

The Power is Yours!
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Maybe you've noticed by now, with this being our first annual Blessing of the Bikes and yesterday being Moving Planet day—a day devoted to moving beyond fossil fuels—I've taken the liberty of making this an environmentally themed service. Earth Day is not here early, but I thought that it would be appropriate to talk about this great big beautiful earth we inhabit and why we as Christians should probably care that it's in trouble.

Now I think most of us care about the environment to some degree, though some of us may feel more tied to this particular cause than others. I admit to feeling a bit inadequate wondering what I can really do to make a difference and I certainly don't understand much of the science behind the environmental crisis.

I also appreciate some levity when it comes to these issues because it's scary stuff. So I have to echo Jay Leno's comment that, "According to a new U.N. report, the global warming outlook is much worse than originally predicted. Which is pretty bad when they originally predicted it would destroy the planet." By now most of us probably admit that global warming is here and that if things don't change—if we don't clean up our acts, literally, our children and their children will be in trouble.

What's interesting about environmental issues is that different faith traditions are all across the board with how they've responded. Mainline Christians have tended to get behind the environmental movement. Some Evangelical Christians now take a stand on protecting the environment too. The National Association of Evangelicals came out with a statement several years ago that said, "We affirm that God-given dominion is a sacred responsibility to steward the earth and not a license to abuse the creation of which we are a part . . . Because clean air, pure water, and adequate resources are crucial to public health and civic order, government has an obligation to protect its citizens from the effects of environmental degradation." [1] This was a big deal that one of the largest Evangelical groups would make a statement like that.

But other Christians have continued to refuse to acknowledge that there's a problem in the first place. Maybe because science is bad in their worldview or perhaps because scripture passages like the ones I had Steve read for us today from Genesis and Revelation have been taken too literally and too far.

My own sister has the habit of calling me up and asking me random Bible questions because she thinks that I have all the answers and she constantly questions literal interpretation of scripture. She does this even though I have told her many times that not all Christians, including her sister, interpret scripture as literal and perfect. She called me a couple months back and asked me about the Creation story—how the earth got populated with people in the first place.

So I responded, "Well you have Adam and Eve and then Cain and Abel, their sons, and then Cain kills Abel 'knows his wife' and they have Enoch." She paused and said, "Well where did his wife come from?" And then I explained that it doesn't say. And being a lawyer, she won't let me off the hook. I sometimes have to tell her to stop her cross examination, because she just keeps pressing me further, "So what, this random woman appears out of nowhere? I thought Eve was the only woman on earth at that point."

To which I stammer that I don't know what to tell you, that's what the passage says and basically when Adam and Eve are created they are told that they rule the earth, "be fruitful and

multiply", so they do, and their son does, and the rest is history. The human family is created, but can't you understand that it's metaphorical, poetic, and beautiful?

When these passages are taken too literally, not only are they confusing but they can also be dangerous. God says to Adam and Eve, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." Just like Cain's wife appearing out of nowhere in scripture a chapter or two later and confusing my sister to no end, this verse makes me a bit nervous. Because when you take it literally, here's what it seems to say, in the words of Anne Coulter, the conservative author and political pundit, "God gave us the earth. We have dominion over the plants, the animals, the trees. God said, 'Earth is yours. Take it. Rape it. It's yours.'" [2]

Well no offense to Anne Coulter's scriptural interpretation, she's certainly entitled to her opinion, but that seems like a pretty bad Christian ethical stance if you ask me. Even the National Association of Evangelicals would seem to disagree with her biblical interpretation . . . and that's saying something.

Because it doesn't seem very logical that God spends all this time making creation, making it beautiful, proclaiming it good, and then God is completely okay with part of God's creation—humanity—pillaging and destroying it and killing all the creatures God just took the time to create. That just doesn't make any sense to me. I don't think God wants us to behave that way. I don't think that God gives us permission to behave that way either.

God says we have "dominion" but maybe this word points to stewardship. If we human beings are high up on the food chain (in our own humble opinions, of course) and are good thinkers and feelers and all that, then maybe we have a responsibility to care for the earth and for the creatures we share the earth with.

So I love super hero movies and this makes me think of Uncle Ben talking to Peter Parker, otherwise known as Spider Man. Uncle Ben says, "With great power comes great responsibility." So when God says that Adam and Eve will have dominion over the earth, I'm pretty sure that God is expecting them to be responsible with that power.

This concept is coincidentally also in the Gospel of Luke—Luke writes, "For everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded." God trusts us to take care of God's creation and God probably weeps sometimes to see the bone-headed decisions we human beings sometimes make.

Continuing on with the super hero theme though, this great responsibility concept is also present in the greatest environmental super hero of all time, Captain Planet. My sister and I used to sing the theme song around the house and drive our parents crazy. The ending was a chant, and I'm going to resist the urge to chant it now for all of you at the top of my lungs. But here are the lyrics, "We're the planetes. You can be one too! 'Cause saving our planet is the thing to do. Looting and polluting is not the way—hear what Captain Planet has to say,"

And then Captain Planet would fly onto the TV screen and proclaim, "THE POWER IS YOURS!" It's so ridiculous, but it's true—the power is ours and the power, the responsibility, the charge . . . seems to come from God whether we take this literally or metaphorically. But this power is the power to create, to sustain, to give life, to nurture—not to destroy and pillage and burn.

There's also major environmental themes in the final book of the Bible—Revelation. One of the best books written about Revelation and the Rapture is Barbara Rossing's *The Rapture*

Exposed—this fantastic book detailing what Rapture fanatics believe, why, and why it's not Biblical, basically. For people who really think the Rapture is coming and Jesus will come back to get the righteous and leave the evil people behind, the environment doesn't matter at all.

In fact, Tim LaHaye, one of the co-authors of the Left Behind series, has even spoken about God destroying the earth completely to make room for the new heaven and new earth depicted in Revelation. He says, "God will destroy the earth that is so marred and cursed by Satan's evil. He will include the atmospheric heaven to guarantee that all semblance of evil has been cleared away."^[3]

And then Rossing goes on to relate that when we hear "new heaven and new earth" in Revelation, that word really means "renewed" or "new" but it certainly doesn't mean a different earth. As she says, "There is no justification for using up the earth on the grounds that we get to trade this one in for a new and bigger one in seven years."^[4] In Revelation, God is depicted after this final epic battle as coming down from heaven to dwell with the people. There's a new heaven, a new earth, and a new holy city—a new Jerusalem. And this voice in the passage proclaims, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

If God's home is among mortals, if God apparently has a throne on earth and the river of the water of life flows right from the throne and there's a tree of life there and God and the Lamb will reign forever and ever, well all of this taken together seems to imply that God perhaps needs the earth in order to renew it and dwell in it with us. And this is all coming from trying to take these passages literally in the first place, which is incredibly difficult to do with Revelation anyway.

But let's go with it, literally we shouldn't be content to just destroy the Earth because God is going to give the righteous a new one anyway. We should be the responsible stewards, we should be environmental superheroes realizing that with great power comes great responsibility and we're up to the challenge.

Basically we should live into the wise words of Chief Seattle, "Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons and daughters of the earth. We did not weave the web of life; we are merely a strand in it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves." Or in the words of Captain Planet, "The power is yours!" Amen.

[1]<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A1491-2005Feb5.html>

[2]Barbara Rossing, The Rapture Exposed, 7.

[3]Barbara Rossing, The Rapture Exposed, 6.

[4]Barbara Rossing, The Rapture Exposed, 7.