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"And Also Many Animals": Biblical Resources for Preaching About Creation

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Texts in Context

“And also many animals”: Biblical Resources for Preaching about Creation

KATHRYN SCHIFFERDECKER

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

—Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889)¹

Gerard Manley Hopkins, writing in 1877 in industrial England, knew the effect that humanity could have on God's creation—a creation “bleared, smeared,” wearing “man's smudge” and sharing “man's smell.” One wonders what Hopkins

¹Gerard Manley Hopkins, ed. Catherine Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) 128.

The Bible offers the preacher a multitude of texts for preaching about creation and the environment. Preachers can and should use these resources to call hearers to join in the creative and redemptive work of God, in the name of Christ and for the sake of the world.

would have said had he lived in our own age, seeing whole mountaintops blown off in West Virginia to expose the coal below the surface. What would he have written had he seen the ubiquitous spread of strip malls, highways, and housing developments over what was once fertile farmland? How would Hopkins have reacted to the scientific consensus on global warming, that humanity—with our voracious consumption of fossil fuels—is actually changing the earth’s climate? “Nature is never spent,” indeed, but our consumer culture’s effect on nature is more than any previous generation could have imagined, and it is to our shame.

What is a preacher to do? The issue of environmental degradation in general and global warming in particular has risen more and more into the public consciousness, the latter at least in part because of Al Gore’s movie, *An Inconvenient Truth*.² The issue of environmental stewardship or “creation care,” as it’s sometimes called, has also gained more and more attention in the church. Eighty-six Christian evangelical leaders (including Rick Warren of “purpose-driven” fame) made headlines in February of 2006 for issuing a declaration called “Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action,” which calls on evangelicals to take steps to address global warming. That landmark statement has stirred up controversy within the evangelical community, which has long associated “environmentalism” with “left-wing” politics, and has therefore dismissed it.³ It is interesting to note that most mainline Christian denominations issued statements on caring for creation years ago (the ELCA in 1993), with what I am guessing was much less attention from the media.⁴

What is a preacher to do? As both mainline Christians and evangelicals now recognize, caring for creation is a moral and spiritual matter, not merely a scientific or political one. If the preacher is to address this pressing matter, he or she must speak to people’s hearts, not just their heads. Most people already know at least some of the facts about environmental problems, and know what they *should* be doing to address them. Therefore, a sermon that becomes simply a list of do’s and don’ts, or a load of guilt put on the shoulders of the congregation, is not an effective sermon. Such preaching leans heavily on the law side of the law/gospel tension. While there is a place for law, what is needed most is a sparking of the congregation’s theological imagination, and a vision of what creation is and is meant to be. What is needed, in other words, is a “God’s-eye” view of creation, and a word of gospel—that “God so loved the *cosmos* that he sent his only Son.”⁵

Such a word of gospel is what Hopkins’s poem gets to in the second stanza:

²*An Inconvenient Truth* (Paramount Classics and Participant Productions, 2006).

³To read the declaration and news articles about it, go to www.christiansandclimate.org (accessed 21 Jan 2007). For more on the controversy within the evangelical community, watch the Bill Moyers PBS program, “Is God Green?” at www.pbs.org/moyers/moyersonamerica/green/index.html (accessed 21 Jan 2007). This program aired first on 11 Oct 2006.

⁴Find the ELCA statement, *Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice*, at www.elca.org/socialstatements/environment/ (accessed 21 Jan 2007). See also the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago’s “Web of Creation” website at www.webofcreation.org.

⁵The Greek word in John 3:16 is indeed *κόσμος*.

After “all is seared with trade; / bleared, smeared with toil; / And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell,” the word of gospel comes: “And for all this, nature is never spent; / ...morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs— / Because the Holy Ghost over the bent / World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.” The Spirit broods like a mothering bird over the cosmos even as at the beginning of creation (Gen 1:2). God continues to will life and salvation not only for humanity, but for *all* of God’s creation (cf. Rom 8:18–23). This is indeed good news!

So, what is a preacher to do? A preacher is to preach both law and gospel—holding up a mirror to show us the sins we commit against creation and against its Creator; but even more so, holding up a vision of what God wills for that same creation. As a pastor and a biblical scholar, I want to make the claim that we have rich resources in Scripture for doing both these tasks. At the same time, I confess that I have not always taken advantage of those resources as I should have.

CHIEF SEATTLE AND THE BIBLE

I was privileged in my college years to work as a counselor at Christikon, a Lutheran camp in the midst of the mountains of the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness Area in southern Montana. Surrounded by incredibly beautiful wilderness, my fellow counselors and I led our campers in backpacking and Bible study, encouraging them to know and love Jesus. At the same time, inspired by the grandeur around us, we tried to impress on them the need to care for creation. One of our favorite means of doing the latter task was to read from a letter supposedly written by Chief Seattle, a nineteenth-century leader of Native American tribes in the Puget Sound area. The “letter” speaks of the sacredness of the earth, and of the web of life: “This we know: the earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.”⁶ Chief Seattle almost certainly didn’t write it, but we liked what it had to say anyway.

I recall one time in particular, another counselor and I were leading a group of women on a backpacking trip, and we stopped the group for lunch and midday devotions. Seated on rocks and logs in the sunlight near a babbling trout stream, we read from Chief Seattle’s letter, and spoke of caring for the earth. One woman eventually spoke up angrily: “I don’t worship the earth. I worship God. And all those modern conveniences like washing machines and cars, they give me more time to study the Bible.”

Now, as then, I marvel at that woman’s sharp distinction between personal piety and environmental stewardship. Still, I wonder now whether we would have spoken to her heart more directly had we read from Psalms or from Genesis rather

⁶I got this version of the “letter” at the website www.barefootsworld.net/seattle.html (accessed 21 Jan 2007). There are other more historically verifiable speeches by Chief Seattle available, but this is the version I remember reading at camp.

than from Chief Seattle's letter. I think we simply didn't understand or appreciate at the time the rich resources we had in Scripture for speaking of creation. We turned instead to other voices, other traditions.

I've encountered a similar attitude about Scripture and the environment in other Christians, not just in youthful Bible camp counselors. I was part of a discussion at Luther Seminary recently about global warming. The presenter asked the group, "How do we know that God wants us to care for the earth?" One student responded immediately, "Because the Bible tells us to." Much to my dismay, the first reaction to that statement on the part of several people was laughter!

“creation and its relationship to the Creator is a major concern of many of the biblical writers”

That incident helped confirm my suspicion that at least some environmentally minded Christians discount the use of the Bible as a resource for speaking of the natural world. Instead, like my more youthful self, they may look to non-Christian (particularly Native American) traditions first. And that is a shame, for while there are indeed wonderful resources outside the Judeo-Christian tradition for speaking about creation (and while there may be a place for using those resources within the church), there are also ample resources within our tradition and within our Scriptures for doing so. Creation and its relationship to the Creator is a major concern of many of the biblical writers.

BIBLICAL “VOICES” ON CREATION

The most well known creation texts in the Bible are undoubtedly the two creation accounts found in Gen 1 and 2, with their vision of an ordered and beautiful cosmos. In Gen 1 and in Ps 8, humanity is given a royal vocation to care for the earth. In the words of the ELCA social statement, *Caring for Creation*:

Made in the image of God, we are called to care for the earth as God cares for the earth. God's command to have dominion and subdue the earth is not a license to dominate and exploit. Human dominion (Gen 1:28; Pss 8), a special responsibility, should reflect God's way of ruling as a shepherd king who takes the form of a servant (Phil 2:7), wearing a crown of thorns.⁷

The creation account in Gen 2 speaks of humanity “serving” (עבד) and “keeping” (שמר) creation (Gen 2:15). The very common Hebrew verbs used in this verse evoke an understanding of humanity's role in creation as one of servanthood or guardianship rather than royal rule. Indeed, the verb שמר is used very commonly to speak of “keeping” the Torah, or “keeping” the covenant between God

⁷*Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice*, section I.B. It must be acknowledged that Gen 1:28, with its command to “have dominion” and “subdue,” has been used to argue for exploitation of the natural world; but as the social statement makes clear, it should not be interpreted in that way.

and Israel. Keeping and caring for the earth, the text would seem to imply, is a sacred duty.

The prophets assert that humanity's sin affects the earth. Isaiah speaks a word of law to Judah: "The earth dries up and withers. The world wastes away and withers. The heights languish with the earth. The earth is defiled under her inhabitants, for they have transgressed Torah; they have altered statutes; they have broken the eternal covenant" (Isa 24:4–5). In similar language, Hosea speaks to Israel, to a land in which knowledge of God is absent: "Therefore the earth mourns, and all who dwell in it waste away—with the beasts of the field and the birds of the sky. Even the fish of the sea perish" (Hos 4:3). Humanity's sin defiles the earth, and the creatures that inhabit the earth suffer the consequences.⁸

Such is the negative effect humanity's sin can have on creation. Many of the psalms, on the other hand, paint a more joyful picture of humanity's relationship with the rest of creation. In Pss 104 and 148, humanity's rightful role is to join in the hymn of all creation, praising God the Creator. Humanity is not ruler or steward, but just one of many creatures, including sea monsters and mountains, called upon to praise the Lord.

There are numerous other examples that could be cited. The wise preacher will, of course, take his or her context into account when choosing which texts to explore. A pastor in a rural context, for example, will necessarily speak about ecological concerns and the land differently from a pastor whose parishioners have no close connection with the soil. In the former context, a text like Lev 25—with its stipulations for a sabbath year for the land—may be able to speak about the natural rhythms of the land in words with which the parishioners resonate. In the latter context, the vision in Rev 21 of a new heaven, a new earth, and a new Jerusalem may be able to address a certain disconnect with the earth, or a weariness with concrete and steel urban landscapes.

PREACHING THE TEXTS

As the issue of environmental stewardship has surfaced more and more in the church, various proposals have been made for how to incorporate it into congregational worship and preaching. The National Council of Churches publishes resources to celebrate "Earth Day Sunday," in conjunction with the observance of Earth Day on April 22 of each year.⁹ Norman Habel, a Lutheran Old Testament scholar from Australia, has even proposed a new season in the church year. He suggests that the four Sundays in September leading up to St. Francis of Assisi Day (Oct. 4) be designated every year as the "Season of Creation."¹⁰

If it seems a bit radical to introduce a new liturgical season, one might instead plan a sermon series in the summer months—when most people spend time out-

⁸See also Jer 9:10, with its startling image of God weeping for the desolate earth.

⁹For details, see www.ncccojustice.org.

¹⁰For details, see www.seasonofcreation.com.

side—focused on creation and ecological concerns. Alternatively, one might simply let the lectionary texts through the year speak about creation, about the God who made, ordered, and sustains it, and about Christ, in whom it all holds together (Col 1:15–17). Because creation is such a prevalent theme throughout the Bible, there are ample opportunities for a lectionary preacher to address the issue, simply by letting the biblical texts bear witness to the grandeur of God in God’s creation.¹¹

By way of illustration, I will discuss briefly three different texts that come up in the lectionary and that lend themselves to theological reflection on creation. I am not including here Gen 1 and 2, as those classic creation texts have been written about more than any other.¹² Instead, because this issue of *Word and World* is devoted to the book of Jonah, I will explore that story, two psalms (96 and 98), and Job 38–41.

JONAH

One of the remarkable things about the book of Jonah is the role played in the book by nonhuman creatures. Most Sunday School children, of course, can recall the story of the whale (or “big fish” in Hebrew), saving Jonah from drowning and vomiting him up on dry land. What the average layperson probably doesn’t know, however, is that there are a number of other nonhuman entities in the story that are also agents of God’s instruction to the reluctant prophet: the storm that nearly sinks the ship in which Jonah is trying to escape God’s call; the bush that grows up over Jonah as he sulks outside Nineveh; the worm that attacks the bush; the scorching east wind and sun that elicit Jonah’s second death wish. It is said of most of these creatures that God “appoints” or “allots” [מִנְהַל] them (Jonah 1:17; 4:6, 7, 8), as a king might appoint someone or something.¹³ The natural world is more obedient than the human prophet to God’s call, and God therefore uses storms, animals, and plants to teach Jonah lessons about obedience, grace, and compassion.

When Jonah finally goes to Nineveh and proclaims his one-sentence sermon, he is met with astonishing success. The king, his nobles, his servants, and all the people of the city put on sackcloth, fast, and repent. In an unprecedented move, however, it’s not just the people, but also the animals who are called to fast, put on sackcloth, and bellow out their repentance to God (Jonah 3:7–8). The image of Bessie the milk cow covered in sackcloth and fasting is a good example of biblical

¹¹There are many lectionary texts that speak of creation. Here is just a small sample, some of which have been mentioned already: Gen 1; 2; many of the psalms, including Pss 8; 96; 98; 104; 148; Isa 11:1–10; 35:1–10; 43:18–25; 65:17–25; Jonah; Job 38; Rom 8:14–27; Col 1:15–28; Rev 21:1–6. Many of these texts occur more than once in the three-year Revised Common Lectionary.

¹²For two fine examples of theological reflections on creation (including Gen 1 and 2), see Terence Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), and Michael Welker, *Creation and Reality* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999).

¹³A group of college students I led in a Bible study on Jonah wanted to make shirts printed with Jonah 4:7—“God appointed a worm.” It might have been an interesting tool for evangelism, or at least a good conversation starter.

humor, but the humor has a point. Cows, sheep, and goats are as responsive to God's word as human beings; in the case of Jonah himself, much more responsive!

The bush that God appoints to grow up over Jonah becomes a lesson for him in compassion. God's last speech to Jonah compares the bush to the city of Nineveh:

You had compassion (חַוָּה) for the bush, for which you did not labor, and which you did not cause to grow. It came into existence in a night and died in a night. And as for me, should I not have compassion (חַוָּה) on Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals? (Jonah 4:10–11)

If Jonah, a human being, can have compassion for a bush that he did not create—compassion motivated by self-interest—shouldn't God, the Creator of the cosmos, have compassion on the thousands of people and the many animals of Nineveh? God bases this argument to Jonah on God's role as Creator and Sustainer of the world.

Whether the prophet learns the lesson in compassion is a question the book leaves open, for the story ends here, with the phrase, "and also many animals." God is concerned not only with the human beings in Nineveh, but also with the animals, and it is the animals that merit the last word. It is a fitting ending for a book in which the natural world plays such a large role.

The book of Jonah lends itself to a number of interesting interpretations, but surely one fruitful line of interpretation has to do with the exquisite responsiveness of the natural world to God's call, a responsiveness noticeably lacking in the reluctant human prophet. It's not Jonah, but the fish, the plant, the worm, and the repentant sheep, goats, and cattle—as well as the non-Israelites in the story—who teach us human beings how to respond when God calls. God appoints God's non-human creatures to teach the prophet, and God cares for those creatures. The book ends on a note of compassion—the compassion of the Creator of the cosmos for lowly domestic animals. These animals—sheep, goats, cattle, perhaps cats and dogs—stand in harm's way because of human sin. The Almighty God has compassion on them. "YHWH, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land" (Jonah 1:9) cares about these animals, and God calls us human beings—in the person of Jonah—to do the same.

PSALM 96/98¹⁴

I cite these two psalms as simply one example of a very common motif in the whole Psalter, indeed, in the whole Bible—the motif of creation praising its Creator.¹⁵ Psalms 96 and 98 conclude in much the same way:

¹⁴I am relying in my interpretation of these psalms on a sermon delivered by Ellen F. Davis at Yale Divinity School in 1993. Davis is doing fine work in the area of ecology and Bible. For an example, see her book *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 2001).

¹⁵For a helpful discussion of this theme of nature's praise of God and a list of the theme's occurrences in the Old Testament, see Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament*, 249–268.

Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad!
Let the sea thunder and all that fills it!
Let the fields exult and all that is in them!
Then all the trees of the forest will shout for joy
Before YHWH, for he is coming, for he is coming to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples in his faithfulness.
(Ps 96:11–13; cf. Ps 98:7–9)

The Lord's coming in judgment may seem to us at first reading a strange reason for the world and everything in it to shout for joy. "Judgment," after all, usually implies punishment of some kind. For human creatures, the thought of judgment day probably evokes more fear than exultation; but from the perspective of the nonhuman creatures—who are the chief singers in these psalms—the fact that God is coming to judge the earth is a very good thing indeed.

The trees, the fields, the seas, and all the animals that fill them are singing the Hallelujah Chorus because they see salvation coming. They are singing praise to their Creator who comes to judge the world, to set things right, to remove the sin and defilement of which the prophets speak. Our sin defiles the earth, according to the prophets, and the earth and its inhabitants suffer. We human beings, along with the rest of creation, were created to praise our Maker, but when we damage the earth and its inhabitants, their ability to praise is diminished. A polluted river cannot praise God with full voice. "The heavens declare the glory of God" (Ps 19:1), but not as clearly when they are clouded with smog. The extinction of a species silences a unique voice in the chorus of praise.

Rainforest destruction, global warming, pollution of air and water—these results of human sin affect human beings, especially those who are poor and vulnerable, without the means to protect themselves or to move away from unhealthy habitats.¹⁶ We sin against ourselves and our poor human neighbors when we engage in environmentally damaging practices. Psalms 96 and 98 remind us that we sin also against our fellow nonhuman creatures and our Creator when we engage in those practices. The sin of environmental degradation is sin not only because it endangers or damages the lives of human beings; it is sin also because it diminishes creation's ability to praise its Creator. "Then all the trees of the forest will shout for joy / Before YHWH, for he is coming, for he is coming to judge the earth." For the fields, the sea, the forests, and all the creatures that inhabit them, the fact that God is coming to judge the earth is very good news indeed. In that day, human sin with its pollution and defilement will be wiped away, and the creation will at last be able to sing with full and clear voice in praise of its Creator.

JOB 38–41—THE SPEECHES OF GOD

At the end of the book of Job, after many speeches by Job and his companions,

¹⁶My colleague Fred Gaiser makes a similar point in his address at an NCC Ecojustice conference. See "No one comes to cut us down": God, Trees, and Human Beings," under "Sermons, Addresses, and Hymns" at his website: www.luthersem.edu/fgaiser.

after agonizing questions and laments addressed by Job to a God he cannot reach, YHWH finally answers Job out of a whirlwind. The answer, though, is not what we expect. God does not mention the wager with the Satan at the beginning of the book, the wager that sets everything else in motion. Neither does God address directly the question of undeserved suffering, a major concern of all the human beings in the book. Instead, YHWH offers Job a God's-eye view of creation in all its beauty and complexity. This tour of the cosmos begins with the establishment of the earth, "when the morning stars sang together for joy" (38:7), and the birth of the sea. It continues through the realm of meteorological forces—rain, hail, snow, lightning, storms—and then into the world of wild animals. Finally, in a second speech, after a brief and ambiguous answer from Job, God shows Job two mythological beasts—Behemoth and Leviathan—and challenges Job to try to use the latter in any of the ways that human beings use animals—as a source of labor, as a pet, as food (41:1–8; cf. 39:9–12). Given the awesome strength of the sea monster, such a prospect is terrifying.

These two speeches of God at the end of the book of Job are remarkable for a number of reasons. They are among the most beautiful passages of poetry in the Old Testament, and the longest sustained reflection on creation in the Bible. Every part of creation—the cosmological, the meteorological, the zoological, and even the mythological—is described, with one very obvious exception. In these divine speeches, there is a deafening silence concerning human beings. People appear only as creatures peripheral to the world God describes: dawn shakes "the wicked" out of the earth (38:13); the wild donkey mocks the tumult of the human city (39:7); the eagle drinks up the blood of slain warriors (39:30); etc. In every instance, human beings in the divine speeches appear only as objects of scorn or judgment. Indeed, it is noteworthy that the most common Hebrew words for human beings [אִישׁ, אָדָם, אָנוּשׁ] never appear in the divine speeches, with one exception. In Job 38:25–27, God says,

Who has cut for the flood a watercourse,
 And a way for the thunderbolt;
 To make it rain upon the uninhabited land [land-with-no-man, אֶרֶץ לֹא-אִישׁ]
 The wilderness where no person lives [wilderness-with-no-person-in-it,
 מִדְבָּר לֹא-אָדָם בּוֹ]
 To satisfy the desolate and wasteland
 And to cause the parched land to sprout grass?

This passage pointedly implies that humanity is not the center of creation. God sends the rain even on wilderness where no human being lives, to a land unused and unusable by human beings. In a similar vein, God draws Job's attention to Behemoth, "which I made with you" (Job 40:15), and Leviathan, who has no equal on earth, who is the only creature—human or nonhuman—designated as "king over all that are proud" (41:33–34).

The divine speeches at the end of Job offer us a radically nonanthropocentric

view of creation. In contrast to the worldview presented in Gen 1–2 and Ps 8, the divine speeches tell us that humanity is neither the center nor the crown of creation. The world is a wild, beautiful place in which there exist forces and creatures indifferent toward, and therefore dangerous to, human beings; and God takes delight in those creatures. God takes great delight in exactly those creatures that are not under human control: the sea, the snow and rain, the wild animals, Behemoth and Leviathan. YHWH describes these beings in exquisite detail, and with obvious pride.

“there exist in the world wild and beautiful things not under human control, and God takes delight in those things”

The vision of creation in the divine speeches of Job is a vision that may fruitfully be used as a “corrective” to our consumerist view of the natural world. To a market-driven culture that views the natural world primarily in terms of how it can be used or exploited by human beings, the divine speeches offer a radical vision of creation: The world is not made primarily for the use of human beings. There exist in the world wild and beautiful things not under human control, and God takes delight in those things. God cares for every part of creation, including those places and creatures unused and unusable by human beings. In other words, there is no land or creature that can properly be called “God-forsaken.” God takes delight in all that God creates.

Humanity is absent from the divine speeches, but at the same time—in the person of Job—humanity is the only passenger on this grand tour of the cosmos. It’s as if God said, “Look at this beautiful world I’ve created. You’re not the center of it, but I’m inviting you to take delight in it as I do.” Wilderness and wild creatures have a value to God and to us quite apart from any “use” we can make of them. Such is a biblical word that needs to be proclaimed today, and the divine speeches in the book of Job help us proclaim it.

My comments on these three texts only skim the surface of the rich resources we have in Scripture for speaking about creation—about human responsibility for creation, about human sin, about God’s love for creation, about creation’s praise of its Creator. In all this, our aim is to allow the natural world to do what it is created to do—show forth God’s grandeur. God created and still cares for the earth, the sea, the lakes and rivers, the fields and forests and mountains, and all the creatures that inhabit them. As we proclaim this biblical truth, we also call on our listeners to join in that creative and redeeming work, in the name of Christ and for the sake of the world. ☩

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