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-raphers” 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. Even though we Americans—who comprise only 4% of the earth’s population—even though 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, after all, 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, after all, the most committed to the caring for and redeeming of God’s good creation.

Thru Christ, our Lord. Amen.