

## The Pregnancy of Nature: An Earth Day Sermon

### John 1:1-4; 14:1-13

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*The insights of this sermon are largely based upon "Christianity and Ecology" by John F. Haught as printed in This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment (2004), pp. 232-247.*

(Singing)

*"He's got the whole world in his hands,  
He's got the whole world in his hands,  
He's got the whole world in his hands,  
He's got the whole world in his hands."*

*Continue with "wind & rain," "sun & clouds"*

Today is Earth Day Sunday. And what better way to start it out than singing a song that lifts up God's care for us and for all of creation.

The environment's becoming a BIG issue for the church. In fact, it's so important, that folks across the theological spectrum are coming together to address this global crisis. You know, I actually saw an ad from the Alliance for Global Protection that had Al Sharpton and Pat Robertson sitting next to each other, imploring us to care for the planet. I couldn't believe it.

The church is great about disagreeing with one another.

When we talk about homosexuality, division.

When we talk about the war, division.

Women in leadership, division.

It's been a long, long, long time coming since the faith community has put aside theological differences and worked *together* as the people of God. The issue of the environment is THAT important. And I absolutely believe that the faith community is at a seminal point in its history. We can either lead the world in reversing the environmental crisis, or we can sit back, do nothing, and prepare for a whole lot of hurt.

Unfortunately, even the most well-intentioned commercials aren't gonna do it. It's gonna take a *drastic* change in how we understand our faith in terms of the environment. The truth is, up till now, the environment hasn't been a very central part of the Christian tradition. It's a new reality for us as a

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community of faith. At best we've been apathetic about the topic. At worst, we've been idolatrous of ourselves, treating this world as if it's a "soul school" to develop our moral character (John Haught, "Christianity and Ecology" in *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*, p. 232).

This environmental crisis is gonna require us to completely reframe our understanding of nature and the cosmos itself. In our Christian tradition, some recent attempts have been made.

In the early 90's, Pope John Paul II and the American Catholic Bishops came out with statements that focused on Genesis, where humanity is given "dominion" and charged with stewardship of God's good creation. This first attempt by Christianity suggests that if we only practiced good stewardship and upheld Christian virtues regarding nature, this would be enough to heal the present situation. It holds, at least implicitly, that Christianity is A-ok as it is, that the degradation of the environment is a result of not upholding our virtues.

I think this approach does have some merit. Certainly, it's not so much that Christianity doesn't understand "stewardship," it's that we've failed to accept the responsibility of doing it. And if we haven't accepted our responsibility yet, I'm a little doubtful that another sermon about stewardship's going to do much.

Many eco-theologians tend to agree. For them, simply looking for the passages in the Bible about nature and stewardship and trying to apply them isn't enough. For these folks, we use the texts to inform ourselves, but the real impetus for change lies in focusing on the sacral quality of nature. Treating nature as a sacrament, as holy. In this approach, the cosmos *itself* is the medium through which we experience the Divine in a tangible way. The Scriptures describe and explain God in nature, but our practical experience comes through the quiet hikes, and literally stopping to smell the flowers.

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Thomas Berry and Matthew Fox and other “deep ecologists” tend to fall into this sacramental approach, where the earth is understood as a sacred organism... an interconnected web of relationships, both human and non-human. This puts us not “over” the created order as caretakers, but “in” the creation as part of the web of life. Nature is not for us to use, but *IS* the actual “breathing forth” of God’s creativity. And we’re called to acknowledge and support this sacred revelation.

Now, both the “stewardship” and “sacramental” approach to nature are important. But, at least so far, they haven’t resulted in the type of dramatic shift that absolutely needs to occur. A fundamental change needs to happen if we’re to leave any hopeful legacy for our children, and our children’s children.

I owe a great deal of thanks to a theology professor at Georgetown University, John Haught. He provided me with one of those illuminating experiences that completely shifts one’s understanding of things. What he suggested was that we need to go back to our foundation in Christ.

As we heard in John 1 today,

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him.”

*All* things came into being through him. You, me, and nature. Could it be that maybe the Body of Christ isn’t just us sitting here today? Maybe the Body of Christ is the entire creation, the wind and rain, the sun and clouds... the cosmos. And because of that, the eschatological dimension of Christianity, the hope for future perfection...the new creation...isn’t just for humanity. “The revelatory promise made to Abraham extends backward to cosmic beginnings, outward to the most remote galaxies, and forward to the future of the whole creation” (Haught).

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Nature is pregnant with promise... the very incarnation of God's covenant with Abraham.

Do you see that shift? It's no longer humanity being given "dominion" over the earth, nor is it simply treating nature as sacred. Our very hope for the future carries with it the whole universe's yearning for its future.

So, Every time we

- use toxic chemicals to clean our house instead of biodegradable products,
- Or use plastic or paper bags and dispose of them instead of reusing them, or better yet, using a cloth bag,
- Or leave the lights on when they don't need to be,
- Or any other decision, and they are decisions, to consume and discard,

we are turning away from and destroying our future promise in God. Jesus the Great Healer tells us, "The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do, and in fact, will do greater works than these" (John 14:12).

We can do better. As a people of faith... as a people of the promise.... we can do better.

(singing)

*"He's got the whole world in his hands,  
He's got the whole world in his hands,  
He's got the whole world in his hand,  
He's got the whole world in his hands."*

(pause)

So, what is our part in this? Amen.