

Biblical and Theological Foundations for Nature and Environmental Care

by Kevin Witt

We live in a time when the natural world seeks understanding and voice. A desperate need exists for interpreters who can help human beings hear the speech of other creatures, so that the plans of the powerful might be shaped to create a future that truly blesses all. The great resurgence of interest in spirituality includes a desire to understand the interdependence of all life and what religion has to say about hugely important biological and environmental interactions. The issues fill the pages of our newspapers, television screens, and public discourse.

People desire direction from God for their own lives, and for determining the priorities of local communities, nations, and international relationships. They long for insight that addresses critical needs realistically with hope. The following reflections are intended to urge Christians and other communities of faith to remember and teach spiritual wisdom that speaks to the heart of modern-day experience, so that we have relevant contributions to offer from our faith traditions. We have an opportunity to add immensely to the discernment that is now actively proceeding in deliberations and decisions about values affecting generations to come. They are conversations occurring every day in homes, in the legislative process, in corporate boardrooms, and, hopefully, in mosques, synagogues, sweat lodges, and churches. If we share spiritual insights from the best of our faith traditions and live them out for the good of all, we extend a gift to society. If we remain silent and unmoved, we should not be surprised if the general public considers religion a bygone artifact, which it certainly is not.

Speaking directly to my Christian friends and colleagues, let's inspire persons in the many settings of human activity to listen more perceptively to the voice of God. One very important avenue of that message is expressed through the natural world itself. The relationship between human beings and the rest of the community of creation to which we belong represents a pivotal crossroad. What do biblical teachings have to offer for the common good? Care for the earth denotes a very special common ground uniting liberals and conservatives today. From the Evangelical Environmental Network to the controversial writings of Matthew Fox we can find at least one harmonious chord. We may not see eye to eye on some issues, but all affirm that stewardship of creation represents an important aspect of Christian discipleship. It is part of living deeply within Christ's way of love.

I urge all leaders of faith-based camp and retreat ministries from the various spiritual traditions to fully embrace the unparalleled opportunities and corresponding responsibilities unique to religiously affiliated camp and retreat settings and ministries.

1. Most camp and retreat centers exist within places of natural beauty. This is no accident. Our faith communities recognize the power of such environments to inspire and open persons to God.
2. We invite persons, oftentimes strangers, to create powerful temporary communities of faith where they have the opportunity to practice ways of living together based on spiritual wisdom. Our strength is experiential learning — actually doing and then reflecting so people can discover their own new insights from the Spirit. Therefore, camp and retreat leaders and staff have incredible opportunities to expose people to a microcosm of what life can be when we cherish each other and simultaneously love the natural world — this is part of what it means to be the people of God.
3. Camps and retreats also encourage people to express the joy of life, and to recognize in each moment the grace of God touching every dimension of our lives. Giving thanks, knowing that we are loved, and being more fully aware of life around us represent different aspects of the beauty of Sabbath. Such practices of rest and worship contribute to renewal of the soul.
4. We can help persons appreciate much more deeply the sacred gift that other creatures provide us in so many ways, including, of course, sustaining our very lives. Giving a portion of our lives and our being to nurture the environments and species that make up the ecosystems that share so much with us honors God. Even more, all aspects of creation contain the spark of the Divine, so regardless of a creature's immediate benefit to humankind, it has a value in God's heart that deserves the utmost respect. The ultimate goal of life is not independence or conquest but interdependence. This spiritual truth demands more than our words. It calls us to intentionally help persons actually experience interdependence through new awareness of the community of life. Where better to do this than in natural places like camp and retreat center settings?
5. Camps and retreats have long been defining experiences designed to encourage persons to hear, respond, and develop as spiritual leaders called to inspire and lead others in lives of love. Spiritual leadership includes assessing

the situation of our own time and being willing to be a voice for justice. Camps and retreats have as part of their purpose the responsibility to assist persons in connecting the learning and transformation at camp or on retreat with new ways of being and living in the world when they return.

6. People retreat when they are wrestling with priorities and difficulties they face in order to talk with God. Just as Jesus went to lonely places to pray and converse with God, so too thousands of people come into our midst to converse with God and to discern direction for their lives and for society.

With all this being said, what follows are a few of the scripture passages from my Christian tradition that I hope will be a valuable resource for all camp/retreat ministry leaders. The list is certainly not exhaustive, but it is a good beginning. I hope that others will add to it from their own traditions.

For those interested in exploring the thoughts and actions of many religiously affiliated groups and organizations that affirm and practice earth care and stewardship of creation, I encourage you to also visit this listing of links.

Psalm 19:1-4

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.

The psalmist is highlighting the important role and sacred aspect of creation in declaring the glory of God, if we have the ears to hear it. Nature constantly proclaims God, and we often fail to hear it because we fail to pay attention and listen. How does it glorify God and invite us into the presence of God? Would we as people of faith advocate silencing the creation — a voice of God — by unnecessarily destroying it simply for our own material gain? Yet it is happening every day in modern society. No, our role is to do all we can to protect and care for that which speaks of God. The creation in its own way worships and glorifies the life force within it that comes from God — the One who created all things. Honoring God is not something purely limited to human beings.

John 1:1-5, 14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it ... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Here, the writer of John makes the inseparable connection between Christ and all of creation. All things came into being through the "Word" — the aspect of God that gives birth to the entire universe or cosmos. The very "Word" which was with God and was God — the very "Word" which initiated the natural world — is the same "Word" that lived and lives among us in Jesus. In a real way, the natural world is an expression of Christ. It is in partnership with Christ to point to and help us connect with God. All life is light helping us see God.

As the Christian teacher Meister Eckhart said so well, "Every creature is a word [a message] from God and a word about God." We would never tear a page out of God's Word — the Bible. And yet creation too is a word from God. When we frivolously wipe out species, it is not like tearing out a page from another kind of sacred communication that God has provided for us. Often, we don't even consider how important and sacred these species are from a spiritual point of view. If we destroy any species, we will never learn what they have to reveal and offer for our own good.

Romans 1:20-23, 25

Ever since the creation of the world God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things God has made. So people are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honor the Creator as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles ... they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

Here the apostle Paul confirms even more strongly that people can come to know God's divine nature and power through the creation — what God has made. We do not worship creation or any creature as the totality of God any more than we would worship a human being as the totality of God; however, the creation itself matters — it is part of the life that God inspires and sustains. It reveals aspects of God and what is at the heart of life.

Genesis 1:1-31

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day. And God said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so.

God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it." And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day. And God said, "Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth." And it was so. God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day. And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky." So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth." And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind." And it was so. God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

This chapter of Genesis clearly confirms the goodness of all creation, including human beings but not limited to humankind. Note that goodness is declared in each stage of creation, not just after humans arrive. Each aspect of creation is good and sacred in its own right. It shows that humanity is part of a larger community of life — not separate from it. The whole universe is interconnected in a process set in motion by God to create and sustain life. Humans, in Genesis, even share their day of creation with the creation of other animals. Human beings are brought into existence in relationship with the rest of creation rather than beyond or apart from it. We must grasp this, in order to understand our existence properly.

What God gives to humans as food, God gives also to other creatures. Resources for survival should not be claimed as a purely human right. What we receive to sustain our lives should be seen as a sacred gift, not a commodity. Life is not just about human beings. Other creatures share the same breath of life that humans have. They have many of the same basic needs that we do. Humans are, however, given dominion or oversight; and similar to the Hebrew concept of leadership, a ruler is to care for those in her or his community, not to abuse and destroy. We are given the creative capacities of the

Maker — we are "made in the image of God," in order to fulfill a specific role and service — to represent God on earth. This is not because we are better than everything else. "Dominion" cannot be fully understood, except in the context underlying the biblical writer's fundamental understanding that the earth is valued by God and we are caretakers of what is precious and sacred.

Psalm 24:1-2

The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; for God has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers.

The bottom line: The earth, the universe, nature, other creatures are not ours. Though we may talk as though we own them (cattle, land, water, and so forth), in reality we never do. Even the parcel of ground where our homes are located belongs to God from a Judeo-Christian understanding. The language of ownership gives the wrong impression. Christians and other people of faith honor the fact that everything in creation, including human beings, comes from God. Also, we must remember that the writers of the creation stories had neither the capacity nor the technology for the widespread destruction of entire ecosystems, the way we do in modern society, so any talk of dominion must recognize that context.

We are stewards — caretakers of what belongs to Another. If God is Love, and we represent God, then our leadership role within creation must be founded on that love — a deep abiding love for all God has made. How would love produce different results from the all-too-typical motivations we frequently follow in relation to the earth, plants and other animals?

With this in mind, ask yourself as a Christian how we might inspire society today to love what is valuable to God — what God has given life — what comes from God.

Genesis 2:4-24

These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created. In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground—then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches. The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there.

The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Cush. The name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates. The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken." Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

Chapter two in the book of Genesis brings additional perspectives to consider about the creation and its meaning. Note that humanity is organically connected with the earth. Our very formation as human beings is "from the dust of the earth — or dust of the ground." Out of the same ground all the other creatures are formed as well. Our deep connection with the earth intimately reflects the interdependence weaved into the very fabric of the whole universe. This is the way God chooses it to

be. There is something sacred, something about the meaning of life here to ponder deeply and to live in tune with.

The first assignment given to Adam, who represents humanity, is to till and "tend" the garden — the garden representing the rest of creation. The word tend has several meanings — to care for, to preserve, to protect, to nurture.

On another topic: some interpreters popularized the theory that only human beings have a spirit or soul and pointed to the moment when God breathed the breath of life into Adam as the proof. The word for breath or wind is also the word for Spirit. But this exclusivity is a very questionable conclusion, since in the first chapter of the book of Genesis it mentions that other creatures have the "breath of life." The reason that this is so important to clarify is because some assume that ultimately all that matters is the soul, because that is the essence of God that ultimately survives.

Narrowing the spirit, soul, or essence of the divine exclusively to humanity leads to the following train of thought: If nothing else has a soul or the spirit of God, then nothing else ultimately matters. That assumption has resulted in devastating lack of concern for the natural world that some, rightly or wrongly, blame in part on self-serving interpretations espoused in earlier times by Christians. However, such a dismissal of the rest of creation, whatever its source, conflicts with the overall biblical message.

Genesis 9:11-16

I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth."

The Noah story brings to bear some important truths. First, if you recall the entire story, it was destructive human behavior that led God to determine that it was vital to make a new start. Just because there was a corruption of what was meant to be does not mean that everything is now worthless. In the story, God required that every species be preserved for the future — not just human beings or the creatures we wanted. Having two of every creature represents the goal that species survive and reproduce as part of God's vision of what matters. In the new beginning, the creation with humanity is loved and preserved by God. Notice, too, that God makes a covenant not only with people. The promises or covenant are extended equally to the earth and every living creature. This does not sound at all like a God who has no concern for the ultimate destiny of the rest of creation. In fact, the account teaches quite the opposite.

Isaiah 24:4-8

The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers; the heavens languish together with the earth. The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore the inhabitants of the earth dwindled, and few people are left. The wine dries up, the vine languishes, all the merry-hearted sigh. The mirth of the timbrels is stilled, the noise of the jubilant has ceased, the mirth of the lyre is stilled.

When human beings fail to love and to be life-givers in honoring the ways of God, there is an impact on everything around us. Life is interconnected. The creation can definitely suffer terribly when human beings are unfaithful. Although this passage is not about industrial pollution, since it was written before industrialization, its language does make one wonder if the earth's current suffering is not also an outcome of our not living as the children of God. Pollution means godlessness. The passage provides an ominous warning about the natural consequences for a people who ignore the ways of God, the ways of life, and the ways of love.

Ecclesiastes 3:18-21

I said in my heart with regard to human beings that God is testing them to show that they are but animals. For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity. All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who

knows whether the human spirit goes upward and the spirit of animals goes downward to the earth?

The author of Ecclesiastes goes right to the heart of the matter. Have you ever heard a sermon preached on this? It counters much of the prevailing assumptions driving societal values. Many of the attitudes that bombard us about the exclusive importance of humanity flow from a sea of vanity on our part. Perhaps the Bible is right — God is trying to teach us that we share the same fate with the rest of creation. We are part of something very important, but we are not all that matters. We are cherished, but so are other members of the family of God.

A quote attributed to Chief Seattle seems to echo a similar sentiment, "We are not the web of life, but merely a strand in it. Whatever we do to the web we do to ourselves." Here perhaps we discover a common truth shared by both Native American spirituality and Judeo-Christian spirituality.

It is very difficult for us, as people, to give up the idea that we are the center of all things. There are so many examples of how far we will go to rationalize our position. The Copernican revolution serves as a poignant reminder. There was a time when everyone believed that the earth was the center of the universe. When the scientist Copernicus observed and began to share that our planet revolved around the sun and not the other way around, there were heated reactions. Some religious leaders accused him of heresy. Other scientists brought out their long-standing theories, and he was attacked. His life was threatened. Why?

Well, if the earth is not even the center of our solar system, then our planet might not be the center of the universe, then we might not be the center of all that is. We might not be the sole reason God made everything. Shocking! Outrageous! Heresy! But, as it turns out, Copernican discoveries were, nonetheless, true.

A different kind of Copernican revolution is underway in modern life regarding how we view ourselves in relation to the rest of creation. New insights come from religious as well as scientific observations. Will Christians lead or hang on to old ways of thinking that don't coincide with new recognitions about the way life really is?

We are interdependent. Humanity is not, and never will be, self sufficient. It is possible for God to love humanity and to love the rest of creation simultaneously — like siblings in the same family, different and cherished. We are loved in the Love that embraces it all. Might the other creatures, also, be valued citizens of God's community — the kingdom of God, the "Kin"dom of God? It may be hard for some to grasp, but this is part of the biblical message.
Job 12:7-10

But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the LORD has done this? In God's hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being.

The natural world is a source of all kinds of wisdom and will teach us, if we are humble enough to learn. As Job exchanges arguments with his friends, he encourages them to observe the natural world to gain understanding.
1 Kings 4:29-33

God gave Solomon very great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than anyone else, wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Calcol, and Darda, children of Mahol; his fame spread throughout all the surrounding nations. He composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He would speak of trees, from the cedar that is in the Lebanon to the hyssop that grows in the wall; he would speak of animals, and birds, and reptiles, and fish. People came from all the nations to hear the wisdom of Solomon; they came from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom.

When Solomon became king, God asked him what he wanted. Solomon only asked for wisdom to rule the people well. God honored his caring request and he became one of the wisest persons who ever lived. A great deal of his wisdom came from lessons learned by observing the natural world. We not only learn scientifically from observing nature; we learn spiritual truths as well, since God is the source of the natural world. We are destroying species by the destruction of their habitat at a rate unparalleled since humanity came on the scene. What wisdom from God are we rejecting and losing because of our

lack of care? This is a faith issue, not just an economic or biological one. What is the earth trying to tell us and teach us right now for our own spiritual good?
John 3:16-17

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Often, when we read this passage we consider only the salvation of the individual, but it says that God so loved the "world" ... God did not send the Son into the "world" to condemn the "world," but in order that the "world" might be saved through him. The word for "world" here is *cosmos* — meaning the whole universe. How does that understanding expand the teaching of the text? It seems obvious that as people of God we are called to embrace the entire *cosmos*, just as God loves it.

Luke 10:25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.

So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.

The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

This passage describes Jesus' reply to a man who was trying to justify himself by limiting who his neighbor might be. In the story, Jesus indicates that a neighbor is anyone who is suffering and the example of the Way is a Samaritan because he cares for the suffering one. The "religious persons" that one would think of first to respond and care just walk on by. Perhaps they think it is a shame that someone is suffering after being brutalized, but that is not enough according to the story. We are called to do something to bring healing.

Today, when we consider who is suffering, among the most hard hit are both the poor and the natural world. They together are being robbed of the fullness of life, and in many cases brutalized purely for economic gain. Some would try to create an either/or scenario. If you care for the environment, you don't really care for the plight of human beings. That logic is ridiculous and a smoke screen. We have a both/and calling — caring both for the plight of people and the plight of the creation.

The truth is that the powers and priorities that fail to alleviate poverty are the same powers and priorities that devastate the natural world. Insatiable desire for unnecessary goods and stuff create a siphoning of natural resources to those with the greatest means to purchase them. Almost always the waste from production is dumped among the poor. This has taken on an international dynamic. Citizens from well-to-do countries have seen the devastating environmental consequences of overproduction and overconsumption (which has not solved the plight of the poor as promised by the trickle-down theory). The impacts of pollution and natural habitat destruction are deplored by the average citizen in wealthy nations, so corporations are moving the damage of industrial production to poor nations who do not have the restrictions found now in developed nations. The problem is not solved, only moved out of sight. Sadly, out of sight often means out of mind.

Few would deny the destructive long-term results of frivolous production when they have to live with it in their own back

yard. Think about it. What is happening? The poor still receive the least benefit and are affected most by the destruction of the natural world and the polluted waste, while wealthy corporations and consumers get the products. You almost never find toxic waste dumps in middle- and upper-class neighborhoods in any country. What does that mean?

Is the way to better the world for everyone really to exponentially increase manufacturing and to earn more money? Is raising the GNP (Gross National Product) of every nation really a panacea? Notice the word Product central to the whole philosophy. Some really believe that if we can just increase production of goods around the world, then eventually the standard of living for the poor must rise. Of course, the rich must get richer at the same time, for that is what will motivate wealthier nations to help poorer countries in a system that worships the market. Self-interest, it is theorized, is the ultimate motive and formula for building a preferred global society.

Right now we in the United States must face up to the fact that we are approximately 7 percent of world's population but we are consuming 25 percent of the world's natural resources each year. In global standards, even lower-middle-class citizens here are absolutely rich, even though we are inundated with messages about how much more we "need." Most of us in the United States must start to question those messages and realize that we are being lied to and we are lying to ourselves.

Are we to believe that increasing production and consumption around the globe to our level, while we use even more, is a recipe for salvation or model for living? What would that do to the natural world based on what we are already seeing, and who will have to live most with those consequences?

Christian faith poses another possibility — love. Love means that we put the interest of the suffering — the earth and the poor — on a level with our own interests. As Gandhi said so well, "We live more simply so that others can simply live." We share — we actually share our abundance rather than trying to get even more in the insane logic that our having more will better the lives of the most needy. Only sharing and learning to live with less ourselves will do that, not hoarding more. John Wesley, spiritual leader for the movement that became the Methodist Church, taught that we should earn all we can, save all we can, and give all we can as a pattern of Christian discipleship. He did not say to consume all we can. This is the message created by advertising bent on convincing us that our wants are the same as our needs. That is not true.

What Jesus is talking about when he taught how to love our neighbor is that we should give priority to the one who is suffering. Can we see the poor and the natural world as our neighbors? Will we truly love our neighbors? As Christians, will we turn our heads and walk on by to attend to our other priorities or will we choose to stop running in the race for more, in order to love? Will we speak and live the way of Love so that others can perceive and adopt it in their own lives?
Romans 8:19-21

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. The apostle Paul links the salvation of people with the salvation of all of creation. As in the beginning we are linked with all of creation, so it shall be in the ultimate future with God. Our salvation does not equate to leaving the earth behind. The creation will not simply disappear because it does not really matter, as some teach. The creation will be set free, as we will, and with us have a future in God.
Colossians 1:15-20

"The Christ" is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. Through Christ, God is holding all things together and reconciling to Godself "all things, whether on earth or in heaven." Unity and wholeness are encompassed in reconciliation. All things really means all things, including but not limited to human beings. Our salvation is tied to uniting with the One who removes false boundaries of worth and separation to embrace the universe. In rejecting the value of nature and other creatures, we disrupt our participation in the unity and reconciliation that God is up to in the world.
Genesis 1:31–2:3

God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that had been done in creation.

Exodus 20:8-11

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

Leviticus 25:1-5

The LORD spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying: Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land shall observe a sabbath for the LORD. Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the LORD: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your unpruned vine: it shall be a year of complete rest for the land.

God rested. I can't help but be intrigued that the creation story is only complete when God rests from the work of creating. Rest seems so unnecessary for God — the almighty, the ever present, the Alpha and Omega. What's up with this? Why didn't the account of creation end with verses 1:31 and 2:1? "God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude." That sums it up nicely. If the passage ended there, it would have seemed normal and complete to me.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons that my life and labor often lacks a sense of wholeness and holiness. This lack of satisfaction, wholeness, and thanksgiving seems endemic in our communities. However, if our creative activity is to be fulfilling, God reveals that rest is essential to the process. Think about it. As spiritual leaders in settings characterized by ceaseless needs and long hours of work, how will we complete the process of creation? By ceasing from creating and laboring, in order to renew and enjoy the blessings that are present in the moment. Pausing is recognizing the goodness of God. Not only can we "do" for God, we can "rest" for God. And God will bless those days and make them holy.

A well-rounded reading of scripture reveals that God values all creatures and their contributions to life. We are to ensure that even the land has an opportunity to observe a sabbath for the Lord. When we mercilessly push the natural world and give it no rest, we enslave the earth. We dishonor God and fail to appreciate the sacred creativity capacities and limits of the full family of God. In some cases, we are driving ecosystems so hard that we are driving them to death — extinction. We prevent their renewal and jeopardize their innate capacity to renew and sustain life. It is like working a person or a horse to exhaustion until they give out completely, even die.

Human appetite, especially in "developed" countries, is overworking the earth. It seems that the natural world rarely gets a break these days as we require it to supply bigger and bigger homes, television sets for every room, frivolous goods, places to park and drive multiple cars, and so on. It's important for us to consciously discern when enough is enough and to seriously reduce, reuse, and recycle so that our brother and sister creatures may also celebrate the sabbath for the Lord. We are pushing other creatures so hard and taking over their homes that we are literally participating in genocide — genocide meaning destroying unique life forms, removing their genetic pool from the land. We must engage our community and our society in soul searching because this is a global issue. Our economy must reflect faith and values or we will end up by default simply worshipping "more."

This may be one reason why our entire culture yearns to experience the holy and the sacred, yet finds it so elusive. We have failed to grasp God's wisdom that we will be blessed in our own resting and in the rest and recovery of the natural world.

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