

Praise the Lord!

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In 1967, an article written by Lynn White appeared in the Journal *Science*.⁽¹⁾ It exploded like a bombshell across the religious scene. Why? Because the central theme of the article, titled “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” blamed religion – the Judeo-Christian religions in particular - to be at the heart of the modern environmental crisis. White asserted that the Judeo-Christian ethic legitimated humanity’s exploitation of nature based on a particular interpretation of Genesis 1:28: “God blessed (humans) and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish...the birds...and every living thing that moves upon the earth.’”

In spite of the prophetic tone of the article, it took the religious world quite some time to wake up and respond seriously to environmental concerns. By the late 70’s and 80’s, however, professional theologians, biblical scholars, Christian ethicists, and leaders of the ecumenical movement gradually came on board. In fact, a whole new field of study opened up - eco-theology – which in turn has led to practical theology in caring for creation at the local church and individual level. Indeed, we have a “green group,” an “earth care group,” in our church.

Listen to what Rebekah Simon-Peter, an ordained United Methodist pastor with a degree in environmental studies, says in her book *7 Simple Steps to Greening Your Church*: “There is now a growing movement that includes theological liberals and conservatives, mainline and non-denominational, and spans every branch of Christendom—Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant. Across the religious spectrum Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and others are also heeding their sacred teachings and going green. At last, our consciousness as persons of faith is shifting, aligning with native and indigenous peoples who have kept these truths alive for centuries. We hope that it is not too late.”⁽²⁾

William Brown, Professor of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta is a stellar example of a biblical scholar doing exemplary work in the field of eco-theology. I highly recommend his book, *The Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science and the Ecology of Wonder*.⁽³⁾ Through a close reading of Hebrew Bible texts, he finds no fewer than 7 different biblical perspectives on creation.

And what I really like is that he illuminates both connections and conflicts between these ancient creation traditions and current natural sciences. He argues for a new way of reading the Bible in light of current scientific knowledge. Prof. Brown enlightens us, for example, on creation as a sacred temple (Gen.1), creation as a garden (Gen 2,3), as a frightening wilderness (Job 38-41), and as a fun playground (Prov 8/Wisdom Literature). (By the way, I hope you can get out into nature this Labor Day weekend and play in it!)

Our lectionary reading today, Psalm 148, is a beautiful perspective on yet another viewpoint - creation as a choir! Talk about inclusion! This ancient song, this ancient hymn of Israel, is all-inclusive as it calls the entire creation to join together in praise of God the Creator. Eleven times this Psalm calls us to praise! Ten times the word “all” appears. No less than 23 entities of creation are called upon to praise God! “Heavens” and “earth” constitute the entire creation in Hebrew thought, animate and inanimate. All peoples and nations, all creatures and more – all are called to join the choir! No wonder that Ps 148 has inspired songs of praise such as St. Francis of Assisi’s medieval hymn “All Creatures of Our God and King” and Katherine Davis’s recent hymn “Let All Things Now Living”.

It’s exhilarating to join a great choir. Ask any of our choir members here at church. It’s wonderful to be in the choir, leading all of us to turn our hearts and minds away from ourselves to worship and praise our Creator/Redeemer God. Choirs, you know, have a central role to play in leading worship...just like preachers. And like preachers, choirs exist not only to make us “feel good”...to help us “enjoy” worship and to “rejuvenate.” Choirs, and preachers, also exist to challenge us. To help us think seriously about God, and what God would have us do. In other words, they’re here to help us change. To align more closely with God’s values. And sometimes that’s not much fun. In fact, it can be downright challenging. I’d like to wrap my sermon up with a few challenges. Four in particular, that current eco-theologians challenge us with.

Biblical scholar Terrence Freitheim’s article “Nature’s Praise of God in the Psalms” focuses specifically on Psalm 148.⁽⁴⁾ **First** of all, he points out that this Psalm challenges our view of ourselves as human beings—specifically our anthropocentrism...seeing ourselves as the center of the universe. He notes that “one of the major difficulties with such a psalm (148) is that it offends our anthropocentric sensibilities to be on a list with hills, horses, and hurricanes...

This anthropocentrism is seen in biblical studies of salvation that focus exclusively on the salvation of human beings (excluding creation), or an existentialism that sees all of reality from the perspective of human existence, or political theologies centered on the liberation of humans alone.

Second, Freitheim points out how scriptures such as Psalm 148 challenge our values of nature and creation. Does nature have mere instrumental value? In other words, is it only valuable because of its usefulness to us humans? A usefulness that, too often, leads to its exploitation? Or, does nature have intrinsic value? Value in-and-of itself – an intrinsic value because it is created by God? How do we balance instrumental value with intrinsic value? That’s a huge question for us!

OT scholar William Brown presents a **third** challenge...challenging persons of faith to take science seriously. Globally, I believe we are reaping what we’ve sown by not listening to, and not acting upon, the facts presented to us by the overwhelming majority of the world’s scientists when it comes to climate change and global warming. Nationally, I believe we are reaping what we have sown by not taking as seriously as we should the warnings of leading scientists when it comes to the Corona virus. Now they are telling us that if we would all wear masks, socially distance, and wash our hands regularly we could save tens of thousands of lives over the next few months. Science matters!

I was tickled this week to hear about a three year old member of my extended family. She is quite precocious. In fact, she informed her Dad a few days ago that she wanted to send President Trump a letter. He was taken aback, but said sure! So she told her Dad what to write, and he mailed it on to the President. Here’s what she had to say: “Please wear a mask. Be nice to people. Have a good day!”

Fourth, Rev. Rebekah Simon-Peter challenges us as Christians, as Methodists, to take practical steps to protect God’s good creation.⁽⁵⁾ She offers us six steps in becoming biblical earth-keepers. We start with repentance and how we have sinned against creation. We then move on to reclaim our role as stewards of God’s good creation. Then we move into the heart of going green by learning to apply the concepts of reduce, reuse, and recycle. Finally, we rejoice in God’s promises to us and for our role as co-creators with God. Praise the Lord! **Amen.**

Sources:

- (1) Lynn White, Jr. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 144, (10 March 1967): 1203-1207.
- (2) Rebecca Simon-Peter. *7 Simple Steps to Green Your Church*. Abingdon Press, 2010, p. 10.
- (3) William P. Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science, and the Ecology of Wonder*. Oxford University Press, 2010.
- (4) Terrence E. Freitheim, "Nature's Praise of God in the Psalms," *Ex Auditu*, January 1, 1987, p. 16.
- (5) Rebecca Simon-Peter. *Green Church: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Rejoice!* Abingdon Press, 2010.