

How Long, O Lord?¹

Psalms 19 and 104 (selected verses)
Environmental Justice Sunday

*A sermon preached by Rev. Steve Robertson
at the Chevy Chase Presbyterian Church, Washington, D.C.
April 15, 2007*

“Hear the Word of the Lord, O House of Jacob, and all the families of the house of Israel: ‘I brought you into a plentiful land to eat its good fruits and its good things. But when you entered you defiled my land, and made my heritage an abomination. Therefore,... I accuse you, says the Lord, and I accuse your children’s children.’” (Jeremiah 2:4, 7, 9)

Today, the land and all of creation are groaning under the oppression of our human dominion. The protective atmospheric ozone layer is in grave danger. It is being chewed up by chemicals released from aerosol spray cans, automobile air conditioners, carpet padding, home insulation and more. Depletion of the ozone is causing more skin cancer and threatening the planet’s food chain and ecological balance.

Polluting gasses are accumulating in the atmosphere, resulting in the phenomenon known as global warming. Less than 20 percent of the world’s population accounts for 80 percent of the annual greenhouse gas emissions. These emissions are the key cause of global climate change.

We are polluting our air, water, and land at alarming rates. Every five years, the average American discards an amount of waste equal in weight to the Statue of Liberty. We generate some 160 million tons of municipal trash each year.

Human activities are snuffing out our identified and unidentified animal species at an appalling rate. If left unchecked at our current rate of development, in the years ahead we will destroy 50 to 100 species every day.

Each year, the world loses some 37 million acres of forests. Almost 40 percent of Central America’s forests were destroyed between the years 1950 and 1980. During that same period, Africa lost some 23 percent and the Himalayan watershed some 40 percent. And in the US, the ancient old growth forests of the Northwest have been reduced to less than 10 percent of their original stand.

Each year, an estimated 24 billion tons of topsoil blows off or is washed away from the land. Soil erosion and “desertification” are undermining one-third of the world’s cropland. Yet the remaining land must be made more productive, to feed more people, often with the use of chemicals that remain in the food, and wash off into the water supply.

Population growth continues to push the boundaries of sustainable development. Over the past 70 years, the human population grew from 1.8 billion people to 5.3 billion people. Each year, 90 million people are added to the world’s population. And industrialized and developed countries like the US, and China export the effects of this population explosion world-wide. With only 4.7 percent of the world’s population, the U.S. consumes about 25 percent of the world’s resources each year, meaning that we are taking more than our fair share.

And while nuclear power is the “clean energy source” for today, nuclear waste will be one of the major environmental concerns for many, many years to come.

Submitted to the Earth Day 2008 Sermon Contest

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The scientific conclusions are debated, the long-term effects are disputed, the implications are unclear. But the truth is obvious: destructive human activities are having permanent and profound implications on the whole of the creation. The whole creation groans, in the agony of the afflictions. The Lord hears the cries of the creation. But do we hear them?

From the beginning of Genesis, with the two narratives of the creation story, right through to the Book of Revelation which concerns itself finally with “a new heaven and a new earth” the Bible makes clear that there is a deep and incontrovertible connection between God and the created world. Genesis 1:1 affirms that it is God who is the creator: “In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth...” God does not despise the physical reality or remain aloof from it. At each step of the way in the process of creation, it is said that God examined what had been created and called it good. It was God’s vision from the beginning, and it was God who was willing to enter into that reality through Jesus Christ. God not only brought the creation into existence, but through the Holy Spirit remains profoundly present throughout the creation.

When God took from the dust of the earth and created human beings, we were made “in the image of God”, that we might be co-creators with God. We were created with and from the creation - intimately a part of the whole of the divine order. And yet, humanity is given a special responsibility within creation. In Genesis, chapter one, it is translated to English as to “*subdue*” and to “*have dominion over the earth.*” Terms that when taken alone have led us to some unfortunate consequences. In Genesis, chapter two, this understanding is made more concrete and specific with the command from God, that humanity should “*till [the earth] and keep it.*” Humanity is to work the earth from which we were created, and to become a partner with God in the process of creation. Humankind has been endowed with a divine role of co-creator with God. And along with being co-creator, is equally responsible for the **care of the creation.**

As Desmond Tutu, Archbishop Emeritus of South Africa has put it: “Any normal, thinking human being would be concerned about what is happening to our environment. Christians have an additional reason... There is a very intimate connection between humans and the rest of Creation. It is mystical and real. So when Adam and Eve muck up their lives through disobeying God, it has devastating consequences for the rest of Creation - the ground which up to then had produced crops for the benefit of humans, now spews forth weeds. This is an imaginative way of saying that Creation has been damaged because human beings have been damaged.”²

The challenges facing our earth and the whole of creation are undeniably greater than at any time in the previous history of the world. In the geologic past, changes in the atmosphere, oceans, land, and with the creatures occurred at the pace of natural cycles. Today, our growing human population, our insatiable demand and consumption of resources, and our need for more sustainability for a growing population, all serve to threaten the earth, the sea, the skies, and the other living creatures in unparalleled ways.

As human beings, we care what is happening because the loss of wood from forests, the depletion of the ozone, the lack of tillable farm land, all these and more impinge on our life as we know it. Especially life for those of us in the so-called “developed world.” But even further, in the not-too-distant future, these deteriorating conditions actually will threaten our very survivability. The rapid deteriorating conditions not only threaten us as human beings, but they threaten all of creation - the birds, mammals, reptiles, fish, and insects, the land and the plants, the water, the air and the skies. Every thing which God created and called “good” has been put in peril by human action.

As Christians, however, our concern for environmental justice is not just for the sake of our own human preservation. What is happening to our world also touches God. As Christians, we share a

concern with the Creator about the deterioration of the creation. God sent Jesus, not just to redeem humanity from the grip of sin, but to show God's love and concern for ALL of the creation. As Christians, we understand that all of humanity has been given a special role of steward for the created world. As creatures of the earth, formed from earth, and given life by the breath of God, we are God's guardians and protector's. We are the servants of God and have a responsibility to care for and protect the creation so that it may flourish and live for our use AND for the benefit and glory of God.

Our Presbyterian *Book of Order* puts it this way: "God calls the Church in the power of the Holy Spirit to participate in God's work of creation and preservation. God has given humankind **awesome power** and **perilous responsibility** to rule and tame the earth, to sustain and reshape it, to replenish and renew it." (W-7.5001, emphasis added)

However, let's be honest. When I hear that, and I consider the magnitude of the problems facing our stewardship of the, I am overwhelmed. What can **I do** in the light of such momentous conditions? How does my **one** aluminum can or **one** extra light bulb make any difference? Even if I bring reusable bags to the grocery, what about the other one thousand customers that day that take home their groceries in a mountain of plastic bags? Will this one extra load of wash really make a difference? When presented with the statistics and stories that capture the headlines and make good movies about the enormity of the problems, it is easy to conclude that there is a catastrophic problem looming, but that none of us individual really can make a difference.

I became concerned about the environment at the dump. During my time in high school, my father had taken early retirement from banking, and was returning to the family roots in construction. He was a general contractor building houses and doing a few remodeling jobs. And I was the clean-up kid. After school or during the summer, one of my high school friends and I would go to the job site, and clean up the construction debris. And when we had a full load in the pick-up truck - an early 1970's gold Ranchero pick-up truck - but that is another story - we would head to the dump.

Now this was not the paved, well organized sanitation and recycling center like you might go to today in Gaithersburg for Montgomery County. No, this was the dump. The landfill, where all the other large trucks would back up to discharge their enormous load of trash. We would drive out over the bulldozed tracks covered only slightly with dirt, to where small trucks shoveled their load. And we would add our debris to the pile.

In every direction you looked, there was trash as deep and as far as you could see. And I became aware of how much stuff we throw out. Trash, yes. The biodegradable stuff, the unusable things. We need a place for that. But also usable things that we simply no longer wanted. So we sent them to the dump. Chairs, tables, books, cameras. You name it. All good stuff - but somebody decided they did not want it, and the easiest thing was to throw it in the trash can for the dump. My dad never minded **sending** me to the dump; he just dreaded to see what **I brought back** from the dump!

You see, I kept looking around that landfill, and asking the question, "**How long, O Lord?**" **How long** can we just keep trying to hide the evidence of our wastefulness and abuse? **How long** can we keep turning beautiful natural landscapes into bio-hazards of our human debris, unfit for human presence? **How long** can we put our garbage on a barge and send it somewhere else - ANYWHERE else - just as long as WE don't have to deal with it HERE? **How long** can we go on ignoring the issues and impact we are making on the world around us? **How long, O Lord? How long?**

I think that same question can be applied to almost every other aspect of the environmental crisis. How long, O Lord, can we keep trying to ignore the problems? How long, O Lord, before all of creation collapses under the stress and strain? How long, O Lord, will we ignore our human responsibility for

being part of the problem, and turn our efforts to helping to find some of the solution?

I am well aware that my individual efforts at reducing waste, reusing anything, and recycling everything, does not solve the problems of global warming or preserve any real part of the rainforest from destruction. And I know that there are many things that I do that have a negative environmental impact. I am a creature of habit, whose habits only change with effort. But I try, in my own way, in my own corner, to make a little difference.

So do many others in this congregation and community. In fact, our congregation is becoming quite involved in concerns of ecology and environmental stewardship and environmental justice. We are honoring our Christian witness as co-creators with God. We are acknowledging our interdependence with one another and with the entire created world, by encouraging the congregation and community in a variety of ways to think about our stewardship of God's creation, and our use and connection to it.

Through the congregation, there are tree-planting opportunities, stream and river clean-up days, workshops and movies to encourage our involvement and advocacy. This congregation has become a partner church with the Greater Washington Interfaith Power and Light, and conducted an energy audit to determine ways we can be both better stewards of our use of energy and our expenditure of funds for building maintenance.

And through our worship today and the displays and information downstairs in Chadsey Hall, you can learn about other ways that this congregation and individuals within the congregation are living out their Christian witness to be stewards of God's creation

The creation is groaning in agony. As human beings and especially as Christians, we bear a special responsibility to listen and to hear the cries of torment and suffering from the land, the sea, the air, and our fellow living creatures. And we have a responsibility to ask of ourselves, and our communities, **“How long, O Lord? How long?” AMEN.**

Endnotes

1. Several facts and figures for this sermon were taken from the information packet *God's Earth Our Home*, produced by the Environmental Justice/Hunger Concerns Working Group of the National Council of Churches, by Shantial P. Bhagat.
2. Desmond Tutu, Archbishop Emeritus of South Africa and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, as quoted in the *Washington Post* column “On Faith,” February 10, 2007, page B7. The full text of Bishop Tutu's remarks is available on-line at <http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith>.