

April 23, 2008 – Earth Day Sermon  
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“For once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people.”

Several months ago, a car company ran a series of ads challenging the public to “redefine luxury”. The hybrid car featured was sleek, it was fast, it was sexy. It was *luxurious*. It wasn’t the granola-smelling, camp gear-toting hippie hybrid of the past: this thing was classy. The fuel efficient, energy-conscious vehicle was being brought to a new class of people. A hybrid could mean status, place, and wealth – the “American Dream” achieved. I loved those commercials. They really sold that car to me. And they made me – someone who considers herself to be environmentally aware – feel as though I had a foot in the door – “selling” the green movement to the upper class.

Now we’ve all seen commercials, we’ve all been swayed by advertising. And we know that image affects demand, and one of the best ways to make a product seem “luxurious” or “elite” is to raise the price (think: those new high rise condos near Washington Circle! “Unparalleled Privacy,” I believe, is the slogan). And soon, another “green” option has become prohibitively expensive for middle-class families.

The target demographic for those ads is probably largely here in this room (okay, maybe not you UCC folks – but certainly us “idealist” Methodists). And I’d say that most of us have an economic buffer large enough to make *some* greener choices. Even my roommates and I, who live on a missionary’s salary (let’s just say that my economic stimulus plan check is going to double my stipend), even we are considering switching to biomass energy in our house as opposed to coal power. We buy organic and fair trade when we can, choose products that have less and recyclable packaging, and we put our fresh fruits and vegetables in reusable canvas bags with the rest of our groceries.

Yet there are those even here in DC – in our own neighborhood – for whom ½ c/kilowatt hour increase would not be an option on an energy bill. Organic and fair trade items are far too pricy –

I'm sure that some of you have gasped at a whole foods bill recently – and when fresh fruits and vegetables themselves are increasingly too expensive to be purchased with food stamps, people living on the economic margins can hardly be expected to buy canvas grocery bags. Here in the US, how “green” you are doesn't only refer to the size of your compost pile, it refers to the size of your wallet.

We are effectively confining people living in poverty to make poor environmental decisions.

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1 Peter is speaking to a group of exiled Christians. They are largely gentile converts who are now being told that the promises of Israel will be theirs. But they aren't recipients of those promises yet. This group of people is a minority in the community. They are struggling with what it means to be a Christian – what is it that sets them apart? Earlier in the book, 1 Peter gives us a litany of things NOT to be associated with anymore: envy, guile, slander. The author makes reference to God's call *before* they became Christians, and here urges them to “build themselves into a holy priesthood”. But this will require sacrifice on their part. Later, 1 Peter will tell them that they will suffer, in the example of Christ, that they should submit themselves to the ruling authority – which scares me, but which makes sense for a group that's already small and already outcast. Why bring attention to yourselves? But in all this, the author tells them, they are to live out their lives COLLECTIVELY as a people of God.

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In our world, those who least affect climate change are feeling the brunt of its effects. Lake Chad, which is a water source for 5 countries in Africa, is drying up. Global weather patterns are changing, which makes sustaining agriculture difficult, driving global food prices up. In the Philippines, the cost of a bag of rice has doubled since 2004, rising 50% in the last two months alone, and experts say that it could rise another 40%. Poor growing seasons contribute to the global shortage of food. The front page of the Washington Post this morning called the food crisis a “silent tsunami.” Shoreline erosion due to rising ocean levels and melting sea ice threatens the relocation of hundreds of coastal towns and cities, many of them populated by people living in poverty. When these stories are told, I do not see those who are directly affected being asked to join us around the solution table.

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See, the author of 1 Peter understands the importance of relationship. The author understands that we cannot build a Holy Priesthood without all the stones. That what binds them together as stones is their holiness in God. It is a holiness God intended for them before they became Christians. It is a holiness that was affirmed in baptism. It is a holiness NOW. And it is a holiness in the hope for God’s Kin-dom to come, in the hope that they will receive the promises of Israel. So who is it? Who is this “holy nation”? Who will be built into this Holy Priesthood? Who is worthy of being a living stone? Who is it that will receive those promises? Who is deserving of God’s creation? And perhaps more importantly, who holds the control over the access to creation? I see a global picture in which the rich hold both economic and environmental power over the poor. A picture in which an affluent superpower comprising 5% of the global population emits over a quarter of the Earth’s carbon dioxide. And here, in that wealthy nation, our capitalism aims to “luxurize,” if you will, environmentalism. We who are not the only recipients of our own poor environmental choices, assume that our response will work for all. Well that does not sound like God’s Kin-dom to me. A table at which the voices of those living in poverty and those who are oppressed are not sought after or present is NOT a table of God’s. *We don’t have all the stones.* One scholar says, “Today’s Christians and Churches are often comfortable members of the social and political scene. Those churches face the challenge of adding the new “living stones” that come from different ethnic, racial, or socioeconomic circumstances.” (Perkins, 26)

Now we are God’s people. We are *drawn* together by our common experience. We are *held* together by our stories. We must now be *built* together with the voices of the poor, eliciting their response, taking into account their experience, making safe, just, equitable, and green choices available to ALL people.

Let us be awakened, O God! Bring us from darkness into light! For once we were not a people, but now we are YOUR people.

So may it ever be.

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Work Cited: Perkins, Pheme. Interpretation: First and Second Peter, James, and Jude. John Knox Press. Louisville, KY. 1995.