

The Four Horsemen of the Modern American Apocalypse

Horseman #4: Estrangement from Creation

Romans 8:18-25

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North Decatur Presbyterian Church

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The Scripture this morning is from Romans 8, Paul's last letter. Romans is a wonderful and complicated book. Right in the middle of Romans, in the 8th chapter, there is a passage that many of you know and love that says, "nothing in life or death can separate us from Christ's love." In the midst of the struggles of this life, Christ's saving love never fails. Never. But saving for whom? Whom is God saving? Listen to what Paul says just before:

¹⁸I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God, ²⁰for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be set free from its enslavement to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning together as it suffers together the pains of labor, ²³and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴For by hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what one already sees? ²⁵But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Whom is God saving? Or should we say, "what is God saving?" It is nothing less than the *whole Creation*. According to Paul, there is no salvation for human beings separate from salvation for the planet that is our home. That is not what popular Christianity teaches. We've been taught that when God saves us, "poof"—God will manufacture a new heaven and a new earth. But that is not, in fact, what scripture teaches. God is in the business of saving this earth—and saving the human beings that go with it.

With this idea firmly in our minds, we turn to the 4th and final horseman of the modern US apocalypse. Of all the signs that tell us we are in trouble—the captivity of our attention spans, the inflation of individual needs over the needs of the community, and the relentless attack on truth, the most daunting horseman of all is this last one: you and I are estranged from the Creation.

Let's evaluate humanity's present relationship to the natural world. Let's do it with some graphs and picture.

1. **(graph of CO₂)** Here's a graph of what we human beings are doing to the planet's atmosphere. Note the hockey stick shape... that is the number of parts per million of CO₂ in the atmosphere; note the shape...
 - a. Here's a **graph of what that accumulation of CO₂ is doing to the earth's temperature;**

- b. Here's a graph of what that CO2 is doing to the ocean temperature;
- c. (image of smokestacks) This is plant Bowen. Our most beloved coal-fired power plant in Georgia, near Cartersville. Our life depends on machines; the power for these machines comes from burning fossil fuel; the CO2 from that burning is making the earth uninhabitable

We could probably stop there... but there's more...

- 2. (graph of 10,000 years) Let's talk about the way we human beings use land; here's a graph that shows how land use has evolved over the last 10,000 years
 - a. 3 charts (10K yrs ago, we were a tiny presence on the earth; 57% forest, 42% grassland)
 - i. By 1800 we are beginning to re-shape the earth's surface; the earth was 50% forest, 36% grassland; now there is 9% grazing, 4% crops
 - ii. 2018: 1/3 of the forests are gone; 38% forest, more than half of the grasslands are gone; 14% grassland; 31% grazing; 15% crops
 - b. You can see the huge change. Why? For one, the population of human beings grew from 1 billion in 1800 to 8 billion today

We have covered the earth, and re-shaped its surface for our own needs. What could go wrong?

- 3. (graph of species loss) There are many effects of this transformation of the earth—topsoil loss, abundance of chemicals, decline in water quality—but the most irreversible is species extinction—the rate at which human beings are killing off other species
- 4. (graph of garbage use); One other obvious environmental issue is garbage
 - a. we throw away a crazy amount of stuff every day, every week, every year; this graph shows the volume of the earth's annual trash if we stacked it all in one place
 - b. (image of Seminole landfill in DeKalb) But we put it in lots of places.
 - c. (image of plastics) Trash causes many problems for the earth—smell, methane, water contamination, but one increasingly poignant dimension of the garbage crisis is the persistence of microplastics
 - i. Plastics don't go away; we've always known this; but we're starting to have the diagnostic tools to find them; where are they? Everywhere! 7g in the human brain.

Before we go on, let's just take a minute. What do you think about when you see this?
(conversation)

Imagine if this were another species doing this? (image of bear in car)

If there were another species going through radical population growth, altering the landscape, building huge machines that burned through energy and overheated the planet; throwing their trash everywhere; making life for every other inhabitant of the planet miserable...

- What would you call that species of animal?
 - *Invite congregational responses...*

Something is wrong with human beings. At one time, our ancestors knew we were not separate from creation. Everything that happened to the earth happened to us, too. We lived and died with the health of the soils, the air, the animals, the rains. We were fully dependent on and fully involved in the creation's life.

That relationship is long gone. We stopped thinking about the earth as something sacred to be honored; it became something to be bought, sold, subdued, logged, mined, cleared, abused. The earth became an object, instead of a subject. We became, over time, increasingly estranged from the earth. Dirt—the very stuff that Genesis says we're made of—became a euphemism for something to be avoided at all cost. We're afraid of bugs and creatures. We pile on chemicals to control bacteria when the chemicals do more harm than the bacteria. We're desperate to keep our climate controlled even as climate control is sending the climate out of control. We want to keep nature away, to wall ourselves off from it.

We did it in our theology, too. We made our churches into hermetically sealed containers, walled off from the natural world. Inside we pontificate about who God is and what God cares about and who God wants to save. We assumed God cares only about humans. We keep our church clean and we put our trash "out there."

But there is no "out there." We have desecrated creation itself. We are estranged from the earth and the result is ecocide.

(Thomas Berry image)

A number of Christians have demanded that anthropocentric Christianity has to die in order for the world to live. Sallie McFague wrote beautifully about the earth as the "body of God." Bill McKibben is one of the most effective environmental activists working in the United States today and he comes to his work from a Christian theological perspective. But no one has integrated theology and ecological concern better than Thomas Berry. Berry, a Catholic priest and a scholar of world religions, was one of the first people to declare in the late 70s, that our environmental crisis is a spiritual crisis.

Berry said that Christian theology has to do a hard thing. We must come to terms with the fact that human beings are not the point of the cosmos.

(star formation image)

When we look at the universe itself, what we see is something far more beautiful and complex than a human-centered reality. The universe is dynamic; it expands and evolves; the things in this universe are not passive. The stuff of the universe shows self-organizing dynamics—that's how the first stars formed out of clouds of hydrogen and helium. Self-organization is how life on earth evolved and continues to evolve. Nowhere in this complex, self-organizing universe are human beings the center of this extraordinary activity.

The fact that we are not the entire point of the universe, Berry says, doesn't make it all meaningless. When you de-center something, it doesn't make it unimportant (note to white people). De-centering human beings from the story of the universe will actually benefit us. How? Our current anthropocentric story isn't working. It's killing the earth. We will find greater meaning and satisfaction and joy by right-sizing our place in the cosmos. One of Berry's most brilliant quotes—and the one that gets to the heart of his work is, "the universe is less like a 'collection of objects' and more like a 'communion of subjects.' While every thing that exists has its own integrity, there is relatedness among all things. When Berry sees this relates, he reads it as "communion." Gravitational attraction is communion; ecological interdependence is communion; and for human beings, love is our form of communion—love is the longing of subjects to honor our fundamental relatedness.

"The Great Work now," Berry writes, "is to carry out the transition from a period of human devastation of the Earth to a period when humans would be present to the planet in a mutually beneficial manner."

(image of the day)

You know what this work is. So many of you are already committed to it:

- We are unwinding the harm we do to the earth. Disentangling ourselves from the systems that profit by the earth's destruction
- We are engaging in political advocacy (elected officials, public service commission)
- Organizing our families and friends and neighbors around ecological values: use less energy, less plastic, less food wasted, less meat eaten—all of that "less" mean more balance, more health, more integrity in our relationship to Creation.
- We put solar on the roof; we work with Compost Now
- In some communities, the nonhuman members of the Earth community are gaining more representation in politics and jurisprudence, such as the recognition of rights of nature in Ecuador's constitution.
- Economists are determining metrics for more accurately valuing the ecosystem services provided by natural resources, and they are also rethinking ideals of growth and progress.

Christians have been the worst enemies of Creation, the most estranged.

But it need not be that way. There is no human life that is not connected to the life of Creation. So says Genesis. So says Job. So says the Psalms. So says Romans.

There has been this wild story that Christians have propagated that God saves by delivering people out of this world and into some other one. That's a lie. There is no Planet B. There is no other Creation.

The story of Scripture is that God, through Christ and the Spirit, is redeeming the Creation.

The French poet Paul Eluard said it beautifully: "There is another world, and it is this one."