

## **A Biblical View of the Ecological Crises (1): Creation**

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

July 5, 2009

A sermon preached in Glebe Presbyterian Church  
Toronto, Ontario

Genesis 1: 1-5, 6, 9, 11, 20, 24, 26-31

Psalm 148

John 1: 1-14

My sermon series this summer will have to do with the ecological crises; as many of you know I was an environmental scientist before I went into ministry and this is a subject near to my heart, but there are other reasons besides personal connection that I have chosen this topic for the next 5 weeks.

Three years ago E.O. Wilson wrote a book entitled *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth*. For those of you who have never heard of him, E.O. Wilson is a world famous biologist, retired professor from Harvard and no friend of Christianity. He was brought up southern Baptist in Alabama in the 50's, and if that doesn't scare you away from the church nothing will. In many previous books he makes the secular case for pretty much everything. He believes that God is a human creation in our minds that will someday be explained as an adaptation of our species to our fear of death. I've struggled with his books for years.

Imagine my surprise then when this new book, *The Creation* came out where Wilson is asking for help from the churches to deal with the ecological crises. Each chapter is an appeal to an imaginary "pastor" of a Christian church to inspire his congregation to join his crusade to save the world or as he now calls it the "Creation".

Why would Wilson write such a book? Well, he, like many other environmental scientists believes that time is running out, and the scientific community by itself cannot sway public opinion enough to solve this crisis. For thirty years the scientific community believed that if they explained their results clearly enough, people and their governments would listen and make the adaptations needed to save the world. But it hasn't worked out that way. Facts by themselves don't change behaviour to the short-term detriment of people. People must believe that they are making a difference, that the sacrifice they are being asked to make is worth the risk; in short, people are being asked to have faith, and that is foreign territory to the scientific community. For people to act faith you need the churches.

The problem is that churches aren't going to just drop everything and change their theology to demonize cars for example, and if we did, people wouldn't listen anyway. Where does it say that in the Bible you would ask.

What does scripture say against ecological destruction? Well, nothing at all really. The scriptures were written in an age when the balance of power between humans and the creation was very different from what it is today. In biblical times, a human being took his life into his hands when he ventured into the "wilderness". Travellers made sure they had enough water for their journey. Bandits lived in the wilderness and would attack travellers on the road. Wild animals were always a threat. It was no coincidence that when the time came for Jesus to be tempted by the devil, the Spirit cast him into the wilderness with no food or water. It was no coincidence that when the Israelites built a house for God, the Temple was located in the middle of the city of Jerusalem, rather than, for example, on the top of Mount Sinai where God had met Moses. The message of scripture is quite clear: the wilderness is a place of demons, temptation and lawlessness. If God is to be found on the earth at all,

it will be in a church or in the cultured minds of holy people. God may have given us “dominion” over the fish of the sea or the birds of the air, but our dominion was pretty shaky and more theoretical than real in biblical times.

Things are very different today of course. The population of humans on the planet has increased by a factor of a hundred. Our “promised land” has expanded well beyond the cities and cultivated farms and vineyards around them, and now includes pretty much the entire earth. The trails up Mount Everest are littered with discarded oxygen bottles and garbage. We have to reserve our camping sites during wilderness canoe trips into provincial parks. Great stretches of the Athabaska River in northern Alberta have been diverted into huge tailings ponds for the waste water produced by the oil sands. This is nothing new of course, but I think it helps to confront our present reality in its sharp contrast with the biblical context of 2000 years ago as we prepare to look at the ecological crises and scripture together.

No one likes to look at the way we have turned the wilderness into a garbage dump. We feel guilty and look for someone to blame. How did this happen? Well, some people point to scripture as the underlying reason for our lack of ecological awareness. It says in Genesis 1:28 that we have been given *dominion* over the earth by God, and God is telling us to *subdue* the earth and its creatures to our will and for our purposes. That might have been a harmless enough gesture in bible times when your survival and the survival of your family depended on whether or not the rains came when the crops needed water, but it is a disaster scenario in our day. The Bible, some people say, has outlived its usefulness. The Bible, some people say, has caused our ecological crises. Some people claim that we would go a long way to solving the ecological crises if we just got rid of the Bible and the churches that revere it.

In the next five weeks I’m going to try to respond to this charge first made over 40 years ago by historian Lynne White in the prestigious journal *Science*, and repeated ad nauseum in many, many essays since then. I want to do this by looking at the whole of scripture rather than pulling one verse out of the first chapter of Genesis. I believe that the Bible has some very important things to say to the world about the ecological crises that will be missed by anyone who stops reading the Bible after the first chapter of the first book.

For this week, however, let’s confine our interest to this first chapter. God creates the human creature separately from all the other earth creatures. Only the human being is created in the image of God; we are different and distinct from every other creature on the earth. The human creature is in a class by itself. And down through the ages we have hung on to the sharp distinction that we believe God made between us and what we call the lower animals. We have exalted ourselves above all the other creatures because we believe that is the way God intended it to be. It’s in the Bible! The Psalmist asks

*What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honour. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet.. (Psalm 8: 4-6).*

Yet, when we read on in the Bible we find that God’s gifts come with a few strings attached. We discover that we cannot do whatever we like; we are constrained by God through God’s laws. And God warns us that if we do not follow God’s laws then we will not live long in the land that God has given to us to possess (Deut 30:10). I will say more about his next week, but what I want to say right now is that it is God who will decide whether or not we will live or die in our promised land, and in that way we are just like all the other creatures of God’s creation. Listen to the Psalmist again:

*O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures... These all look to you to give them their food in due season; when you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand they are filled with good things. When you hide your face they are dismayed; when you take away their breath they die and return to their dust. (Psalm 104: 24, 27-29)*

The Psalmist keeps talking about these creatures as “they” and “them” but perhaps it is more accurate to say “we” and “our”: **We** look to you to give us **our** food; when you open your hand, **We** are filled with good things; when you hide your face **We** are dismayed; when you take away **our** breath **We** die and return to **our** dust. We are children of Adam, which means “mud man”. Our DNA is not that much different from the chimps and gorillas that are our close relatives or any other creature for that matter. All living things are descended from the same single celled plants and animals that appeared in the primordial ooze millennia ago.

If we are going to deal with the ecological crises we must first see the rest of creation as part of our family, our neighbours, those whom God has called us to love and serve. Science has known for 150 years from the Theory of Evolution of the heritage we humans share with the rest of creation, and has verified the fundamentals of this theory thousands of times in a wide variety of contexts ever since. Still, most churches have refused to accept the Theory of Evolution as our understanding of the way in which God created life on earth. It seems to me that if we are going to play our role in resolving the ecological crises we must first embrace the relationship we have always had with the rest of creation, with the rest of the earth. We are not gods. If we ever were created in God’s image, that image has been deeply scared over the eons by our pride, our inflated egos and our ambition to exploit and desecrate the earth.

So where is the good news in all of this? The Good News is that the God who weeps over the ravaged earth continues to love the human creature and continues to work for our redemption. In the fullness of time this same God came to live among us as one Jesus of Nazareth, a human creature who shared our DNA and all the rest of our earthly nature. Paul wrote that Jesus came to free all creation from the groans of its labour pains, and from its bondage to decay (Romans 8: 20-23). Jesus taught us how we humans must act and how we must live if we are to have the abundant life that God has intended for us (John 10:10). He said at the beginning of his ministry that he had come to give news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free. In the light of the ecological crises of our day we can see ourselves as the ones who are blind; blind to the effects of our actions on the rest of creation, which has been made poor, oppressed and captive to our actions. Jesus talked about loving our neighbours as ourselves, which we must now interpret beyond the limitations of the human species. I will say more about all of these issues in the coming weeks.

In spite of the challenges we face in our day, we are still upheld by God’s grace and God’s love. The Kingdom of God proclaimed by Christ is just as real and just as present among us as it ever was. The true light, which enlightens everyone has come into the world. The light still shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it. And so we continue our pilgrimage of faith, confident that we are not alone, that in spite of the challenges we know we face, we do not face them alone. There is a path through the wilderness, this wilderness of our own making, that will carry us through to the other side of these crises.

Thanks be to God.

Amen