Standing on Holy Ground

Intro. to Green Discipleship Series

Co-pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen

Nutana Park Mennonite Church, Jan. 29, 2017

**Scripture: Ezekiel 37:1-14, Revelation 21:1-5**

I want to open my sermon today with an excerpt from the poem “Damage” by Wendell Berry, who is an American writer and farmer. It’s about a pond that he had dug on his farm to create a water supply for his cattle:

“The pond appeared to be a success. Before the bulldozer quit work, water had already begun to seep in. Soon there was enough to support a few head of stock. To heal the exposed ground, I fertilized it and sowed it with grass and clover.

We had an extremely wet fall and winter, with the usual freezing and thawing. The ground grew heavy with water, and soft. The earthwork slumped; a large slice of the woods floor on the upper side slipped down into the pond.

The trouble was a familiar one: too much power, too little knowledge. The fault was mine.

. . .

In general, I have used my farm carefully. It could be said, I think, that I have improved it more than I have damaged it.

. . .

And yet there *is* damage – to my place and to me. I have carried out, before my own eyes and against my intention, a part of the modern tragedy: I have made a lasting flaw in the face of the earth, for no lasting good.

Until that wound in the hillside, my place, is healed, there will be something impaired in my mind. My peace is damaged. I will not be able to forget it.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

In this short passage, Berry puts his finger on so much of what is happening in our world right now: there is so much damage that humanity has inflicted upon the earth, there are so many “wounds” like the one Berry speaks about, so many “lasting flaw[s] in the face of the earth, for no lasting good,” that it can be overwhelming to think about. And like in his experience, this damage has not always been intentional – our efforts to improve human life on this planet are partly responsible for the damage we’ve caused, and our ignorance about the particularities of different places, about the effects of the actions we’ve taken and not taken. How could we have known that a few hundred years of industrial, transportation, and technology “advances” – to name just a few earth-altering human activities – could drastically and dramatically alter the weather cycles of our planet, jeopardizing life as we know it?

And this is just one sign of a larger, bleaker problem. Waziyatawin, a Dakota writer who contributed to the recent book *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry* (about the relationship between Mennonite and First Nation communities), describes it this way:

“We are now facing a global catastrophe, with CO2 emissions threatening runaway global warming – one recent study said that by 2100 global temperatures will have increased by sixteen degrees Celsius [but scientists agree that even two degrees would be devastating for all climates] – and through environmental destruction on such a scale (think tar sands and fracking) that our planet may become uninhabitable – think 90 percent of large ocean fish gone, think ten times as much plastic in the ocean as phytoplankton, think two hundred species gone forever every day.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

The extent of the destruction is truly staggering, making Berry’s statements about the “damaged peace” between human beings and creation seem like an understatement.

So as people of faith, where do we turn when faced with this kind of grim reality? It can be difficult to know where to start when facing the complexity of climate change and global warming, given that it’s bound up with economic and resource inequality, broken relationships between settlers and Indigenous peoples, and the exploitation rather than the valuing of God’s good creation. We are starting to see that those most affected by climate change will be the poor, those already vulnerable in our global economic and political system. We are already seeing some of the violence and all-out war that results when resources become scarce. So this is an economic and political issue, a physical and mental health issue, a peace and social justice issue, and yes, a theological issue. It’s no easy topic, which is why it will take us five weeks of worship and ten weeks of adult education class to even begin to address it!

 So what does our faith contribute to this many-sided conversation? The preface to my “green-letter” Bible (which highlights all the passages pertaining to creation in green ink - a variation of the classic “red-letter” Bibles which highlight the words of Jesus) starts with a few simple questions: “Is God green? Did Jesus have anything to say about the environment? What is [our] role as … Christian[s] in caring for the earth?”[[3]](#footnote-3) If you flip through this “green-letter” Bible, the amount of green ink is significant. There is much in our sacred Scriptures about God’s creation and its goodness. So why do these “creation care” questions seem so new and unfamiliar to our ears?

 One major reason is the dualistic thinking which is so ingrained in our Western worldview that we no longer notice it. Among other dualisms – God/humanity, male/ female, white Europeans/Indigenous peoples, humanity/the natural world – this kind of thinking starkly divides the body from the spirit, and the earth from heaven in such a way that our bodies and the body of the earth become secondary. Spiritual matters take precedence over mere material matters. Contemplation, prayer, and connection with God take precedence over the active service of caring for the bodies of the poor, hungry, the sick, people with disabilities, children, the natural world. In short, our faith ultimately becomes disembodied. I want to suggest this morning that this kind of extreme dualism is partly to blame for the environmental mess we’re in now, because it devalues God’s good creation, which includes the human bodies which are dependent on it for our very survival. We can’t follow this dualism without denying that we as human beings are in fact part of creation, and interdependent with all people, animals, plants, and the environment.

 But you might be thinking, wait a minute! Didn’t we learn this dualism from the Bible? What about Paul’s theology about the spirit being willing but the flesh being weak? What about Jesus’ teachings on life after death? Am I throwing out the baby with the bathwater here?! What am I suggesting, exactly? Well, I’m suggesting first of all that this dualism is not as biblical as we think; that it’s closer to Greek philosophy with its emphasis on abstract ideals than to the earthiness of the Hebrew worldview, which carries over into many central Christian beliefs. We have a biblical narrative that begins with creation and paradise as a Garden (Genesis 1-3), and ends up with a tree by a river which heals the nations (Rev. 22:1-2). Even Paul spoke of the body as the “temple” of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16-17), and Jesus’ resurrection was a decidedly embodied one, as he ate and spoke with and touched his disciples after he was raised. In light of all this mixing of categories, I’m suggesting that it’s time to rethink this dualism between body/spirit and earth/heaven precisely by rereading our Bible with “green” lenses. All that green ink suggests that creation DOES matter to God, and that our bodies therefore also matter to God, who knit them together (Ps. 139:13).

 Theologian Sallie McFague puts it this way: “Centuries of Christian speculation about life after death have encouraged a diffidence [or ambivalence] toward the body at best, distrust and hatred of it at worst. That attitude is at the heart of one of the central crises of our time: the inability to love the ‘body’ of the earth. The ecological crisis will not begin to turn around until we change at a very basic level how we feel about bodies and about the material creation in all its incredible variety and richness of forms. It is not enough to change our life-styles; we must change what we value”[[4]](#footnote-4) – i.e., our theology.

 While this might seem daunting, she talks about how this is actually a neglected aspect of our tradition, that we have forgotten that Christianity is built on the notion of incarnation, on God becoming flesh, God becoming embodied and dwelling among us, here on earth! In McFague’s words: “Christianity is the religion of the incarnation *par excellence*. Its earliest and most persistent doctrines [or central beliefs] focus on embodiment: from the incarnation (the Word made flesh) and christology (Christ was fully human) to the eucharist (this is my body, this is my blood), the resurrection of the body, and the church (the body of Christ who is its head), Christianity has been a religion of the body. Christianity during first-century Mediterranean culture, which was noted for its disparagement of the body and its otherworldly focus, defiantly proclaimed its message of enfleshment.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

 In other words, McFague is claiming that a valuing of the body and this earth isn’t actually new for Christianity; it’s already part of our tradition that needs recovering in light of our current context of climate change and global warming. And if we look carefully at the Scripture passages for today, we can see where her claim comes from: there is much to suggest in our Scripture, especially in the Hebrew worldview, that this earth really is “Holy Ground” and should be treated as such.

 The first comes from Ezekiel 37, and is the well-known story of the valley of dry bones. It’s a powerful story in which Ezekiel is taken to a valley, presumably the scene of some kind of battle or massacre which happened some time ago; the Psalmic language of “the valley of the shadow of death” comes to mind. It’s full of human bones which have become dry with the passage of time. And at God’s prompting, Ezekiel prophesies to the bones, saying “O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord” (vv. 4-6). And then Ezekiel hears the “rattling” noise of bones joining together, and witnesses as the bones gain sinews, muscles, skin. But, we’re told, there is still no breath in the bodies; they aren’t yet alive. So Ezekiel is told to “prophesy to the breath” (in Hebrew, the word for breath also means wind or spirit). So Ezekiel says, “Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live” (v. 9). And breath comes into the bodies, and they are alive, a great crowd of people.

 It’s a poignant vision for the Israelites during the violent and uncertain time of the Babylonian exile: God bringing life out of death, restoring life to murdered bodies, and breathing the breath, wind, or spirit of life into them. Here we see in incredible detail that human life involves the mixture of body and spirit – that we are embodied spirits or enspirited bodies. That bones, sinews, muscles, skin, and breath all matter. And God goes on to tell Ezekiel that this is a sign of hope and delivery for the exiles: “Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil…” (vv. 12-14).

Perhaps what is most important about this passage is its thoroughly embodied and “earthy” – even sinewy! – vision of God’s deliverance, which is actually typical of Hebrew theology. Here we see an early, Jewish articulation of the belief in the resurrection of the dead, which will become central to Christians in the story of Jesus’ miracles of raising the dead and his own bodily resurrection. But notice that here, God’s deliverance is not envisioned as other-worldly or spiritualized; it’s not some great escape from this earth, which we leave behind as we’re lifted up into the sky. It’s not, as theologian Brian McLaren writes, about “wrapping up the whole of creation in an empty candy wrapper and throwing it in the cosmic Dumpster so God can finally bring our souls to heaven, beyond time, beyond messy matter, beyond this creation entirely.” McLaren continues, “There is virtually no continuity between this creation and the new heavenly creation in this model; this creation is erased like a mistake, discarded like a nonrecyclable milk carton.”[[6]](#footnote-6) No, Ezekiel here sees something different – the resurrection precisely of the body, and the people reunited with their land and “their own soil.” Deliverance is an embodied reality in the context of this earth as holy ground.

 Our passage from Revelation 21 conveys a very similar message. Envisioning the time when God’s reign has come in full, this passage also doesn’t whisk the faithful away from this earth into some spiritual realm. Rather, we are shown the opposite: the new Jerusalem descends to the earth, heaven and earth are united and reconciled. God’s reign is thus about renewing not only heaven and the spiritual, but also this earth and our earthly bodies, about God coming to dwell among us as earth and heaven are not only reconciled but married. What a beautiful image! John writes:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
4he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.”

5And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true” (Rev. 21:1-5).

 As in Ezekiel, deliverance is not about escaping this world and our embodied nature, but about God coming to dwell on this earth, among human beings, forever. This earth is not only our home, but God’s as well. In this light, to pray that God’s “will be done on earth as in heaven,” as we pray in the Lord’s prayer, takes on a profound significance. Poet Jan Richardson puts it this way,

**The boundaries of heaven and earth are not as fixed as we think.** God becomes incarnate in Christ, choosing to enter fully into our human life for the purpose of showing us how heaven is already in our midst. What we tend to experience as separate realms are, in fact, part of one realm in which God is everywhere at work.[[7]](#footnote-7)

 So as we move into these series on creation care and “green discipleship” in our worship and our adult education class, I hope we can start to imagine what it would look like to live as if the earth matters and as if our bodies matter to God. I hope we can reclaim the embodied and earthy emphases of our Scriptures and tradition. I hope we can start to see the small or large ways in which we’re already living out this reconciliation between earth and heaven, already living as if our bodies and the earth matter to God and to us. As painful and frightening as it is to contemplate the damage we’ve done to the body of the earth, these passages from Ezekiel and Revelation, among others, are ultimately hopeful: they declare that God can bring life out of death, that God is renewing heaven and earth. But as we will hear in the coming weeks, God also depends on us as followers of Jesus to declare the goodness of the earth and the value of our bodies, and, empowered by the Spirit, Wind, or Breath of Life, to live out God’s will on earth as in heaven. AMEN

1. Wendell Berry, *What Are People For? Essays* (New York: North Point Press, 1990), 5-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Waziyatawin, “A Serpent in the Garden: An Unholy Worldview on Sacred Land,” in *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry: Conversations on Creation, Land Justice, and Life Together*, ed. Steve Heinrichs (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2013), 215. See also Heinrichs’s introduction, page 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Preface,” in *The Green Bible*, New Revised Standard Version (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 16-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. McFague, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Brian McLaren, “Why I Am Green,” in *The Green Bible*, I-46. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Jan Richardson, http://adventdoor.com/2015/12/17/this-luminous-darkness-searching-for-solace-in-advent-and-christmas/ [↑](#footnote-ref-7)