

# **Eco Sermon Challenge to the Presbyterian Church (USA)**

**Warren Wilson College, 2008**

## **Winning Sermon:**

**“Creatures, Creation and the Creator”**

**Rev. John Wilkinson**

**Third Presbyterian Church,  
Rochester, NY**

## **Scripture Text**

**Revelation 1:4-8**

**Revelation 5:11-14**

## **Sermon**

We put our children on a school bus, send them off to lacrosse practice, write a tuition check, as acts of hope and possibility. We know that we do not live in a perfect world. We live in a fallen world, in fact; but nonetheless, we live in hope, and a portion of that hope is placed in youth - children, young people, the generations that will follow, to do things a little better than we have. So much so that the events of this past Monday shake us, shake us to the core. We are saddened beyond sadness, hurt, angered. We ache with those families, grieve with that college community, with an unimaginable grief.

We do not stop there, however. As people of faith, we cling to deep promises, that God creates us in God's images and connects us to one another. That is why this week we are all members of the Hokie nation. We are all residents of Oklahoma City, all students at Columbine High School.

As children of God, we believe that nothing in life or death can separate us from God's love, and as Easter people, as beneficiaries and practitioners of resurrection, that the tragic and unfathomable events of Monday will not define us or the world in which we live, or the lives that have been lost. We are invited to add our names and our prayers to the prayer book that we will send to the Presbyterian community in Blacksburg.

And we are also called to act on our faith, and it seems to me that as a church committed to peacemaking, committed to following the Prince of Peace, that the issue of gun violence must be addressed. This is, at heart, not a political discussion, but a matter of faith.

We are called to pray, to remember. We have printed an old prayer in the bulletin. After a time of silence, shall we pray it together with one voice, as an act of solidarity, remembrance and hope.

Let us pray.-.God of compassion, you watch our ways, and weave out of terrible happenings wonders of goodness and grace. Surround those who have been shaken by tragedy with a sense of your love, and hold them in faith. Though they are lost in grief, may they find you and be comforted; through Jesus Christ who was dead, but lives and rules this world with you. Amen.

A quick scan of the hymnal will let you note how many hymns echo the theme of creation. We have sung one already, "All Creatures of Our God and King." Burning sun with golden beam. Silver moon with soften gleam. Rushing wind Clouds. Flowing water. Fertile earth. Flowers and fruits. All singing God's praise. We will sing a newer one in a moment, a bit less poetic if not more specific: "Thank You God, for Water, Soil and Air." There are many others: "All Things Bright and Beautiful," "In the Bleak Midwinter" (a springtime favorite!), "This Is My Father's World," "O Beautiful for Spacious Skies."

On a tour of Scotland, we bused through a small west coast village called Bunessan. A familiar Gaelic tune is named after that lovely village. Many sets of words are sung to the tune; the ones we know best include these:

"Morning has broken/Like the first morning//Blackbird has spoken/Like the first bird./Praise for the singing!/Praise for the morning!/Praise for them springing/Fresh from the Word.

Sweet the rain's new fall/Sunlit from heaven/Like the first dew fall/On the first grass./Praise for the sweetness/Of the wet garden/Sprung in completeness/Where God's feet pass.

Mine is the sunlight!/Mine is the morning/Born of the one light/Eden saw play!/Praise with elation,/Praise every morning,/God' s recreation/Of the new day."

On this Earth Day 2007, our conversation needs to be more than a sentimental appreciation of nature. Our task needs to be an effort to *de*-politicize the conversation about the environment and to *re*-theologize it; to realize that we face a major, perhaps a life-and-death, crisis, and that we as people of faith have both the resources and the urgent calling to respond, to do something, for the sake of the morning that breaks each new day, God's creation and God's re-creation.

For too long, the conversation linking faith and ecology and the environment has been outcast to the tree-hugging fringe. But it seems clearer day by day that the ecological crisis is one of, if not *the*, most crucial and critical moral issues of our

day, so that whether we feel convinced or not, equipped or not, competent or not, this is where God is calling us to be.

It seems so big, so daunting, that to me, at least, thinking about doing something, anything, to make a positive environmental impact is an almost immobilizing experience. And yet we remember the words of Margaret Mead, who said "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." That is true for you and me, and it is true as the church, whose ability to affect social change seems to be on the wane, takes this challenge on as a theological and moral matter.

There are many compelling reasons to motivate us, and we should not be put off by the complexity of issues such as carbon emissions, greenhouse gases, global warming, alternative energy sources. Nor should we be put off by a political debate that confuses rather than clarifies.

It seems clear that much negative evidence exists to concern us. We are burning too much, mining too much, consuming too much. We are not conserving enough, not replenishing enough. The negative evidence is real, from dwindling rain forests to dwindling polar ice caps to dwindling fossil fuel reserves. But we are people of faith, and as alarming as the negative evidence would seem to be, we are called from a different perspective, a faith perspective, a "morning has broken" perspective.

We begin with the Bible, as we always do, and it is a clear and continuous story that, from the first words of the Bible to the last, God has created the world, has created the universe, and called it good. God has created humans to care for the universe, for creation, for God's creatures. God appoints us as stewards of creation, not to consume and devour, but to keep and tend. And God calls us to live in harmony, in covenantal relationship, not only with the human family, but with all of creation, those very rocks and rivers and creatures that join us in praise to God.

In an article called "The Bible on Environmental Conservation: A 21st Century Prescription," William T. Johnson identifies biblical themes that demonstrate "the belief that the God of the Bible cares about the environment and holds people accountable for its sustained management." In the Bible, Johnson says, you will discover:

- That creation reflects and gives witness to the creative nature and activity of God.
- That God owns the earth and people are merely charged with caring for it. Caring for the environment involves management for sustainable yields and balancing work with rest.

- That we are to trust God to meet our needs. (We call it providence.)
- That we are called to enjoy creation.
- That the purpose of nature is not to provide for we humans, but to praise its Creator.
- That we humans are given power and authority to use wisely, and that there are consequences if we misuse them.
- That a right relationship with God leads to a right relationship among the elements of creation, people with other people, and between people and the environment.

We could begin in the beginning, with Genesis, and be reminded of the goodness of creation and God's intent. We could read the Psalter, psalm by psalm. "The earth is the Lord's," the 24th Psalm reminds us, which means it is not ours.

Or we could enter where we have this morning, through the Book of Revelation. Revelation intimidates with its strange imagery and history of controversy. But let us be reminded of a fundamental affirmation. Every living creature - in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea - every living creature is called to sing God's praise, is envisioned as one of the countless voices offering praise to God. And by extension, anything we do to prevent that praise from happening, to silence creation's voice, is contrary to God's intention and harmful to the creation for which we have been entrusted to care.

The Presbyterian General Assembly has issued statement upon statement. They have even called for a reduction in the use of paper upon which those statements are printed! In 1954, more than 50 years ago, a General Assembly saw the horizon and spoke with concern. "Great natural resources have been entrusted to our nation by Almighty God. We call upon the Christian conscience to recognize that our stewardship of the earth and water... recognizes the interdependence of soil, water and man (and woman) and the development of a responsible public policy which will resist the exploitation of land, water, and other natural resources, including forests, for selfish purposes and maintain intelligent conservation for the sustenance of all living creatures through future generations."

That statement underlines the fact that as people of faith we should not be put off by the political nature of the current debate. When someone tells you that we should not get involved in politics, that we should stick to religion, that's often a good indication that the particular moral issue on the table - from war to education to poverty - is in fact precisely the kind of political and ethical issue that calls for a religious response.

In 1971, more than 35 years ago, the General Assembly committed the church and its members to a plan of action, including commitments to:

- Affirm values such as the taming of technology in order to enhance quality of life, restraint in consumption, equitable distribution of resources and modes of corporate decisions accountable to the public and to existing communities.
- Urge individuals, Christians especially, to discipline themselves as consumers.

Since then, of course, the earth's population has skyrocketed and consumption has intensified multifold. Our latest substantive statement was made in 1990, called "Restoring Creation for Ecology and Justice." Its summary is printed on the cover of the bulletin (and is included here).

The church has powerful reason for engagement in restoring God's creation:

- God's works in creation are too wonderful, too ancient, too beautiful, too good to be desecrated.
- Restoring creation is God's own work in our time, in which God comes both to judge and to restore.
- Human life and well-being depend upon the flourishing of other life and the integrity of the life-supporting processes that God has ordained.
- The love of neighbor, particularly "the least" of Christ's brothers and sisters, requires action to stop the poisoning, the erosion, the wastefulness that are causing suffering and death.
- The future of our children and their children and all who come after is at stake.
- In this critical time of transition of a new era, God's new doing may be discerned as a call to earth-keeping, to justice, and to community.

*Restoring Creation for Ecology and Justice*, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1990

Much has changed since then, and not much for the good. The church has changed -we spend more and more time on internal conflict and institutional survival, all the while consuming more and more and conserving less and less. Yet it seems, perhaps, that we are at a tipping point, that finally the mainstream church is listening, moving this conversation from the peripheral fringe and back to the center. Though our denominational environmental justice office sits empty now for lack of funding - it's not the only one - a whole new generation of books, websites, conferences, is providing the resources and inspiration to do something, as is a generation of leadership steeped in the urgency of this conversation.

Theologian Bill McKibben makes the case for the present moment:

- 1) If you care about social justice, this is the biggest battle we've ever faced.
- 2) If you care about the rest of God's creation, then get to work. God made (in whatever way) the creatures of the earth and of the sea; we're now engaged in a massive, rapid act of decreation
- 3) If you care about the future—about 10,000 generations yet unborn—then this is your cause.

("Meltdown," *Christian Century*, February 9, 2007)

McKibben reminds us of some of the options. We do some here at Third Church; perhaps you do in your living. There is first the ecological trinity: Reducing, reusing, recycling. We try to recycle as much as we can around here, and to print as little as we can. With our Earthkeeper group's leadership, we have changed the kind of light bulbs we use. We have replaced the windows in our offices and the Parish House to conserve energy. We are attempting to purchase more environmentally friendly products, and to decrease our use of disposable goods.

We are learning and nowhere near perfect. Perhaps your own lives reflect that as well, whether it's in the products you purchase, the cars you drive, the choices you make. We've even said that whatever we do with this fine old facility in the future, we will do so with as much of a "green" perspective as we can manage. Bill McKibben reminds us: "We don't lack for science or engineering, nor indeed for economic mechanisms to make a transition more efficient, or policy proposals to guide our work...What we lack is simply political will. We need a movement," he concludes, "as urgent, as morally committed, as willing to sacrifice, as creative, as passionate as the civil rights movement was a generation ago...(with) church people at the forefront...Without a vision the effort will perish, and with it the blooming, buzzing, mysterious, gorgeous, cruel world we were given."

This is the beginning of a conversation, and not the end. Actually, it's the continuation of one, and we join it, rather late. We encounter the biblical testimony and are convicted, in the negative by how badly we are doing and more so, by what a difference we might make if we - the people of God - put our individual and collective spirits to the task.

My friend and colleague John Buchanan writes that "It's time to pay attention. It's time for people of faith, people who believe in the Bible and the Judeo-Christian tradition of God's holy earth, to wake up and acknowledge what has happened, to understand and accept it as the moral issue of our day, to change the way we think, to demand that our politicians act responsibly, and to make personal adjustments and decisions appropriate to our faith." ("Holy Earth,"

September 17, 2006)

Every Sunday afternoon, the poet Wendell Berry takes a walk in the woods, returns home, and writes a poem.

"Slowly, slowly they return/To the small woodland let alone/Great trees,  
outspreading and upright./Apostles of the living light.  
Patient as stars, they build in air/Tier after tier a timbered choir./Stout beams  
upholding weightless grace/Of song, a blessing on this place."

*(A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems)*

May it be so - and may we join the music of creation to sing God's praise always.

Amen.

**Finalist #1**

**“Remembering God”  
Rev. Lee Alder Koontz  
Philadelphia Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, NC**

**Scripture Text**

**Genesis 1:26-31**

**Psalm 24**

**Philippians 2:5-11**

**Sermon**

There once was a three-year-old girl who was the firstborn and only child in her family. Her mother, however, was pregnant, and the little girl was very excited about having a new little brother or sister. Within a few hours of her parents bringing a new baby boy home from the hospital, the little girl made a request: she wanted to be alone with her new brother in his room with the door closed. Her insistence about being alone with the baby with the door shut made her parents a bit uneasy, but then they remembered that they had installed an intercom system in anticipation of the baby’s arrival. They realized they could let their daughter do this, and if they heard the slightest indication that anything strange was happening, they could be in the baby’s room in an instant.

So they let the little girl go into the baby’s room, shut the door, and raced to the intercom listening station. They heard their daughter’s footsteps moving across the baby’s room, imagined her standing over the baby’s crib, and then they heard her saying to her three-day-old brother, “Tell me about God – I’ve almost forgotten.”

This story is told by Marcus Borg in his book, *The Heart of Christianity*. He goes on to say:

*“The story is both haunting and evocative, for it suggests that we come from God, and that when we are very young, we still remember this, still know this. But the process of growing up, of learning about this world, is a process of increasingly forgetting the one from whom we came and in whom we live.”<sup>1</sup>*

“Tell me about God – I’ve almost forgotten.” Since reading that story that line has stuck in my head, perhaps because as a new father I have in the last year spent long moments standing over my son’s crib, gazing down at the tiny miracle sleeping there. I’ve also spent time watching him gaze up at the immense bright blue sky in complete and utter bewilderment. I’ve seen him immersed in sheer wonder as he clenched sand between his toes and felt the tiny remnants of the ocean’s waves tickling his legs. I watched his expression change to a mixture of excitement and fear as we all ventured out to the breakers. I’ve seen the peace of deep, contented sleep and the unbridled joy of seeing new people or new animals. I’ve marveled at his fascination with simple things, like leaves on trees, raindrops

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity* (HarperCollins, 2003): pp. 113-114.

clinging to windows, or the shape the sunlight coming through the window makes on the floor. I've actually caught myself thinking, "He's just a baby. He hasn't learned yet that these are just ordinary things." But then again, maybe I've forgotten that all these things are really wonderful, marvelous, extraordinary gifts from God. What I really should be saying to my son is, "Teach me about God. I have forgotten."

What I've forgotten, and what we all forget, is our smallness, our helplessness, and our complete dependence upon God. We get so preoccupied with ourselves, with the decisions we make, and with our own plans that we immunize ourselves against the wonder, glory, and mystery of God's creation. We barely notice the clouds floating in a tranquil blue sky or the spider's web adorned with gems of morning dew. Frost in the yard comes and goes. Flowers burst forth from the fields and then wither. We fail to notice as we proceed through the seasons of the year with an almost mechanical consistency, merely content to pass through the warmth of summer or the snows of winter as fast as we can. We maintain climate-controlled buffers of seventy-two degree comfort, encasing ourselves in artificial, non-threatening environments that shelter us from nature's extremes.

We are so good at maintaining the illusion that we control our own surroundings that we lose our connection with God's providence. We are so accustomed to thinking that "natural" is only a label in a supermarket, so used to the bounty of nature arranged in piles on store shelves, that we never think about the mystery and wonder of God's creation. We grow up learning how to be better and better consumers, and at some point it becomes apparent to us that just about everything can be bought and sold as commodity. The result of all this is that we miss the experience of awe, reverence, and wonder for the world in which we live. We fail to see the connection between creation and its Creator, divorcing God from God's world. We forget that out of grace and love God caused all of this - and all of us - to be.

Have you ever looked at yourself in the mirror or studied the lines on the palm of your hand and simply allowed yourself to be overwhelmed by the wonderful mystery that God created you? Have you ever tried to find your place in the world - not by road maps or directions from the internet - but instead by your identity as a created being in a world full of God's glory and splendor? It's easy to read the Genesis creation narrative in the same way that we read our calendars or day-planners. Yet, the story of creation is not a mere schedule of daily events. It is how God's relationship with us begins. It's how we begin. Genesis 1 preserves what we so often overlook, namely that God is the foundation of all that is (including us). God created everything we know by God's own gracious word. God spoke, and it was so. Light and darkness, deep waters and high mountains, deserts and plains, lush rain forests and rocky crags, sun, moon, and stars, creeping things and wild animals, living beings of every kind, you, me, and all of us - all were brought forth by God's grace. As such, we and the entire world in which we live bear a fundamental connection with the Creator.

What this means for us is that when we forget that connection, when we fall into the habit of assuming that the world was created for us and is owned by us, we neglect the most fundamental part of who we were created to be. While it's true that we human beings are given a special place in God's creation, there is a certain responsibility that comes with our unique identity. We are the only living things capable of preserving and maintaining a sense of awe, wonder, and reverence for the created world. We are the only creatures on the planet that can connect our adoration and praise for the Creator with reverence and care for the creation.

Our uniqueness in being given “dominion” or “lordship” over God’s earth also carries with it a responsibility to connect our lordship with our Lord. It is God-with-us in Jesus Christ who teaches us that true lordship means serving another with love. It is He who loved outcasts and sinners simply because they were children of the Creator. As scripture tells us, it was He, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave. And yes, having dominion over the earth means carrying the responsibility of loving the created world with His love, serving it with His humility, and caring for it with his mercy and compassion. It is not enough for us to simply love the neighbor. We must also love the world and all that is in it simply because it was created by God and belongs to God alone.

So much in our culture will entice us to view the earth and its resources as just one more commodity to be consumed without limitations. Yet, it is clear that we cannot persist in that mindset, or else we place ourselves on a path toward the desecration of God’s world rather than reverence for it. We run the risk of becoming undertakers instead of caretakers, lords of a dying or even dead world. Worse yet, we may very well be the agents of our own destruction. While the human population of the world increases exponentially, the earth’s resources are being overused, overtaxed, and over-polluted on global, local, and personal levels. A cycle of entitlement persists in our culture, where the convenience of running water, working electricity, curbside trash pick-up, and one-vehicle-per-person have led us to believe that we are entitled to use or consume these things without limit. The problem with this is that it turns God’s creation into our warehouse. It places us, not God, at the center of creation. We ultimately become insatiable consumers instead of loving stewards.

I realize that this troubling news is not really news anymore. We’ve all heard the grim statistics and dire predictions over and over again. Obviously, we need something other than warnings to help us change our sinful behaviors in relationship to our home planet. I would suggest to you that any change in our behavior begins with confession. We must humble ourselves, recognizing our complicity in damaging God’s creation. We must also ask forgiveness, seeking God’s direction in our stewardship of our natural resources, and finally, we must remember God. Lying within our deepest roots as Christian believers is a formidable truth: Creation remains intimately connected to the loving Creator. It is a truth that governs everything we do on earth. I realize that the water coming out of the faucet seems like a commodity. After all, I paid for it and it is delivered to me at a precise 2.1 gallons per minute. But the fact remains that the water coming from the faucet is the same water that God spoke into being. The heap of dirt at the local landfill is the same dry land that God separated from the deep waters. The air becoming saturated with emissions from my car is the same air that God breathed into the nostrils of the first living creatures.

I think we’ve almost forgotten the deep truth that creation is inseparable from the Creator. As time goes by we may forget completely the One to whom we and this world belong, and the consequences of our forgetfulness will likely be severe. Of course, it’s not too late to remember. It’s not too late to practice reverence for God’s creation by doing things like recycling, using less water and electricity, conserving water, consuming less gasoline, and reducing our carbon dioxide emissions. It’s not too late to remember our place in creation, or that our pattern for dominion is found in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It’s not too late to respond to God’s creative grace with our wonder, our reverence, and our love.

God be praised. It's not too late.

Amen.

## **“The Glory of the Lord Revealed in Creation”**

**Rev. John Creasy**

**The Open Door in Pittsburgh PA,  
an NCD of the Pittsburgh Presbytery**

### **Scripture Text**

**Psalm 104**

### **Sermon**

We’ve been talking for a few weeks now either directly or indirectly about the idea of “gift.” We’re coming at this broad and nebulous topic from a few different directions, God’s gifts to us, our gifts to God, our gifts to others, and vice versa. Today we’re going to talk about what I think is one of the greatest gifts God has ever given – the creation, all of the matter in the universe, in all of its beautiful forms. We’ll talk about creation and this physical world as God’s gift to us, and we’ll think about the responsibility that we therefore have toward that gift.

Some theology today can actually encourage us not to care for the God’s creation. Have you ever been exposed to theology that may have negated creation as gift, or even seemed anti environmental? Have you ever been exposed to theology that says this physical world will be burned by God in the end times, along with all people who don’t accept Jesus? That kind of theology is out there, it’s alive and well in popular Christianity, and so I think we need to point it out and discover why it’s not Christian. I want to talk about this world as if God loves what he created. Could it be that God actually abides here with the beauty of what he has created? I want to imagine that you and I are the appointed care-takers of a creation in which the actual presence of God is located – and then realize this is reality.

The theological problem in the church today is rooted in an ancient strand of religious thinking called Gnosticism. Many Gnostics believed their spirit was good, but their flesh was evil. They thought the physical world was so corrupted by sin that God had chosen to abandon it and care only about spiritual things. There’s similar thinking that remains today, thinking that says this world is dirty, completely corrupted by sin, and therefore of little worth. The Gnostics thought that God has separated himself from the contamination of physicality. This is more or less what many Christians believe today - God is spiritual and cares about our spiritual lives. Some Christians believe God has separated himself from the sin of this physical world and we can only come to God *spiritually* by accepting Jesus as our *spiritual* savior.

Many early Christians believed these kinds of things. They believed the physical world was evil and the spiritual world was good. The goal of Christianity for them was to deny their physical bodies and all things of physical creation, and focus on the spiritual. The physical body and the spirit were completely separate from one another, one good and one bad. These Gnostics and were deemed heretics by the church. A form of Gnosticism lives on today in popular Christianity that says our flesh, and therefore all physical things, are evil but our spirits can be saved and live forever. This over simplification of Gnosticism sets a good framework for understanding why Christians have neglected their responsibility toward caring for the creation God has given us.

True Christian thought is not overly dualistic like Gnostic thought. The Hebrew people did not split human beings into a dualistic body and spirit like the Gnostics of old or the neo-Gnostics of today. Instead our physicality and our spirituality were innately bound together. They did not believe God was removed from that which he had created. God's spiritual being, they believed, was present in the physicality of this world. Let's read our scripture for tonight and I think you'll agree with my point.

(Read Psalm 104)

To some degree I think the beautiful poetry of that Psalm can stand alone, but I'm going point out a few things that might seem obvious from this chapter. The first thing to notice is that God is the cause of creation. Without God there are no animals, no trees, no sky, no sea, nothing. If God created all things then all things are under his lordship, God is the cause of the creation

The Second thing I notice is how intimately involved God is with his creation, he is not a creator who deserts his creation, rather he is the one who sustains it and gives it life. I love the language and imagery of God causing streams to flow, God providing the grains for the animals. God even provides the food for the lions, he is not a soft, naive God, but deals with the reality of creation in its goodness and in its seeming harshness. God is not only the cause of creation, he is the sustainer of every living and non-living thing, God is intimately involved with his creation as its sustainer.

Pastor BJ and I are taking a class together on Celtic Christianity. We're both amazed at how the ancient Celts were able to understand God's intimate involvement in all aspects of creation and all aspects of life. There was nothing too large or too small to have a poetic, Trinitarian prayer written for. And these Celtic prayers were extremely earthy. It almost seems when reading these prayers as if you could touch God by touching the simple physical things of this earth. It seems that they believed God was so intimately involved in every detail of his creation that you truly could come to know him better through that creation, by worshipfully participating in this physical life. I think these ideas also come through in the Psalm 104. By participating in creation we can join it in worshiping God.

We can also know God more fully when we experience that which he has created. Saint Columbanus of ancient Ireland wrote "Understand, if you want to know the creator, created things." His point was that if we revel in the beauty of God's creation, we come closer to knowing God. In my last message to you back in Advent we talked about God as the artist and creation as his masterpiece. Like any great artist's work, if you listen to it, study it, gaze upon it, you will come to know something of its composer or its painter or poet. I don't believe this is the only way or even the primary way of knowing God, but I do believe it is a legitimate way to know the Creator.

Thirdly, and I've hinted at this point already, it is in the beauty of God's creation that God makes his home. Krista Marshal, who is a regular at our weekly Midrash bible study, pointed out that God is even playful in this poem. God's tent is the sky or the heavens, the clouds are his chariots, the beams of light reaching from the sky hold up his palace, and God rides in the wind. You may not have thought of God as playful before, but I think we should. God sees his creation as a place for enjoyment and play, God uses his creation as his home and place of enjoyment.

The fourth thing that I want you to notice with me takes only a light scratch on the surface of the poetic imagery to realize... all of God's creation is in constant worship of its Creator and we have the

opportunity to gaze at and through that beauty to join in that worship. This earth, the stars, the galaxies, and even the minute subatomic particles of this physical world are singing the praises of our God, we have the opportunity to join in that celebration. It's obvious to me that the Psalmist sees creation as a major avenue for the worship of the creator. I would argue that anything beautiful in this world can be used as an avenue to worship of God. The Orthodox churches use beautiful icons as avenues to worship, we can use God's creation as an icon, a window through which we see, come to know, and experience our Creator God.

What is the purpose of the Christian life? I would argue that our purpose is to know and worship God and through that worship to usher in his kingdom, here on earth as it is in heaven. If we are to worship God as Psalm 104 leads us to worship God, we must stop destroying the creation in which God chooses to abide, care for, and love. The destruction of the environment is a direct assault on the kingdom of God. I know it can be overwhelming when you think about things like global warming, the extinction of species, and destruction of the rain forest. Be encouraged to act locally, do your small part. God cares about the small attempts that we make to care for his creation as we show our appreciation for the gift that it is. As we join God in caring for his creation we in fact help to usher to this earth God's Kingdom.

Part of our problem today is that we have very little connection with the earth. You and I can live our lives very separated from the rest of the natural world and so it's easy to allow for destructive practices to happen for the sake of our comfort and consumption. It's so easy to live inside our heated and cooled houses and apartments, watching our TV shows and working on our computers, only venturing outside far enough to hop into our cars or onto the bus. It takes a conscious decision and commitment of time to connect ourselves with the natural creation. I have to confess that I've spent little time in nature lately, I've used the excuse of being too busy to backpack, hike, or bike, all things that I love.

Think for a moment about our food. I think we've reached an extreme of disconnection from what we eat. Today it's easier and cheaper to eat food so processed that we don't even know what the natural ingredients are. If you're up for it you can choose to eat food that actually grew and lived in a field, but it's cheaper to eat chemically and artificially created food. Many people can't afford healthy, natural food, they're stuck buying over processed, terribly unhealthy food. These are issues of justice. Justice for the poor who are forced to eat cheap food, and ecological justice for God's creation.

The issues of ecological justice and its connection to poor and disadvantaged are issues we can only touch on tonight. We all know the problems and could discuss them for hours. I want to ask what it will take to make a change. It will take a subversively simple lifestyle. The beauty of our world is being destroyed because of the way we live our lives. Our practices of consumption are killing this earth. It's told to us that there is no other way to live, that the only way to be happy is to buy more stuff, and have the newest of everything. The only way to live in this American culture of consumption and not be a destructive force toward the environment is to begin living a subversive lifestyle where you, with other followers of Jesus, seek ways to undermine the system of consumerism, greed, and the need for the newest, fastest and sleekest.

The best part about being a Christian who cares for the creation is knowing that it's not all up to you. We have a Savior who is making all things right through his all encompassing salvation. We are called to join in the work of Jesus Christ, the work of bringing his kingdom from heaven to earth. The

ultimate acts of reconciliation have already occurred. The birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ have made reconciliation of the physical world, even you and me, possible. God has in fact become flesh for the sake of all that has been created!

Colossians 1:15 – 17 can be summarized by saying all things are held together through the power of Jesus Christ. Without the presence of the Incarnate One every molecular structure and every solar system alike would spin out of control. Our world, according to Psalm 104 and Colossians 1, is reliant on the God of the universe for every moment of its being. The presence of the incarnate Christ holds all things together. And where Jesus' presence abides, there also his redemption is set into motion. Every moment that Christ holds this world together, every moment that God feeds his people and feeds the animals of the field and birds of the air, is one movement closer to the redemption of all things. Sin is any destructive force against the presence of God and His Kingdom.

Part of sin is the destruction of God's creation. This church is interested in joining in the process that began at the beginning of time, the ushering in of God's kingdom to this earth, for the sake of worshiping the triune God. By living a subversive lifestyle that puts creation care in important relationship with our theology we have a foundational reason to live subversively against the grain. We can continue to usher in the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and deny the lordship of consumerism and greed. We can usher in his Kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven. Amen

**“Is This God’s World or Ours?”**  
**Rev. John Helgeson**  
**Apollo Presbyterian Church, Apollo, PA**

**Scripture Text**

**Genesis 2:4b-8, 14 Psalm 104:5-13, 19-24 Job 38:4-11, 31-33**

**Sermon**

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it. God asks, “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Who determined its measurements? Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades or loose the cords of Orion?” In other words, do you control the stars, the galaxies, the universe? You God make springs gush forth in the valleys, giving drink to every wild animal. O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.

I just combined portions of our readings from Genesis, Psalms and Job into one piece. Why? To remind us that the same God who created the universe is the same God who is in charge of the universe and that the same God who created the earth and us is the same God who is in charge of earth and us. This same God challenges our pride, our assertions to be something that we are not. This same God reminds us who is ultimately in charge. This same God lets us know that the world of creation is his to command, not ours. This same God gave us the first job as gardeners. I am sure gardeners in our midst can appreciate and understand that.

What does it take to be a successful gardener? Well, you have to properly prepare the soil. You have to plant carefully. You have to water. You have to weed. You have to watch over the plants to keep them safe from insects and animals. You have to carefully cultivate and care for what is growing. You can not neglect them. You can not avoid them. You can not assume they will take care of themselves. You can not let them go on their own. They need you, if you want to be a successful gardener.

You know, that sounds like a recipe for how God wants us to take care of this world, God’s world in which we have been placed to till it and keep it. We have to provide for it. We have to watch over it. We can not neglect it. We can not assume the world will take care of itself. We are needed to be successful in keeping the world going, in keeping nature going.

So I guess you can call this my environmental sermon. And the first and most important part of any good environmental sermon is to remember that what we are dealing with is God’s world, not our own. Job was complaining about his suffering and God’s role in it, and God replies that unless you were there at creation who are you to criticize the creator. The words are sharp by God, but they make it clear that God created, God keeps things going, God is really in charge of the world. This is God’s world, not ours. And we need a certain humility when we deal with the world. We are not supposed to be seeing ourselves as so above everything that we go our own way and do our own thing in the world and to the world.

If it is God's world as Christians have confessed always, then it really is not our world and we can't do with it anything we want to do to it. We have to respect it. We have to care for it. We have to watch over it. We have to tend it. We have to provide for it. We are the gardeners for God. We are not God, and the world is God's not ours. God is in charge, not us. God harvests. God maintains. We are there to take care of it for God not for ourselves. That is the basic understanding of seeing God as creator.

We were put in a garden to till it and tend it. Paradise was gardening for the Lord. Paradise was keeping up God's creation, not destroying it, not refusing to take care of it, not letting it go downhill or be wasted. If the world is God's and God created it, we can not be against God and tear up this world. We can not allow this world and all that is within it be lost or destroyed because we are careless, because we can't be bothered, because...., because, ....because.... We have all sorts of excuses for not doing what needs to be done to ensure the world remains God's world and not a human disaster. Indeed, we know from history that the ancient Maya in Mexico and Guatemala wiped themselves out by deforestation, by soil erosion, by not caring for the land, by not even being good farmers. They took advantage of the land and lost everything.

Deserts are spreading throughout the world, and one of the biggest reasons is that forests that could stop that spread were torn down and not replaced. Scientists studying the planet Mars say that though it did not go through what Earth has gone through, what it has become is what could become of Earth if our planet is not cared for properly. Whose world is this anyway? Who is God? Are we God or is God God? And if God is really God, then all creation belongs to God and we dare not mess up this planet.

God makes water possible and to people who live under the threat of drought as people have done in parts of this country and many other countries at various times (consider many countries in Africa for instance), the loss of water is deadly. God provides the water, but it is up to us to keep it clean. It is up to us to ensure there is water to go around. We can not allow lakes to be killed. We can not allow water to be contaminated. And we can do all we can to clean up the waters of the world, so they may exist and we may exist under God, who provides water in the first place. Yes, we did clean up the Kiskiminetas River and the Allegheny River and many other rivers. We have to keep on cleaning up rivers, lakes, seas and the oceans for the sake of our lives and the lives of all creation.

The fact is that God loves animals. God provides for animals in creation from water to food to life to environment in which they can thrive. But it does not take a scientist to tell us that animals can be eliminated from the earth. It does not take expensive studies to remind us that certain animals are extinct, others are facing extinction and others are in a severe decline. We live in Pennsylvania. I dare say if I asked you to name the animal Penn State or the University of Pittsburgh uses to identify themselves you would tell me. The Penn State Nittany Lions, Pittsburgh Panthers. My college I went to had as its mascot and the name of the team the Catamounts. Tell me when was the last time you saw those eastern mountain lions, also called panthers or catamounts and a few other appropriate names, in Pennsylvania.

They used to be very common in Pennsylvania. They were the biggest predator of deer by the way, and their absence is one of the biggest reasons deer have multiplied into our backyards ever since. God loves all animals and that comes quite clear in Job and Psalms. Even the most unlovable animal is

loved by God. What animals don't you like-rattlesnakes, mosquitoes, spiders, scorpions, sharks, or any of a number of other animals? Name your least favorite animal and then tell yourself God created it and God loves it. How do you deal with that? How can you handle that?

Rachel Carson of nearby Springdale wrote her famous book *Silent Spring* to warn us of the dangers of too many human-made chemicals in the environment. Her book led to the banning of the most infamous DDT. As you may remember DDT was the most powerful insecticide ever developed, but it had the unfortunate side effect of destroying almost every other living thing as well. Thus, the bald eagle, America's symbol, almost went extinct because of the constant use of DDT. Now the bald eagle has made a monumental comeback. But there are other chemicals which create problems for the environment and have to be stopped.

Is this God's world or is it ours? Are we in charge or is God? Do we take seriously that God put us into the world in Paradise to tend God's garden, or do we insist on tearing it up and making it into our world despite God? Is this God's world or is it ours? Do we take seriously that God created and God is in charge or is that just words? If we really believe this is God's world, we have to treat this world as if we are going to have to answer to God for how we treat this world. We have to treat this world as God's gardeners, and we are going to bring before God what we have done to God's wonderful world.

**AMEN!**

## **“The Challenge of Living Sustainably”**

**Rev. Roger Scott Powers,  
at Light Street Presbyterian Church,  
Baltimore, MD**

### **Scripture Text**

**Acts 9:1-20**

### **Sermon**

The week after Easter, I spent a few days on the campus of Warren Wilson College, a Presbyterian-related school located in the mountains of Western North Carolina. I've begun serving on the college's Church Relations Council, a group of Presbyterian pastors and laypersons who are asked to help strengthen the relationship between the college and the Presbyterian Church (USA).

Warren Wilson College was founded in 1894 as the Asheville Farm School by Presbyterian missionaries who sought to bring educational opportunities to young men living in rural Appalachia. By 1966, it had grown to become a four-year liberal arts college. It is an unusual school in that its curriculum consists of three components: academic study, hands-on work, and service learning. In addition to their regular courses, Warren Wilson students work 15 hours a week on any one of more than 100 work crews, which are responsible for keeping the college in operation on a day-to-day basis. Students do everything from maintaining campus buildings to assisting with college administration to growing food on the college's organic farm. During their four years at Warren Wilson, students are also required to devote at least 100 hours to off-campus service learning projects, which may be in a nearby community or far away in another country.

What impressed me most about Warren Wilson College was its emphasis on environmental sustainability, which is why I wanted to tell you about it on this Earth Day Sunday. The college's 275-acre farm uses sustainable agriculture techniques, which have led to the farm being certified "river-friendly." The school has an extensive recycling program, including a "Free Store" offering all sorts of reusable items salvaged from trash. Students compost nearly all of the food waste from the dining hall, turning it into rich organic fertilizer for the college's vegetable gardens, which are also pesticide free. Students also manage a 640-acre forest for multiple uses including growing mushrooms for food and harvesting trees for lumber using sustainable logging practices. Some students live in an EcoDorm, a green building constructed largely of recycled materials, and which uses solar energy, recycled rainwater, and composting toilets in its operation.

Warren Wilson also boasts one of the first buildings on a college or university campus to achieve Gold Certification under the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) rating system. The Orr Cottage, which houses the college admissions office, was built by Warren Wilson students using stone from nearby mountains and wood from the college's forest. It uses 50% less energy than a conventional building of the same size. Given this focus on environmental sustainability, you probably won't be surprised to hear that one quarter of the 800 students at Warren Wilson College are environmental studies majors.

It was exciting to spend a few days at Warren Wilson College and to see all the things that can be done to better care for the earth, to lessen our impact on the earth's fragile ecosystem and its limited natural resources. I came away inspired, with a renewed commitment to go home and try my hand again at growing an organic vegetable garden.

Since returning home, I've begun to think more about how I live my life and to what extent my lifestyle is environmentally sustainable or unsustainable. What would it take, I wondered, for me to live in a way that was truly environmentally sustainable? What would I have to change about my lifestyle such that the earth could sustain everyone in the world at my new standard of living?

On the internet I found a tool to help me answer this question. It's called the Ecological Footprint Quiz. You answer 15 questions and it estimates how much of the earth's resources are required to support your lifestyle. It also lets you compare your Ecological Footprint with that of others and with the total resources available on the planet. Earlier this week, I took the quiz. I tried to answer the questions as honestly as I could.

How often do you eat animal based products?  
Very often, I answered.

How much of the food that you eat is processed, packaged and not locally grown? Most of it.

Compared to people in your neighborhood, how much waste do you generate?  
About the same.

How many people live in your household?  
Two.

What is the size of your home?  
1,000-1,500 square feet.

Which housing type best describes your home?  
Free standing house with running water.

Do you have electricity in your home?  
Yes

On average, how far do you travel on public transportation each week?  
1-25 miles.

On average, how far do you go by motorbike each week?  
0 miles.

On average, how far do you go by car each week?  
200-300 miles.

Do you bicycle, walk, or use animal power to get around?  
Seldom.

Approximately how many hours do you spend flying each year?  
10 hours.

How many miles per gallon does your car get?  
15-25 miles per gallon.

How often do you drive in a car with someone else, rather than alone?  
Occasionally.

End of quiz. The result? My current lifestyle requires 28 acres of biologically productive land and ocean area. That's a little more than the average Ecological Footprint in the United States, which is 24 acres per person. But worldwide, there exist only 4.5 biologically productive acres per person. That means that if everyone lived like I do, we would need 6.2 planets. Bottom line? My current lifestyle is very far from being environmentally sustainable. Putting out my recycling every other week and gradually replacing my incandescent light bulbs with compact fluorescents may be helpful, but it's small potatoes compared to the drastic changes that are really needed.

What could I do to reduce my ecological footprint? I began changing my answers to the quiz to see what would happen. What if I gave up my car and bought a motorbike with which to get around, carpooling with others only when absolutely necessary? That would reduce the size of my footprint by 20%, but it would still require 5 earths to sustain everyone at that lifestyle. What if I followed Kelli's lead and shifted to a vegan diet, eating no more meat or dairy products? That would reduce my footprint a little more. What if I followed Curt's example, and not only gave up my car, but used a bicycle to get around instead of a motorbike? Together, those changes would bring my ecological footprint down to 18 acres. But if everyone lived like that, we would still need the resources of 4 earths!

What would I have to do to reduce my ecological footprint to the point that our one earth could sustain everyone at the same level? I would have to become a vegan vegetarian and eat only locally grown foods with little or no processing or packaging. I would have to move into a green-design building incorporating energy conservation measures with less than 1000 square feet of living area. And I would have to travel exclusively by foot or bicycle. No cars, no motorbikes, no buses, trains, or planes. This may sound like an awfully Spartan way to live, but for many people in the world it would be a vast improvement over their current circumstances. In this scenario, I would still have a decent home in which to live, with clean, running water, electricity available 24 hours a day, and enough food to eat. That's more than many people have. But having grown up in an upper middle class family in the United States, it feels like an impossibly difficult lifestyle change to make.

This has been a depressing exercise for me. I've been down all week. I consider myself to be very much aware of the environmental issues facing the world today. I am genuinely concerned about them. And I claim that environmental values are important to me. But I am now forced to admit that there is a huge disconnect between the values I espouse and the consumer lifestyle I enjoy. And if that's true of me, what about the millions of people who don't even claim to care about the

environment? What will it take to wake us all up, to change our way of thinking, and to change our way of living, in order to address the environmental crisis effectively?

Will it take a Damascus Road Experience like that of Saul to reorient our lives? Saul persecuted the early followers of Jesus. He threatened them with arrest and execution. But then Jesus appeared to him in a vision that left him blind for three days. With the help of fellow travelers and the disciple Ananias, Saul made it to Damascus and there regained his sight. The experience produced in Saul a radical transformation from being a persecutor of the early church to being one of its greatest advocates.

Similarly, we who threaten the earth must undergo a radical transformation such that we will become its greatest advocates. Somehow we must come to see the light and reorient our lives toward environmentally sustainable living. We cannot do it alone. Like Paul, we will need the support of a community. We will need the support of one another to find our way.

For some years now, this congregation has lifted up environmental sustainability as one of its core values. We have taken pride in maintaining the church's garden as precious green space in an urban setting. Some of the renovations to this building have incorporated principles of green architecture. Our annual flea market encourages people to reuse items others no longer want or need. We recycle paper and we try to conserve energy. But there is much more we could be doing as a church and as individuals. How about placing clearly marked recycling bins in the kitchen for metal, glass, and plastic? Or what about becoming a collection point for household batteries, so they don't end up in landfills? I hope we will challenge one another and support one another in taking further steps toward living more sustainably. Every step we take does make a difference. Thanks be to God. Amen.

**“The Peaceable Kingdom”**  
**Rev. J. Stuart Taylor III**  
**St. Mark’s Presbyterian Church**  
**Tucson, AZ**

**Scripture Text**

**Isaiah 11, Luke 2:1-20**

**Sermon**

Many of you have probably seen at least one of the famous series of paintings on the Peaceable Kingdom by the colonial folk artist Edward Hicks. But it would be a rare person who would know much about his life and beliefs which were totally connected to the images of his paintings. Edward Hicks was a Quaker who was born in Pennsylvania in 1780. He tried his hand at the respectable vocation of being a farmer but when that failed he finally pursued his true vocation as a painter. In his famous series of paintings on the peaceable kingdom we can see all the characters from Isaiah 11, the wolf and the lamb, the ox and the lion, and the little child. In some paintings the words of Isaiah are actually written around the perimeter of the painting.

Some think of Hicks as an untrained, simplistic folk artist and his vision of the peaceable kingdom romantic, perhaps even innocent or naïve. But there is so much more going on here. Edward Hicks and the Quaker communities of Pennsylvania struggled mightily to realize the vision of the peaceable kingdom in their relationships to one another, to the Indians and to the land itself. In addition to being a painter Hicks was also a preacher who believed in the inner light, of the ability of every faithful person to have direct access to the wisdom of the scriptures. The paintings of Edward Hicks have helped to make scripture come alive. Hick’s paintings have made Isaiah’s vision of the peaceable kingdom a tangible vision within American culture. Edward Hicks paintings of the Peaceable Kingdom have allowed many to see the Divine Light that shines in all God’s creatures.

Isaiah’s prophecy of the peaceable kingdom finds its fulfillment in our Gospel reading from Luke 2: “And the shepherds out in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night. And the angel of the lord appeared to them and the glory of the lord shown all around them, And the angel said, be not afraid, for behold I bring you good news of a great joy, which will come to all the people, for to you is born this day in the city of David a savior, who is Christ the Lord, And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe lying in a manger”. A babe lying in a manger.

Is there any symbol of the Christian faith that is more common and familiar to us than the manger scene of Christ’s nativity? Many of us have grown up with nativity scenes as one of many Christmas traditions practiced by our families. Some of us have even had the experience of being a part of a living nativity scene. In the home church of my growing up, I was always cast in the role of the shepherd. But how many of us know where this church tradition of enacting Christ’s nativity began?

The founder of the Christmas Nativity tradition was none other than St. Francis of Assisi. Francis thought Christmas was the feast day of all feast days. We know of his great love for animals and Francis always asked that during Christmas, extra hay be given to the oxen and asses. He said that if he

could speak to the emperor he would ask that a general law be passed that extra grain be scattered along the roads so that the birds might have an abundance of food.

Two weeks before Christmas in 1223 Francis was staying in the little hillside hermitage near the town of Greccio. Francis called his friend Giovanni to help him in preparing a special celebration for the forthcoming Christmas feast. Francis asked that animals and hay be brought to a cave at the hermitage so that a scene could be prepared to show the people of the town, and his own brothers the physical conditions of the birth of Jesus. He wanted the people to be able to experience what it was like for the Son of God to be born in a stable, surrounded by the ox and the ass, straw and the cold.

Francis' brothers and the people of the town of Greccio gathered in the cave on Christmas eve, lighting up the night with torches, singing hymns, and celebrating mass on an altar arranged over the manger. Francis himself chanted the gospel reading of Luke 2 in a beautiful voice and preached a sermon that stirred the hearts of everyone. And it seemed to one eyewitness that the infant Jesus long forgotten in the hearts of the people came to life that night. And all of creation, the trees and stones of the surrounding mountainside echoed the praises sung by the people.

St. Francis was drawn to the birth of Christ for its simplicity, humility and poverty. But beyond this St. Francis understood that even animals have a role to play in the drama of Christ's birth. In the symbol of the child lying in a manger, Francis understood and celebrated the Good news of Christ's birth that embraces all living creatures, indeed all of creation. I must say that in my celebration of Christmas over 53 years, it has never occurred to me until this moment to actually wonder: what is the manger a sign of?

We know that a manger is a wooden trough or box made of stones that were used to hold the food for animals in a stable; but in what way is the manger a divine sign? All the times I was a shepherd in a living nativity scene, all the many years that we pulled out the nativity scene and put it on the coffee table or on the mantel piece. All the times that I have read this story and it has never occurred to me until now to wonder what kind of divine sign is this manger?

It seems to me that this manger that holds the Christ child is a sign of God's peaceable kingdom in which the natural world offers hospitality to the Christ child. The manger is a sign that the animal world indeed all of nature participates in welcoming the Christ child who brings peace to all the earth. Yes, this year I am hearing the old familiar story of Christmas in new and fresh ways. "And this shall be a sign to you, a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among all with whom God is pleased". When the angels sing peace on earth: what comes to your mind?

What comes to your mind when I say the word peace? Perhaps you think of a feeling of serenity, the absence of anxiety and fear. Or perhaps you think of peace as the cessation of hostilities and conflict. And you would be right. But the Biblical understanding of peace is far more expansive than even this. Biblical Peace or Shalom signifies a state of wholeness that includes security, prosperity and health. The biblical understanding of shalom includes right relationships because peace is not just the health and well-being of the individual but the harmonious interrelationships of the family, the community, and the nation.

Finally Biblical understanding of peace includes the harmonious interconnectedness of human society as a whole with the natural world. God's peace includes the earth; God's peace embraces the well-being of all of creation. God's peace is ecological. It is only when the heavenly realm comes to earth through the birth of God's beloved Child is the land soaked in peace. The earth awaits the birth so that the vision of the peaceable kingdom is realized. Only then can the rest of creation, including human beings –rejoice. The Good news of Christmas has its roots in Isaiah's vision of the peaceable kingdom. Clearly for Luke the birth of Jesus is the source of the earth's transformation.

This week former Vice President Al Gore accepted the Nobel Peace prize. And in his acceptance speech he said, "Without realizing it, we have begun to wage war on the earth itself. Now, we and the earth's climate are locked in a relationship familiar to war planners: 'Mutually assured destruction' ....It is time to make peace with the planet". VP Gore's Nobel peace prize speech also invoked Isaiah's vision of swords into plowshares. "We must quickly mobilize our civilization with the urgency and resolve that has previously been seen only when nations mobilized for war.

These prior struggles for survival were won when leaders found words at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour that released a mighty surge of courage, hope and readiness to sacrifice for a protracted and mortal challenge." Gore challenged the entire world to in effect embrace Isaiah's vision of swords into plowshares by undergoing the conversion of our global economy from one that wages war on the planet to one that enacts peace. In Al Gore's acceptance speech he quoted the great Norwegian playwright, Henrik Ibsen who wrote that "One of these days, the younger generation will come knocking at my door" The future is knocking at our door right now.

Make no mistake, the next generation will ask us one of two questions. Either they will ask: "what were you thinking; why didn't you act?" Or they will ask instead: "how did you find the moral courage to rise and successfully resolve a crisis that so many said was impossible to solve?" When my grandchildren come to me I want them to ask me the second question: "how did you find the moral courage to rise and to successfully resolve a crisis that so many said was impossible?" And I will tell them that it was my faith that helped me do this. It was our faith that helped all of us rise up in hope and take on the impossible. It was our faith that gave us a vision of the peaceable kingdom. It was our faith in the Good news of Christ's birth in the world that presents humanity with a renewed possibility for peace and justice.

We will tell our grandchildren that in the story of Christ's birth we have been given a vision of peace, of social harmony linked to a renewal of the land. We will tell our grandchildren that faithful people of our generation rose up in courage and hope to face the impossible task of saving the planet, because we knew we were not alone. The Creator, the Powerful God of all creation was with us and is with us now. God is Immanuel God with us, born in the form of a child lying in a manger, God with us and with all living creatures bringing peace into the world.

The theologian Stanley Hauerwas has written that "The Christ child is the embodiment of God's peaceable kingdom. God's favorable peace is poured out on all those who have found the confidence through the life of Jesus, to make their lives a constant worship of the Creator. We are a movement of people who are learning to rest peacefully in God because we are no longer driven by the assumption that we must be in control of history; that it is up to us to make it right". In the birth of the Christ child,

God has enacted cosmic peace. Such a peace is not just between people but between people and the natural world. "It is the renewal of the peace of paradise where humans and animals do not depend on one another's destruction for their own survival.

As citizens of God's peaceable kingdom we are pledged to extend God's peace through the care and protection of God's creation". We know that this human generation faces monumental challenges of bringing peace to the earth. But here is what we will tell our grandchildren was the secret behind our faithful action. We were able to do our part because our true hope lies not in what we can do but in the God who brings peace on earth, the all powerful Creator who is revealed to us in a child lying in a manger.

**“The Greening of the Kirk”  
Rev. Dr. William Paul Tarbell  
Batesburg-Leesville, SC 29070**

**Scripture Texts**

Genesis 1:31a - And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.

Psalms 24:1 – The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-3 – For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up.

John 1:14a – And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.

**Sermon**

The assigned topic of this sermon is a Christian understanding of our place in creation. An adequate treatment of so complex a subject in a brief presentation is mission impossible. An extended series of lectures in partnership with copious reflection and dialogue might open the door to such understanding, but we would have to spend considerable time engaging each other honestly, fairly before any genuine consensus on this subject emerged.

Yet, there may be value in laying some of our cards on the table. By doing so, we might get a clearer idea of the hand God has dealt us in the created order. We might also sense a bit better how God wants us to play that hand with our environmental companions.

With that in mind, let us consider, in relationship to the environment, our state, our sin, and our salvation.

We human beings are inherently a part of the entire biosphere. From the moment we are conceived until the moment we die, we consume other forms of life and they consume us.

We depend absolutely on the resources surrounding us and those same resources interact with us.

Take a breath. You have just inhaled oxygen vital to staying alive, along with countless microscopic organisms that will either be destroyed by your immune system or will find a way to start dining on you. Eat some food. You will derive nourishment from the plants and animals sacrificed for your meal. In the process of digestion, you will slaughter millions of bacteria which help you break down your dinner into nutrients usable by your body. If you are unlucky, some little critters will sneak a ride in your food and perform very unpleasant games with your digestive tract. Drink some water, the absolute elixir of life. That, too, could result in an undesirable invasion.

However, as you swallow this fabulous liquid, think of the endless cycle in which water vapor from the seas is carried to the skies, becomes liquid again and descends to mountains and plains as rain and

snow, fills streams, lakes and aquifers, and finally, assuages the thirst of all that lives. You might be drinking the same water that relieved the parched throats of an ancient family dipping it from a spring as they give thanks for its purity and life sustaining power.

I grew up in Suquamish, Washington, the ancestral home of Chief Seattle's people. As a teenager, I cared for his grave. Thus, his words to President Pierce in 1855 play often in my mind. Chief Seattle said: "The air is precious to the red man. For all things share the same breath-the beasts, the trees, the man... What is man without the beasts? If all the beasts were gone, men would die from great loneliness of spirit, for whatever happens to the beasts also happens to man. All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth."

We could safely add to Seattle's wise words, "Whatever befalls the sons and daughters of earth, befalls the earth." Our station in creation, our state of being, is utterly interactive, completely interdependent, absolutely connected to all that inhabits this good earth.

However, there is a wild card in the environmental hand God has dealt us. That card, the joker in the deck, is choice. We can decide, within certain limits, what we will do and how we will do it. Our response to nature follows our desire, our wishes as we try to express them.

With the development of technology, our choices relative to the environment have expanded exponentially. Whereas we once may have been confined to a small geographic area in a preset village life style, now we can all be Marco Polo, flight isn't just a fantasy, and we don't need faith to move mountains. At least here in North America, with a little work and a little planning, most of us can call the shots as to where we live, what kind of housing we call home, and how many things we add to our list of belongings.

The choices we make individually and collectively as a civilization determine what we take from the environment and the amount of waste returned to it for processing.

Mind you, like experienced backpackers we may try to tread lightly on the land, to have as little impact on ecosystems as possible. What we are able to do individually to create less environmental demand is commendable. Yet, much of what we decide to do is culturally determined. We are part of systems that have been developed over time through a series of choices, which may only be amended by another series of choices.

Given the complexities of our situation, we make mistakes. Even when we seek to do good we often sin. Flora, fauna and the habitats in which they reside frequently bear the scars of human activity.

Looking back into antiquity, patterns of abuse can be detected. Without fully appreciating the consequences, forests were cut, leaving land open to erosion. Irrigation projects were developed to improve agriculture, only to lead to salinized soil and barren ground. Villages became cities, concentrating population, overtaxing resources and creating lethal combinations of disease and disease bearing rodents.

With more knowledge, we prevent some of the errors the ancients made. Yet, utilizing land, water, and other resources appropriately still eludes us. And when we try to play the role of Mother Nature, strange things happen.

My wife's grandfather was encouraged in the early 1940's to plant Kudzu, an Asian import, on his farm in South Carolina. To his credit, or perhaps by sheer luck, he declined. Sixty-five years later, the disastrous results of this innovation can be seen along highways all over the south. Acres of Kudzu vines deal death to every form of plant smothered under their unforgiving weight. What was supposed to be a cheap, plentiful supply of fodder has become sheer folly and a stern lesson in environmental error.

We constantly sin against our surroundings, even if only by default. Whenever we intersect with any ecosystem, large or small, our actions can trigger the law of unintended consequences.

Sometimes to consume is to sin. In the act of taking what we need to stay alive, we undermine the basis for future environmental health. Or, rather, we ignore the limits of need and move on to unlimited desire.

In this respect, virtually everyone in the industrialized world sins and shows no sign of repentance. It is not only the United States that pursues consumerist dreams. Everywhere the possibility of acquiring goods and services appears, demand for the infrastructure that supports such acquisition rises rapidly. People simply want the safety and satisfaction that come with modern conveniences.

Such an atmosphere means that want often outstrips proportion. Our desire blinds us to the effects our consumption has on both the human and natural order.

Oddly enough, desire also causes us to overlook diversity of supplies that could reduce imbalances we create. For example, moving toward energy sources not oil based might have a profound beneficial impact on conflict and energy scarcity worldwide. Or, adopting new culinary disciplines could reduce our dependence on a narrow range of food sources. In New York, once a year a select group is invited to dine on exotic (so we think) species such as cockroaches, spiders and snakes. The chef, an accomplished dietician, points out that these creatures offer nutritional value superior to many of our traditional foods.

But, alas, we live in cultures devoted to narrowly focused goals. Consumptive sin may be the most alluring of all.

To make matters worse, in a well-meaning effort to correct environmental imbalances we overreact. Rather than correct, we punish people groups and inadvertently cause another imbalance, sometimes worse than the original.

Usually, on a wave of public compassion (grounded, I think, on our collective consumerist guilt), strict regulation is put into place. This is what gave rise to the extensive system of National Parks and wilderness areas in the United States. Dedicated to the preservation of pristine wild habitats, they have in many cases become overcrowded with certain animal species, and reservoirs of possible wildfire and disease. The parks demonstrate that when we try to institute a positive outcome, a negative one always accompanies it.

The same may be said about protecting specific species by inflexible laws. When the protected proliferate unchecked, both humans and other animals suffer.

Or, again, we attack certain activities in the name of environmental justice. Some activists have made it their goal to ban the fur trade and at least some forms of hunting. In doing so, they would abolish the livelihood and culture of many rural peoples. I once asked a Nez Perce man what would happen to his tribe if hunting were outlawed. He replied that the Nez Perce would be no more.

Harsh, punitive environmental legislation only sets in motion forces in nature and reactions in human communities that will be extremely difficult to cope with later.

So, since all of us sin against the environment, how shall we be saved? What must we do to find our way through this enormously complicated, seemingly intractable, problem of Christian discipleship? I submit that two things are basic to finding our way.

First, we must learn to live synchronistically. We have to seek a reciprocal harmony with the interconnected biosphere that Chief Seattle spoke of. Looking to our own genuine needs, we must become skilled partners in nature's dance, letting her lead in the complex pattern of steps necessary to well-being.

This cannot be accomplished if the human side of the dance continues to engage in fierce arguments over aspects of our relationship to the environment. Conflict over issues such as global warming, land use, conservation of wild areas, and many others cannot persist if we are to measure up to the dance for which we have been created.

Imagine a great square dance with urban and rural folk, Native Americans and peoples from every land practicing the many moves required for synchronicity with each other and the cue caller, The Domain of Life. Imagine missteps gradually becoming rhythms mastered until all glide corporately along paths directed by the cue caller. Imagine the benefit. Imagine the blessing. Imagine the joy.

Second, we must learn to contemplate sacramentally. When we look to creation we must put on Christ.

Eastern Orthodox Christians have always held that the elements of the environment are sacrament to us, teaching us of God's power and grace. We are at table with Jesus with every contact we make in the world of nature. Thomas Merton puts it this way.

"We are not in a condition to make the best use of our own or of the world's goodness. But we rejoice in hope. We enjoy created things in hope. We enjoy them not as they are in themselves but as they are in Christ-full of promise."

Or as one of my little guys, Jessie put it in Sunday school yesterday: "Jesus must be a tree hugger. He made everything!"

Isn't that precisely what we encounter at the communion table? God in Christ offering to us the sustaining cup and bread, physical elements suffused with the sacrifice of our Lord. True response from us includes profound gratitude and worship.

When a wren warbles nearby, when a child smiles into her mother's face, when a breeze flutters through Aspen leaves, when the dawn breaks chill and cold, when mountains raise snow capped peaks

to God, when feeding cattle low softly, when our body stretches every muscle pushing our bicycle at top speed, when our hearts thrill to magnificent music, when any encounter with human or beast occurs, we awake from our lethargy and sing, “May Jesus Christ be praised!”

Any hope of “Greening the Kirk” depends on dismissing hubris and embracing humility. It is no accident that insurance policies refer to natural disasters as “acts of God”. For, if they do not proceed directly from God’s hand, they certainly emanate from a primordial power with which creation is endowed. We are not in charge here. We exist together, all of us, as the environment permits and God’s grace sustains. Amen.

1. **Chief Seattle quote from “The Newton Reader,” Eleventh Edition, Linda H. Peterson and John G. Brevaton, editors, New York, 2004, p. 611.**
2. **Merton quote from “Thoughts in Solitude,” Shambala Pocket Classics, Boston, 1993, p.31.**

I detect muttering and murmuring in the congregation. Most of it seems to be coming from the area in the back of the sanctuary near the public address system booth where I usually sit and is usually the source of muttering and murmuring here. What I hear is something like, "Listen reverend, or doctor, or professor, or whatever - you have so many titles that you could go by - you can't preach on stewardship this morning. It's out of season. You're at least three months premature. Why Dean Rennell isn't anywhere near getting his stewardship campaign in gear, and Ray Bladine doesn't have his 'STEWART SHIFF' costume out of mothballs from last year. He's not even here today. You can't preach on stewardship this Sunday. We're not ready for it.

So runs the usual understanding of stewardship. It is used almost exclusively inside of churches, and it is used almost just as exclusively in connection with annual autumn fundraising campaigns to meet the budget for the coming year. So we have the story of two men stranded on the proverbial desert island. One is scurrying about while the other is stretched out, relaxed under a palm tree. The scurrer comes up to the relaxed man and desperately shouts, "Get up and help me. We have to find food, fresh water and firewood, and I'm having no luck at all." The relaxed man says, "You just relax. It's stewardship season, and I'm absolutely certain that the elders of my church will find me and bring a pledge card with them."

Just as significantly, the idea of stewardship is almost totally alien in almost any culture in the world today, including our own. A steward was in ancient times and into the middle ages a person who took care of the extensive real property and other possessions of a very rich landowner. That was the case in our New Testament lesson, even though the word "steward" itself is not used there.

It is rare, almost to the point of non-existence, for anyone in our, or any other, cultures to have that much real property and other possessions. Most of us consider ourselves blessed if we can just utilize Lou Jacobo or Bob Daudet to do our taxes for us.

Nevertheless, stewardship, the work of a steward, in fact extends far beyond the church and is part of our human responsibility for the world. Indeed, while the idea of having a steward is alien to us, the obligation of responsible stewardship of God's world must absolutely not be alien to us humans.

Now there is an utterly mistaken notion that started to develop near the birth of the modern era, around 1500 A.D. that we human beings are the absolute rulers of the earth, that the earth is ours, that God gave the earth to us, and therefore, because it belongs to us, we can mess it up, use it up, cripple it, destroy it, and do anything we please to it and with it.

**WRONG! UTTERLY WRONG!** God did not give the earth to us

humans. The point of our Old Testament lesson is that God gave us to the earth, not the earth to us, us to the earth to "till it and keep it." God made us humans to be God's stewards, or to use more familiar contemporary terms, trustees or property managers to act on behalf of God's best interest for God's real property and other infinitely extensive other possessions, God has appointed us humans to be God's responsible, stewards, property managers, trustees of the earth.

How badly has the human race botched the job of being the stewards/trustees of God's property? So badly in fact that by now we are worse than the useless servant in our New Testament lesson who simply buried and kept what had been entrusted to him.

Part of that botching of the job is related to our attitude and vocabulary that the earth, God's property, is our resource for us to use and use up. Invariably when people speak of "natural resources," they/we speak of them as things to EXPLOIT! As an eminent physicist many years ago put it, "We must simply stop talking about and dealing in natural resources. We must begin regarding the materials of the earth as CAPITAL ASSETS, and anyone in business knows that you are supposed to deal with capital assets by at least maintaining them and preferably enhancing them."

The hymn that we sang just before the sermon started is a paraphrase of Psalm 24. We all rightly know and get our kids to memorize Psalm 23, but we and our kids ought to know and memorize Psalm 24 as well. "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell in it." The earth is not ours, not a collection of natural resources, not for us to exploit for our own selfish purposes.

In addition to the idea that we as stewards/trustees of the earth are to attend to it and keep it up on behalf of God, its owner, an absolutely crucial part of responsible stewardship is to enhance the owner's property and possessions. We have not even come close to fulfilling that trusteeship responsibility. We are deep into negative numbers on that one!

I am a collector and rememberer, not only of bad jokes, but also of good cartoons. One of several among my favorites, though not because it is hilariously funny, but because it is so telling, is the standard Michaelangelo stereotyped image of God as an old man with long gray hair and beard pointing his finger across the heavens to the globe-shaped earth. The caption reads, "Earthlings, this is God. You have two weeks to pack up and leave. I have a buyer for the property."

If the worthless servant of our New Testament lesson was going to be cast into outer darkness for his failure to enhance the property of the owner,

where does that leave us who are not even maintaining it? We simply must learn and relearn the basic concept of stewardship as the vital responsibility of us humans to tend and keep AND ENHANCE God's property.

Stewardship is not just fundraising for our churches' budgets. It is barely that at all. Stewardship/trusteeship is and must become for all humans with Christians, who presumably know what God expects, taking the lead, become our purpose and our duty in our time on earth, lest God find a buyer.

for the property, lest we find ourselves with that worthless servant in the outer darkness weeping and gnashing our teeth.

## Finalist #2

**The Stewardship of Life Sermon Series**  
**“Stewards of Creation: Caring For God’s World”**  
**Dr. William P. Seel**  
**Easley Presbyterian Church**  
**Easley, South Carolina**

### Scripture Text

**Genesis 2:4-17**

### Sermon

Ever since I first read them, I have loved the opening paragraphs of Ferrol Sams’ wonderfully funny book, Run with the Horsemen, a fictionalized account of his growing up on a farm in middle Georgia between the world wars:

*In the beginning was the land. Shortly thereafter was the father. The boy knew this with certainty. It was knowledge that was in his marrow. It predated memory and conscious thought as surely as hunger and thirst. He could not have explained it, but he knew it.*

*The father owned the land. He plowed it, harvested it, timbered it, and hunted over it. It was his. Before that it had been the land of his father and his father’s father . . .*

*The boy knew all this. No one told him. He also knew that in turn the land owned his father. Everything the father did eventually revolved around nurture of the land. Without the land there could be no family. The ungodly were not so and lived in town. They were like chaff which the wind bloweth away. Their feet were not rooted in the soil, and they were therefore of little consequence in the scheme of things.<sup>i</sup>*

Those wonderful paragraphs describe a sense of connection to the land that is utterly lost to those of us who have come of age upon the sidewalks of suburbia. Not so very long ago, most Americans had at least some connection with a family farm, some feel for what it meant to live so close to the land. Now the closest contact many of us have with farming comes through the closed windows of the car as we zip past on a country road, or through the window of an airplane as we soar across the grain fields of the Midwest at 20,000 feet. Not so very long ago, God’s instruction to Adam to work and keep the land would have struck a deep emotional chord of understanding and experience. Now it barely registers with us at all.

And that is not good. In an age in which the actual amount of living material on the face of the earth has actually decreased by four percent in the last fifty years<sup>ii</sup>, maybe more than ever we need to listen to God’s instructions for how we are to live upon the land. In an age in which there are tens of thousands of toxic waste sites in our country alone, maybe more than ever we need to hear God lay out for us again the terms for how we are to live on the face of His creation. In an age in which the very air

we breathe and water we drink can make us sick, maybe more than ever we need to be reminded by God of our responsibility toward the earth that He has made. Maybe more than ever we need to learn what it means to be stewards of creation:

*Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the Lord God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food . . . The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.*

“*To work it and to keep it.*” From the very beginning it has been God’s intention that those two tasks would be practiced together, held in harmony with one another. We are to work the garden – to till it, to labor upon it, to draw from the earth that which shall sustain us in life, that which will clothe us and feed us and shelter us. But we are to do so in a way that also keeps God’s garden – protects it, preserves it, renews it, restores it. We are to work God’s creation in such a way that it can continue to provide for us and for all living things. We are to keep creation in such a manner that we may continue to work it to provide for life, generation after generation. To work the earth and to keep the earth were intended by God to be one and the same thing – one and the same way in which we are to relate to the creation and draw from it our life.

But this is our sin, this is our failing before God and before our fellow creatures: we have allowed these two tasks to become separated, divided, pulled apart. The result being that we no longer live in a creation governed by a harmony of working and keeping, but rather by a disharmony in which working the earth and keeping the earth have come to be perceived as polar opposites, as utterly incompatible actions. In our day and age, we have come to believe that one must choose either to be a tree-hugger or a tree-cutter – that there is no third way. Instead of developing economic and ecological practices in which we are able to work and keep the earth at the same time, we have come to employ an economic and ecological practice in which we first work the land by exploiting it, devastating it, stripping it bare and crushing it; and then, when we are done, try to keep the earth by launching extraordinary rescue efforts to clean up and restore the damage we have done.

The result is a sort of cultural schizophrenia in which one minute we are almost gleefully lopping the tops off of mountains and paving over meadows, and then the very next wringing our hands in remorse over the mess we have made and worrying about global warming. God meant for working and keeping the earth to be one and the same thing – a single way of living upon the face of the earth that would sustain life as well as sustain beauty. This is our sin, this is our failure before God and before our fellow creatures on the face of the planet: that we have turned working and keeping into enemies – and so have harmed the garden God gave us to tend.

So what can we do? What can one Christian possibly hope to do in a world of corporate conglomerates and agribusiness and global economies of scale? What can we possibly do in the world such as it is to bring back into harmony our charge to work and to keep the earth? To begin with, we can start to reclaim that connection in our own lives. We can start to reclaim for ourselves the Word of

God that instructs us both to work and to keep the earth. We can start by reclaiming our connection to the land.

Within our Scripture this morning is a wonderful play on words. The Hebrew word for dirt is 'adamah. The word for human being is 'adam: "Then the Lord God formed the 'adam of 'adamah." We are not only to work and keep the land, but we are formed from out of the land, 'adam from 'adamah, man from dust, humans from humus. So we are made, and so we are to live – closely connected to the land. With every living thing we have this one commonality – like them, we too are formed from the earth.

So at the very least we can begin by reclaiming that connection to the land in our daily lives. In this age of cyberspace, cell phones, and shopping malls, it is very easy to forget the land upon which we live. It is very easy to overlook it, to never see it, never think about it. But as stewards of creation, we can begin by starting to pay attention to the world God has made. Annie Dillard tells of walking down a city street and being utterly startled and delighted by a reminder of creation's goodness and beauty:

*About five years ago I saw a mockingbird make a straight vertical descent from the roof gutter of a four-story building. It was an act as careless and spontaneous as the curl of a stem or the kindling of a star.*

*The mockingbird took a single step into the air and dropped. His wings were still folded against his sides as though he were singing from a limb and not falling, accelerating thirty-two feet per second per second, through empty air. Just a breath before he would have been dashed to the ground, he unfurled his wings with exact, deliberate care, revealing the broad bars of white, spread his elegant, white-banded tail, and so floated onto the grass. I had just rounded a corner when his insouciant step caught my eye; there was no one else in sight. The fact of his free fall was like the old philosophical conundrum about the tree that falls in the forest. The answer must be, I think, that beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there.<sup>iii</sup>*

The least we can do as Christians seeking to reconnect the working and keeping of the earth is to keep our lives connected to the earth – remembering our origin as 'adam out of 'adamah. We can plunge our hands into the good soil of a home garden, we can look up in awe at the mountains around us, we can listen attentively to the sounds of doxology to God that fill the backyard at night. We can learn to love the land as our Creator loves the land – to see what He saw when He stepped back and looked over everything that He had made, and said to Himself, "This is good, it is very good."<sup>iv</sup>

And second, as Christians seeking to reconnect the working and keeping of the earth in harmony before God, we can use our power as consumers to reward businesses who are seeking to do the same; and to punish those businesses who see the earth merely as a commodity to be ruthlessly exploited for profit or who are indifferent to the way their working of the earth may be destroying it. We can remember that our consumer choices have consequences, and should honor God and His

intentions for us. For example, an evangelical pastor named Jim Ball started a campaign a couple of years ago with the slogan, “*What would Jesus drive?*” He wanted to get Christians to make the connection between the cars they choose to drive and the larger implications of those choices for their discipleship. In an interview, Ball said, “*Most people don’t think the kind of car they drive has anything to do with their faith. We want to show them how it does . . . Evangelical Christians ought to relate everything we do to the Lordship of Christ.*”<sup>v</sup>

Another example can be found right in our backyard in the form of the Happy Cow Creamery, a dairy farm owned by Tom Trantham and his family. Trantham began as a typical dairy farmer. In an interview with the Greenville newspaper he confessed, “*I was one of the top uses of chemicals. I thought that’s what farming was, using chemicals.*” He would spray to kill weeds, plant his crops, and use fertilizer to help them grow. Then he would mow them down, put the grain in the silos, and allow the cows to feed. The cows were confined on concrete floors, and were never allowed to graze – a typical modern dairy operation.

Then one spring, he says, the cows took matters into their own hooves. The bank was about to foreclose on the farm, and Trantham hadn’t been able to afford any weed-killer. The cows broke out of their concrete pen one day and went into a field choked with weeds, and began feasting. Within a day, milk production had increased by two pounds per day per cow – five pounds per day per cow within a week. Trantham had stumbled onto a secret that has vastly revolutionized his dairy farm. Now his cows graze freely and he no longer uses chemicals or fertilizers. He has a rotation of things growing in his fields so that the cows may always eat what they want and need – and his milk production is higher than it has ever been. And if you have ever tasted milk from the Happy Cow Creamery, then you know how much better it tastes than milk from unhappy cows.

In 2002, Trantham was named the first recipient of the USDA’s Patrick Madden Award for Sustainable Agriculture.<sup>vi</sup> “*To work and to keep the land,*” instructs God – and you and I can reconnect to that commandment by rewarding businesses that are seeking to do the same, and by seeking to punish with our consumer choices businesses that are merely exploiting the earth for easy profits without regard to its long-term health.

And last, as Christians seeking to reconnect the working and keeping of the earth in harmony before God, we can add our labor to the task of repairing the damage we humans have already done to the environment. Paul, writing to the Romans, states that not only we human beings, but also creation itself is groaning in anticipation of being redeemed.<sup>vii</sup> We can hear and heed creation’s groaning – and as good stewards of creation, work with God and with one another to redeem the earth from the harm we have inflicted upon it. We can join our church group in cleaning up the landscape along Highway 135; we can recycle our refuse, which the City of Easley makes so easy for us to do; we can give our money to organizations that are working to clean up the earth; we can work to make healthy and beautiful the places in which we live.

“*Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.*” Caring for the environment is not a liberal issue or a conservative issue. It is not a Democratic issue or a Republican issue. It is a Christian issue. And, most of all, it is not optional. It is a matter of living upon this earth in obedience to the instructions of God regarding the earth; it is a matter of caring for

God's creation as God Himself cares for it; it is a matter of taking seriously our God-given vocation – to work and to keep the earth, until the Kingdom comes.

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<sup>i</sup> Ferrol Sams, *Run with the Horsemen* (Atlanta: Peachtree Publishers, 1982) p. 1.

<sup>ii</sup> Cited in Ched Myers, "To Serve and Preserve," *Sojourners*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (March, 2004), p. 28.

<sup>iii</sup> Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), pp. 7-8.

<sup>iv</sup> Genesis 1:31.

<sup>v</sup> Quoted in Katherine Ellison, "Stopping Traffic," *Christian Century*, Vol. 119, No. 24 (November 20, 2002), p. 8.

<sup>vi</sup> For more information on the Happy Cow Creamery, as well as a fuller account of the farm's transformation, visit their website at <http://www.happycowcreamery.com/>

<sup>vii</sup> Romans 8:18-23.