

“An Ecology Sermon”
 Psalm 148/ Romans 8: 18-25
 The Reverend Robert M. Knight, D. Min.
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Recently, I’ve been “challenged”--by **two prominent ministers**--I’ve been “challenged” to preach an “ecology sermon”; in **other words**, a sermon **concerned** with “**caring for the environment.**”

One of those ministers is **Walter Shurden**, a “professor of religion” (for many years) at **Mercer University** (in Macon, Georgia). Dr. Shurden edits a monthly “newsletter” I subscribe to.

The **other** minister is **Tony Campolo**--who was **recently**, here, in Charleston--giving the “annual lectures” (in honor of the late **Dr. John Hamrick**) at **First Baptist Church**. Dr. Campolo is a **sociology professor** (at **Eastern College**, outside of Philadelphia), and a widely recognized **evangelical** “Christian preacher.”

In “my defense”: there are at least “**two reasons**” **why** I’ve never **before** “preached such a sermon”--**on** “ecology”--**on** “caring for the environment.”

1. The “first reason” is because I don’t normally **preach** “topical sermons.” Since “**topical** sermons”--they tend to “go to the Bible,” **looking for** the Bible to “support” **whatever** the particular “topic” (**whatever** the “subject” at hand). Which, **too often** (I’m afraid) is merely a matter of “**using** the Bible” to “support” **this** or **that**, or **whatever** “point of view”--whether the Bible “**supports** it” **or not**. **Since**, of course, you can “support” almost **anything** “from the Bible”--from “slavery” to “child abuse” to the “denigrating of women”--**depending on** how you “interpret” **whatever** “part of the Bible” you happen to be “using” (at the time) to “support” **whatever** “the topic.”

Instead, I usually preach (what are called) “**expository** sermons.” That’s where you “**start** with the Bible”--**whatever** “part of scripture” it **may be**--letting “the Bible” **itself** determine “the topic” at hand. In the case of “**this** sermon,” **today**: the “subject” of “ecology” (what “the Bible says” about “caring for the environment”)--**at least**, in the “scripture lessons” **before us**.

2. The “second” (and perhaps “**better** reason”) I’ve never, **before**, preached an “**ecology** sermon”: it’s because--when it comes to **anything** “scientific”--I don’t know “anyone” **less** “informed,” **less** “knowledgeable” than **myself**. Which is something I **generally** “try to **practice**” (**certainly**, when it comes to “preaching sermons”): in **other words**, I’m not “**usually** given” to “**talking** about something,” when the particular “something” I’m “**talking** about” is “something” I “know **so little** about.”

And **not** that I haven’t “listened **in**” (and “over-**heard**”) some **highly-respected** “scientists” (in particular, “ocean-**og**-rappers” and “climat-**ol**-ogists”) discussing the “**perilous** subject” of “**global warming.**”

As in, for example, a **recent issue** of The Christian Century (a respected “**theological journal**”; **founded**, in fact--nearly “a century ago”--by the distinguished “**Disciples minister**,” **Charles Clayton Morrison**); an “issue” of The Christian Century devoted, primarily, to “the subject” of “global warming.”

Where “I read statements” such as **these**. “The **climate crisis** is **bearing down on us much faster** than most people **realize** . . . as one study after another has **shown the earth** to be more **finely balanced** than we **thought**.”

“For instance, the **current rise in temperature** has **begun to melt every frozen thing on earth**. In the **Arctic Ocean**, **white ice** that **reflected the sun’s rays** back into space is becoming **blue water** that, instead, **absorbs the sun’s heat**. The **thawing of the tundra** is releasing huge quantities of **methane**, another potent global warming gas. And because the great ice sheets above **Greenland** and the **West Antarctica** appear to be **melting faster than predicted**, a catastrophic **rise in sea level** would ultimately **inundate much prime farmland** and **drive hundreds of millions of people from their homes**.”

“According to world-renown climatologists, **Sir John Houghton**, such **change in the environment**--it is, in fact, a **moral issue** and represents a matter of **social justice**. Since those who would pay the **highest price** (due to **climate change**)--they would be among the world’s **poorest people**--for example, some **10 million** people in **Bangladesh** alone. Eventhough **we Americans**--who comprise only **4% of the earth’s population**--eventhough **we** account for **25% of all carbon dioxide emission into** the atmosphere.”

“**NASA** scientist **James Hansen** (who is considered a likely candidate to win a Nobel Prize for **his** research): **he** insists that we must reduce carbon emissions by **2% a year** (and **80% by 2050**), to even have a **chance** of averting an **environmental catastrophe**.” Not that many of us “adults,” here **today**--that **we** are “likely to be alive” **43-years from now**--however, our “children” and “grand-children” **will be--we hope**.

“Eventhough the **major opponents**, politically, of such **efforts to reduce global warming**--represented by the **lobbyists** of **multi-national industrial interests** (for example, last year Exxon Mobil made more money than any corporation in the history of corporations; such **economic leverage** making it **extremely difficult**, obviously, for the more **modestly funded environmental lobby to compete with**)--at a **personal level**: according to our nation’s **Environmental Protection Agency**, if every American household were to **replace just one light-bulb** with an **Energy Star-rated compact fluorescent bulb**, the energy saved could light more than **2.5 million homes for a year** and **prevent greenhouse gases equivalent to the emissions of nearly a million automobiles**.”

Indeed, “both **St. Olaf** and **Carleton** (two **exemplary colleges**--both located in the same small town, **Northfield--in Minnesota**): each has installed a **wind turbine** which **supplies more than a third of the electricity** needed for the schools.”

In fact, **just recently**, I was talking with **Dr. Travis Pritchett** (who is, clearly, more “sensitized” **to** this “important matter” than **am I**; and **he tells me** that “his daughter”--that **her** “consciousness” has been “raised” even **beyond his own**); Travis was “explaining” some of these “subtleties” **to me** (in terms of things “environmentally conscious” **individuals** and **families** can do) as we were riding in his “new car” (an “investment” **he** has made) for the “express purpose” of **becoming** more “ecologically accountable” (not the **least of which** is because the car can go “50-miles” on a “gallon of gasoline”; and when it’s “idling,” it’s “running on **battery-powered electricity**,” rather than on “fossil fuel”).

That’s, perhaps, enough “science” for “**any sermon**” (?), I suspect. It’s about as much as **I** can “absorb.”

Both of our “**scripture lessons**” today, **however**, they are **just** as “environmentally conscious” as **any** “science **book** or **article** or **lecture** or **whatever**.” And **not** that “the Bible” **is** about “science.” Hardly. **The Bible** is about “God.” Which is something I **do** “know something about”--at least, in terms of what “**the Bible** says” about God **and** “the world” (the “**natural world**”) which God has “created” **and** (is **still**) “seeking to **redeem**” (in Christ). It’s called “theology” (literally, “the **word of God**”)--what these two “**Bible lessons**” **today**--what **they’re** “talking about.”

In fact, the “**two lessons**” (from both “Old **and** New Testaments”)--they “go together.”

Psalm 148, for example: **it** “describes the world” as God has “**created** it to be.” In the words of “a (**lovely**, and **familiar**) “hymn” **we will sing** (later, in this service): “a world” where “all nature sings, and round us rings, the music of the spheres.” As in “the **first**” (actually “the **later**”) of the “**two creation stories**” (in **Genesis**): where at “each **interval** of creation” (if you will); where it **is as though** “God were a **cheer-leader**”; where “God **declares**”--**over and over**--“It was **good** . . . it was **good** . . . it was **good**.” And **finally**--“It was **very good!**”

Psalm 148--where “sea monsters and **all deeps**,” the Bible says (all **marine life**?); where “fire and hail, snow and frost and stormy wind”; where “mountains and hills, fruit trees and cedars; beasts and cattle, creeping things and flying birds”--where “**all of nature**” is enjoined to “praise God.”

Except in **Romans 8**: something has “gone **wrong**.” And it’s **not just** “the fall” of “**human-kind**”; **you** and **me** and **everyone else** in this world (along with “those gone before us”); **we**--who have “**rebelled** (so **will-fully**) **against God**.”

It’s “not just **us**” whose lives are “broken” and “damaged” (**morally** and **spiritually**). As **Paul** “says it”--here, in **Romans 8**--it is “the **whole of creation**” that has been “subjected to futility”; that is, **indeed**, “in bondage to decay”; as it were, “groaning in travail.”

Paul was hardly “a scientist.” He’s “**not** speaking,” here, “scientifically” (certainly not, in the way we, **today**, “understand science”)--even someone who “knows as little” **about** “science” as **I do**.

Rather, Paul (in **Romans 8**): he’s describing the world (the **natural** world) “theologically.” And **not just** “what’s gone wrong.” **No**, Paul--he is **also describing** the “redemption of the world” (in the “saving life and work” of Jesus, as “the Christ,” as “the fulfillment” of how God “intends the world to **become**,” once **again**, like “the world” of **Psalm 148**)--in fact, a “redemption” that has **not yet been fully** “accomplished.”

When **he writes**: “For **the creation** waits in **eager longing**, [even as] **we wait** for **our adoption** as children of God.” According to **Paul** (here in **Romans 8**): the “redemption” (the “healing” and “restoring”) of **our lives**, “morally” and “spiritually”--it is not **un-like** the “redemption” of a “fallen” and “broken **natural** world”--which has “yet to be **realized fully**.”

“The point” **being**: that--as **Christians--we** are “called” to “participate **with** God” **in** (not only “**our** redemption,” **morally** and **spiritually**); we are “called” **also** to “participate with God” in the “healing,” the “restoring”; indeed, in the “redeeming” of the “**natural** world.”

Not unlike how the **second** “creation story” in **Genesis** (which is actually “older” than the **first** “creation story”); how the Bible, **there**, describes **God** “instructing **humankind**” (that’s what the “Hebrew word,” **Adam**--what it means--“**all** of mankind”); God “instructing **him/them**” (**and us**) to be “good **care-takers**” of the “natural, created world” (which **the Bible**, of course; which **the Bible** “speaks of” as “a garden.”).

Traditionally, “evangelical Christianity” has **emphasized** the “place” and “purpose” of “the **individual**” **within** “God’s created order”--at the “expense,” **unfortunately**--of any “comparable emphasis” on the “**natural** world.” In **other words** (for those of us **who have**, at least, “spent a lifetime” **in church**): for “every sermon” **we** have **ever heard** on “the **creation**, groaning in travail, waiting with eager longing, for **its** adoption (its **redemption**)”--we have heard “countless sermons” concerning our own “**personal** spiritual condition” (that of “being **lost**,” in relation to God)--indeed, “sermons” which “speak” (and **faithfully so**) of God’s “initiative” in “seeking to save **us**” (in the “person and work” of **Jesus**). As **Paul** “says it” (here, in **Romans 8**): “And we, **ourselves**, who await **our** [not-yet-completed] **adoption** (our **salvation**) as God’s **children**.”

And, of course, the most “**popular** kind of Christianity” you “hear being promoted”--in “the media”--from the likes of **Pat Robertson** (and **other** popular “television preachers” **these days**): it is the “dispensational theology” of the Left Behind novels (a “**nefarious** brand of theology” that **has**, unfortunately, influenced “public domestic **and** foreign policy” in our “**national** life,” here in America, in recent years).

A “theology” (if you will) which claims that “God’s purpose”--that **it is**, afterall, to “**destroy** the world”--and the “sooner the better.” **In fact**, a “theology” that thoroughly “dismisses” what **the Bible so clearly teaches**: that God’s “good creation” (which, **even in** its “fallen-ness,” God is **still** “seeking to **redeem**, in Christ”); that “caring **for**” the “natural world” (for “the environment”)--that this is **nothing less than** “the **highest** of callings”--at least, “for **a Christian**.”

Or as Tony Campolo “said it” recently (speaking, here, in Charleston): “That the ‘environmental movement’ (as we know it, here in America, in these days); that it would have become relegated, **primarily** (or **so it would seem**), to those who espouse **New Age religion** (those whom Rush Limbaugh calls ‘tree huggers’)--this is, indeed, the most **tragic of ironies**,” said Dr. Campolo. “When it should be **Christians**--orthodox, evangelical Christians; **Bible-believing** Christians--who **are**, afterall, the **most committed** to the **caring for** and **redeeming of** God’s **good creation**.”

Thru Christ, our Lord. Amen.