place of need for God, we all need to change. Repent! It's one of the very first words that Jesus says as he enters as an adult into his public ministry – repent, change your heart, everyone! And if this is not an apropos notion for what is needed in our current environmental crisis I don't know what is. Change is what is needed and change from all of us. We are all ecological sinners, period. Whether we drive Priuses or SUV's we are all eco-sinners participating in a system that approaches the natural world with an attitude of dominance rather than stewardship and for all of us, in this room at least, we benefit from such dominance. So the words of Jesus need to ring out loudly in our ears – repent for the kingdom of God is here! This is the kingdom of God, right here in the present, the world as it is, and we all are in need of repentance, to change our lives to honor God's kingdom as it should be honored, to care for it as it should be cared for, to be loving co-creators within this earth turning away from our destructive and merely self-serving patterns and practices that do not serve the earth and its remarkable family of created beings.

And that might mean sacrifice... actually it *does* mean sacrifice, which is also obviously a central Christian teaching, as these crosses up here make plain. But the key is that there's appropriate sacrifice and inappropriate sacrifice. Sacrifice is what makes the world go round but what the cross represents is appropriate sacrifice in the face of the world's inappropriate sacrifice. An inappropriate sacrifice would obviously be sacrificing the ozone for the sake of our getting to where we want to be as quickly and comfortably as possible. So we make the earth sacrifice for our convenience. Another example of inappropriate sacrifice would be the 10's of thousands of people in the middle

east who sacrificed their lives and loved ones unwillingly in our response to the attacks of 9/11, which were done by Muslim radicals as a sacrifice to their God. They made of us and then we made many of the people of Iraq the sacrificial victim, the scapegoat if you will, transmitting our own pain onto one another. These are examples of the kind of sacrifice that makes the world go round – call it sacrifice of transmittance where we transmit our pain and our sin onto someone outside of us.

However this is decidedly not the kind of sacrifice that is represented by the cross, which we might call the sacrifice of transformation. The difference in Jesus' sacrifice and the sacrifice of the world around him, is that Jesus took the pain and suffering of the world into himself and chose to suffer it instead of transmit it and as a result he transformed the world. That's true and appropriate sacrifice, the conscious choice to suffer whatever pain, anger, suffering comes at you so that it ends with you rather than transmitting it, projecting it out onto the people around you. It's the ego self, the false self that tells us that others outside of us need to suffer for what we want and need and it is our true selves, our divine selves, that understands that we at times need to suffer for what the world needs. Suffering is an inherent part of life and could it be that there are too few people who are willing to hold the pain of their lives such that it can be redeemed instead of transmitted it so that it increases.

This is an enormously important concept I think for our current ecological crisis. The earth is suffering and it is critical that there are those among us who are willing to suffer with the earth. As resources dwindle, for instance, who among us will choose the way of ego grabbing and protecting all we can while we can and who will choose the Way of Christ, the way of sacrificing even in small ways and bearing even small portions of pain so that the suffering of the earth is not transmitted through us but ends with us and is thus healed and transformed. Jesus was all about sacrificing the ego self for the sake of the true self –which is God within and that place of unity within us to all creation. It seems we must work at that interior level of things even as we call for global action on the part of our politicians because our politicians are there to serve us – ideally - and we've got to decide if we want them to serve our ego-selves or our true-selves.

That's some of the theology, I think, that is critical for us as churches and as Christians to speak into the ecological crisis – God is the only dominant one and we

God's loving servants; we are all sinners, equally indicted for the trouble our earth is in and the great invitation and gift is that we can change and that such change is not only necessary for the sake of the earth but it's also the pathway into our true and divine selves. Amazing isn't it?! As we deepen our spiritual journey and become more fully authentic, more fully ourselves, we are healed and transformed and how we carry ourselves upon the earth is transformed and so the earth is healed and transformed as well.

Praise be to God who so loved this world that he gave of himself in the form of a suffering servant to heal the human heart so that we can be agents of healing the wounded earth. Amen.