

Preaching to Environmental Crisis

Richard Cartwright Austin
Chestnut Ridge Farm, Dungannon, Virginia

Environmental pollution has replaced the cold war as the leading threat to the survival of life on this planet. How may we preach the gospel helpfully to this crisis? It took me four books on environmental theology to consider the implications of this crisis for Christian faith. Here I simply wish to list some rules for preaching that may be useful:

1. *Preach from experience.* This basic “New Light” principle suggests that we cannot preach the gospel effectively until our own hearts have been touched and warmed. Environmental crisis may tempt us to offer moral judgements before we have fallen in love with the earth, God’s creatures, and the beautiful interactions of sunlight, atmosphere, water and earth, that sustain life. Without experience of nature that warms the heart, we will not be able to preach affectingly, nor can we honestly recommend those loving qualities that may repair human relationships with the sisters and brothers of other species that God has created to share this planet with us. So get out of your study and into the woods.

2. *Preach to experience.* A major problem that contributes to environmental crisis is the physical isolation of modern, urban, technological men and women from other species and the natural systems that comprise earth life. Nevertheless, few of us are totally isolated. We have a pet, we cultivate a garden or a house plant, we visit a national park on vacation, we fish or hunt. Some are professionally engaged with species and natural resources. Honor these experiences in your preaching, and so encourage your hearers to deepen their appreciation of nature and their moral reflection upon it. Encourage your hearers to share their joys and concerns about nature within the household of faith. When experience with nature is valued, then we can begin to ponder some immediate ethical issues: whether to replace a sterile, chemical-dependent yard with a living system that sustains biological life and diversity; or how to avoid products that contribute to environmental destruction. With practice, congregations can consider broader issues as well.

3. *Preach grace.* The many faceted environmental crisis is, truly, so frightening that people are tempted to block it from thought in order to pursue the normal and necessary tasks of life. Without the conviction of God’s promise, it may be difficult to face the realities and to accept the many changes that will be required of us. So preachers must offer hope. Begin with the very first symbol of the covenant of salvation, the rainbow for reassurance for God’s chosen family and also for “every living creature that is with you, all birds and cattle, all the wild animals with you on earth, all that have come out of the ark” (Gen. 9:10 NEB). Preach right through to the climactic chorus of praise for Christ, the Lamb of God, sung by “all the living things in creation — everything that lives in the air, and on the ground, and in the sea” (Rev. 5:13, JB). Show that all life has grounds for hope.

4. *Preach pollution.* Modern anxieties about pollution are based upon scientific analyses of the damage that our technologies, populations, and life-styles inflict upon the life-support systems of this planet. Yet “pollution” is a profoundly moral conception original to the Bible, where it expands from ceremonial concerns to embrace moral corruption more generally and also, in its broadest reference, to describe the fouling of the landscape. Beginning with Cain’s murder of Abel, human

injustice pollutes the earth, damaging its capacity to support life. And, as Jeremiah saw through his own agony, pollution wounds the God who loves the whole community of life so deeply.

5. *Preach the whole gospel.* There is no substitute for wrestling with the whole of the gospel in the light of environmental crisis. Every aspect of our faith is relevant, yet each may have to be modified in some respect. We have preached an anthropocentric Christianity, although God “loved the world” (John 3:16). As the accompanying sermon illustrates, care for God’s creation may shed new light upon familiar texts and may modify traditional Christian images. I find that my eschatology has broadened. Sabbath ethics - much to my surprise! - now appear central to both the Hebrew scriptures and the Gospels. And I now see the tenth commandment as a challenge to the whole acquisitive structure of modern capitalism.

6. *Preach with humility.* Once you discover how relevant the gospel is to environmental crisis, it may be tempting to preach Christian imperialism again: Creation, as in Romans 8, waits for every person to repent and become a new child of God by professing Christ. Remember, however, that Christian denominations have most often baptized the systems of dominion and exploitation that now overwhelm the fabric of life. Most of the prophets who have summoned modern society to repent from pollution - from John Muir to Rachael Carson - have been on the margins of our faith, or outside it altogether. Remember that, if we come to see Christ as Savior of the ecosystem itself, this is a new insight. The struggle to redeem the earth from destruction will have to be profoundly ecumenical, uniting all those who love the life on this planet. Let us Christians make our contribution as servants of the community of life, not as presumptive masters.

7. *Avoid anachronisms.* How did society go so wrong and, indeed, why was the church blind for so long? Although the roots of environmental crisis go deep, the global threat is unique to the modern world since World War II. Looking back through this crisis, we may revise our estimates of historical figures without blaming them for what they could not foresee. Despite his reputed wisdom, King Solomon cannot be blamed for failing to anticipate that clear-cutting cedars in Lebanon for grandiose building schemes would eventually reduce rainfall upon the Promised Land. He can, however, be held accountable for violating the covenant by imposing slave labor upon the tribes of Israel, without which the building projects would have been impossible. The covenant overtly protected human freedom and natural vitality together. By attacking one, Solomon inadvertently damaged the other.

8. *Preach inclusively.* We have hardly adjusted to nonsexist language before a new challenge appears! As the late psalms suggest, the community that praises God is a congregation of many species. “All God’s critters got a place in the choir!” - tell that to the choir director and see how testy he/she becomes. Nevertheless, preaching the crisis of creation, we preach in a new context. Other creatures are listening, for their lives and welfare depend upon how effectively we convey the gospel. When we lift the petitions of our parish to God, we need to include the outcry of the nearby polluted stream, the vulnerability of the woods before new “development,” the darkness of polluted air that cannot fulfill its mission to sustain life, and the sickness of birds poisoned in our yards. Indeed we must preach that Christ stands with *these* who - alongside the hungry and sick and imprisoned of humanity - are our vulnerable brothers and sisters. When we minister to the polluted and the endangered, we minister to Jesus.

The following sermon, whose text is Isaiah 10:33-11:9, is an example of how one

might preach on the environmental crisis.

Childlike Leadership for Endangered Species

Today's theme comes from Isaiah's beautiful prophecy that Christians have always associated with the work of Christ:

Then the wolf shall live with the sheep,
and the leopard lie down with the kid;
the calf and the young lion shall grow up together,
and a little child shall lead them (11:6 NEB).

The question I put to the text is this: is there, indeed, any hope for human administration of natural life? Given our monstrous oppression of other creatures, our disruption of vital ecosystems, and our growing pollution of the biosphere, are there any grounds to anticipate that human society might yet make peace with nature? To borrow a phrase from our president, can we become a "kinder and gentler" species?

It is essential that Christians address these questions, for environmental leaders have charged Christianity with inventing the ideology of oppression that subjugates other species and indeed all of natural life to human purposes and human whims. In 1966, in his widely regarded essay on "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," Lynn White, Jr. wrote that Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt." He argues that Christians draw authority from the first chapter of Genesis to "subdue" the earth and to establish "dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth" (Gen. 1:28, 25). White claims that it was the triumph of biblical monotheism over primitive animism and pantheistic polytheisms that doomed nature to oppression. "By destroying pagan animism," White wrote, "Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects."

There is some truth to White's claims, but they are overstated. There is too great a delay from the cause to the effect: from the ancient Book of Genesis and the rise of Christianity, on the one hand, to the modern subjection of nature beneath human management and mismanagement, on the other. Another ideological root of environmental abuse is nearer to hand: it is the rise of modern science and, particularly the marriage of science to technology. The critical texts are not from Genesis, where human dominion is held in check by the requirements of God's justice, but from the fathers of modern science. In the seventeenth century Francis Bacon claimed "Man may be regarded as the center of the world," while René Descartes urged science to be practical so people may become "lords and possessors of nature." From the seventeenth century onward the mission of modern science has been to understand nature objectively - that is, without the distractions of feeling, sentiment, or moral regard - and to manipulate nature for human enrichment.

My purpose, however, is not to assign blame but to find a path that may lead us from the abuse of nature to the loving communion Isaiah envisioned. That search leads me back to the Bible. there we find a society different from our own in one striking particular: nature was included within the social fabric. The Genesis words on dominion that so alarmed Lynn White were followed in the same paragraph by dietary instructions that restrained human consumption of meat and reminded the first man and woman that even plant life must be shared with domestic animals, wild

animals, birds, and reptiles.

Following the flood that nearly destroyed creation, God proposed a covenant of salvation with Noah's family and also with "every living creature that is with you, all birds and cattle, all the wild animals with you on earth, all that have come out of the ark" (Gen. 9:10, NEB). God's promises embraced all the species: God placed a rainbow in the sky to reassure humanity and also to comfort other creatures vulnerable to the elements. And the legal system of Israel extended civil rights not only to the people rescued from slavery but to domestic animals, to wild creatures, and to the land as well. Each of these had rights and duties within the commonwealth of the covenant. Land and people together were offered liberation from oppression. Together they were called to be holy: holy people, holy land.

Isaiah's vision, therefore, has deep roots in the biblical tradition. I would be less than candid, however, if I did not point out a problem. In common with most Hebrew prophets, Isaiah had difficulty imagining how people might make peace with predators - with lions that threaten both sheep and shepherds, not to mention serpents ready the sting the unwary. In different poems Isaiah proposed different resolutions for this dilemma. In our text the solution is to alter the personalities of wildlife so they become domesticated and harmless. On my desk at home I keep a reproduction from Edward Hicks, the great Quaker painter of "peaceable kingdom" scenes. In it a child pats the nose of a leopard, a lamb snuggles trustingly against the flank of a lion, while in the background William Penn signs a treaty of peace with native Americans.

Sad to say, modern experience reveals that domesticating the wild is not an effective road to environmental peace. The danger is no longer our vulnerability to predators but their vulnerability to us. Many of the great predatory species - the California condor, the Bengal tiger - are now endangered. It is not their appetites that need to be curbed, but our own. Therefore I would modify Isaiah's beautiful vision with another from the prophet Hosea that is less poetic but more apt to our modern dilemma. Hosea imagines disarming *human* society so other species can live without fear. When the Lord restores covenant justice, Hosea prophesied, God will pay special attention to the weakest party, nature:

I will make a covenant on behalf of Israel with the wild beasts, the birds of the air, and the things that creep on the earth, and I will break bow and sword and weapon of war and sweep them off the earth, so that all living creatures may lie down without fear (Hosea 2:18, NEB).

And so it will be. Christians have always taken Isaiah's vision to point to Christ. Isaiah's portrait of a peaceable kingdom, wild and domestic animals gathered around a human child, suggests to us an even more familiar image: the manger in Bethlehem where the Christ child and his family share residence with ox and ass while, outside, shepherd and sheep, kings and camels, pay homage. The Gospels tell us that later, when Jesus fasted in the desert awaiting the tempter, *wild* animals approached him - not in fear but in hope. When Jesus first stepped into Simon Peter's boat, the slack nets were overwhelmed by fish crowding close. Jesus considered a field of wildflowers more beautiful than kingly robes, and when he wished to convey his love for sinners, he compared them to lost sheep. When Christ died the earth quaked because it, like we, had a stake in the event. John on Patmos foresaw that in the final days when Christ, the Lamb Triumphant, opens the Book of Life, every creature will join in praise because all will be beneficiaries: "all the living things in creation - everything

that lives in the air, and on the ground, and under the ground, and in the sea” (Rev. 5:13, JB).

How does this help us address the modern crisis of worldwide pollution, of nature abused, and of species perishing? First, Jesus clarifies for us what “dominion” means. The image of Godly rule in the Bible is one of justice, mercy, and responsibility - not tyranny and oppression. Psalm 72 puts it this way:

O God, endow the king with thy own justice...
He shall give judgement for the suffering
and help those of the people that are needy;
he shall crush the oppressor...
He shall be like rain falling on early crops,
like showers watering the earth (vs. 1-6, NEB).

Not many kings were like that, to be sure, but each was supposed to be so. Jesus reveals that such is God’s style, and this is the style we are commanded to emulate. The dominion we exercise over nature - so dangerously extensive now - is a call not to exploit but to redeem. Every creature needs us now, for their lives are in jeopardy. When we minister to the polluted, the endangered, and the abused, we minister to Jesus, for he told us we would meet him among the needy.

Second, Jesus gives us hope. If we confess Christ to be the Savior of the world, we can take heart. All the world is at stake, all the world is threatened, but Christ is Lord of condor and snail darter, of veal calves in confinement, of dying lakes and poisonous air, as well as of you and me. When we are saved, we will be saved together. That is a future worthy of hope.