

## **A Biblical View of the Ecological Crises (5): Making the Case for Hope**

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

August 2, 2009

A sermon preached in Glebe Presbyterian Church

Toronto, Ontario

Genesis 17: 1-8

Psalm 33

Romans 4: 13-25

Five weeks ago when I began this series on the ecological crises, I introduced you to a book by Harvard biologist Edward O. Wilson in which he appealed to the churches to help the secular world take on the ecological crises. It's called *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth*. Wilson himself is not a churchman; in fact in his previous books E.O. Wilson claims that anyone who believes in God is deluding themselves. Wilson believes that God is a human creation, part of our attempt to cope with the knowledge that we are mortal, that we will die. For Wilson, God is an intellectual fabrication that humans have invented to give our lives some meaning, to enable us to have hope. As far as he is concerned God is a kind of mirage in the desert reality that our universe actually is. In fact, the universe is cold and dark and mostly dead. There is no real meaning and no actual hope. For Wilson, life on earth is a wonderful accident, a highly improbable combination of events that have produced all that we are and all that we have. The ecological crises threatens to destroy all that, and Wilson has dedicated his life and all his energy to saving life on earth, and he is trying to recruit anyone who might help him in his project – even crazy deluded people like us who believe in God.

The fact that E.O. Wilson has written this book at all says a lot about the desperation scientists feel as they grapple with the challenge of the ecological crises. Scientists know how big this problem is and how difficult it will be to solve, and I can say that with some confidence because I used to be one of those scientists. For example, even before the Kyoto Agreement was signed, we scientists knew that the emission reductions contemplated would not be enough to reverse the growth of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. In other words, even if every country that signed on to Kyoto met their emission targets under the treaty, atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases would still continue to grow. The Kyoto Agreement was always only a first step in a long journey – and a baby step at that.

We know now of course that while some signatories to this agreement did make their targets, the largest emitters did not do so, and the government of the United States, the largest national source of Greenhouse gases backed away from the agreement at the outset and didn't even ratify it. When a famous scientist like E.O. Wilson or anyone else is faced with this kind of reality check it is no surprise that they tend to become pessimistic about humanity's chances to survive the ecological crises; and it is no surprise that they are tempted to give up and to fall into despair. Perhaps he sees his appeal to the churches as grasping at straws, as a futile gesture in a campaign that is already lost. Perhaps he has already lost hope.

So how do we in the churches respond to Wilson's plea to join the battle against the ecological crises? What have we said in response? The World Council of Churches has responded positively to the campaign. We are definitely against the ecological crises, although several high-profile evangelists in the United States have denied the importance of the issue. In the United Church we have added a call to "live with respect in Creation" in our new creed, following the direction of the World Council. Still, we haven't really made the same level of commitment as we have for example, in our calls for world peace or social justice. And why would that be the

case? I believe that the church remains luke-warm towards the ecological crises because we see the call to action coming from scientists and governments – groups of human beings – whereas the call to act in matters of world peace and social justice comes from God, which for the church is a very different thing. Wilson does his best to make the case to the churches to become involved, but his arguments are all scientific ones. If the church is really going to take the ecological crises seriously, we have to believe that the call to action comes from a divine source. Ecological responsibility has to be seen as part of our covenant to be the people of God in the world; it has to be seen as part of our vocation to be the hands and feet of Christ. Scientists like E.O. Wilson don't really get that. How could they when they don't believe that God actually exists.

For the last four weeks I have tried to make the case that responding to the ecological crises is just as central to our faith as our responsibility to work for world peace or social justice. We have looked at our scriptures in the light of the ecological crises and found truths we hadn't seen before. For example, when God called God's people to "Choose life" by following God's commandments, there was no mention in the scriptures about ecological responsibility, but we know now that we cannot choose life for human beings without caring for the ecological systems on which all life depends. So in our day, choosing life has another dimension to it that we didn't know about when the scriptures were written. Another example. Jesus taught that God's commandments could be summarised in the twin calls to love God and love our neighbour. In our day, ecological science has shown us that our "neighbours" include all the life forms in our ecosystem working together to sustain one another. We depend on the trees and plants for oxygen; in turn, plants depend on insects to pollinate them and so on. We cannot live without them. They are all our neighbours. So in our day, Christ's call to love our neighbour must go well beyond the human community. When the churches take action on the ecological crises we need to realize that we are doing so, not because the famous scientist E.O. Wilson has convinced us with his scientific arguments, but because we are called by God to do this as the people of God.

The scientists and other ecological activists may think we in the church are splitting hairs here. Why should it matter if the churches are motivated by scientific or religious reasons to become involved so long as we do. And that's the issue I would like to talk about today. The plain fact is that the scientific arguments around the ecological crises are not enough to solve the problem. The ecological crises must be addressed with the same level of commitment Abraham made to God when he left his home and travelled to a far country, the same level of commitment Jesus made when he went up to Jerusalem to die. God demands our lives: not our spare time, not our investments in green technology, but our entire lives. Only God can make such a demand on us because only God is the source of our life. And as the source of life, only God can promise us that our faith in God will never be in vain. Governments will let us down; politicians will lie to us; scientists will make mistakes; but our God is ever faithful and ever sure. We sing our faith every week: "Christ is made the sure foundation"; "All my hope on God is founded"; and so on. And it is from our faith in God, nurtured over the centuries by the church that we have the courage to hope, no matter what the odds against us might be. "If God be for us, who can be against us" was Paul's cry to the early church.

Throughout history God has reached out to God's people in the same way that God reached out to Abraham when God said, "I am God almighty; walk before me and be blameless... I will give to you and your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien (Gen. 17: 1, 8). Here was a man in the final stages of his life who left his home to follow a God who promised him that he and his wife Sarah would finally have a child, and from that child his offspring would multiply to be more numerous than the stars in the sky. Paul called that "hoping against hope" in the passage from Romans that I just read. Abraham had less reason to hope than we do, and yet he walked with God into a future that God had planned for him. Today we human beings are aliens on the whole earth, wrecking havoc, driving species into extinction. And God calls us to be faithful, to hope

against hope, just like God called Abraham. God calls us to choose life; God calls us to love God and to love our neighbour. And if we do that God promises us that we and our children will live. That's the sort of hope that the ecological movement needs. That's the sort of hope that lies sleeping in the churches, waiting to be awakened and put to work.

It is this ancient faith and the hope that flows from it that the churches can bring to the ecological crises. We believe that we are not alone no matter what challenges we may face. We believe that the universe does have an ultimate purpose, that it is more than a strange tale told by an idiot. We believe that the path that lies before us will lead us to us to life if we are faithful and if we persist on this path. It is true that none of us by ourselves can do very much; all we have, after all are our lives. However, those lives are the gift of a God who knows us better than we know ourselves and who loves us anyway, a God who has plans for us and for the world, a God who calls us to be faithful.

It seems to me that this is the basis on which the churches can love and serve Creation, joining with the secular world that seems to be losing hope in its battle to save the planet. As the scientific community learns more about the depth of the problems facing us, the situation seems more desperate and we fall into despair. However, the secular world is burdened down by the belief that everything depends on us human beings, that if we can't solve the problems we have created then they won't be solved at all. For the secular world this possibility is the ultimate disaster, the end of the world. But for people of faith, even this is not the end because we know through our faith that the God who hovered over the waters of chaos at the beginning does not depend upon the presence of human beings to create and re-create all things. This is the good news and the ultimate source of hope that we bring to the world as we work to restore its God-given ecological integrity. This is the Great Work of the church in our day.

And for this we give thanks to God.

Amen