

Through the Lens of Scripture

Reflections on Green Faith: Repentance and Returning

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Repentance for our role in climate change

One of my favorite set of lines in a contemporary Confession is, "...We repent of the evil that enslaves us; the evil we have done and the evil done on our behalf..." (Enriching Our Worship 1: 19). The act of repentance signifies recognition that wrong has been done; it acknowledges culpability in the wrongdoing; and it indicates movement (turning) toward right doing, right living. We are bombarded by the cultural media with conflicting messages about what is happening with our climate. It is sometimes difficult to make sense of conflicting claims. And yet, we know that as God's people and God's stewards of Creation that we have lived in ways that have not been for the benefit of all created things. In the Seattle area and much of the Puget Sound we can point to practices that set us apart and far ahead of many areas of the rest of our country: curbside recycling and compost pick up; recycle, compost and trash receptacles in most homes, schools, businesses, and on most city streets; and city and regional policies to reduce carbon emissions. And yet, in images from orbiting satellites we are able to see miles-wide floating mats of plastic waste in our oceans, hundreds of square miles of clear-cut forests in our own state, and expansive mountain top removal for coal extraction in the Appalachians. "What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?" (Matthew 16:26a). There are consequences for Creation, including God's most vulnerable people, because of how we choose to live.

In 2011 at their meeting in Quito, Ecuador, the Episcopal House of Bishops (HOB), in their Pastoral Teaching on Climate Change, recognized that "In the twentieth century, the human impact on the earth increased enormously. In the last thirty years alone, human activity has destroyed many of the planet's natural resources. Climate change, flooding, habitat destruction, desertification, pollution, urban expansion, and famine have all played their part. A third of all fish species and a quarter of all mammal species are in danger of extinction." Our Bishops called us to repentance for our role in climate change, saying, "*We, your bishops, believe these words of Jeremiah describe these times and call us to repentance as we face the unfolding environmental crisis of the earth: How long will the land mourn, and the grass of every field wither? For the wickedness of those who live in it the animals and the birds are swept away, and because people said, "He is blind to our ways."* (Jeremiah 12:4)

As Christians we affirm the love story of our faith that says out of abiding and all-encompassing love, God created the cosmos and called it "Good!" We live interdependently with all created beings, and so we cannot separate our faith in God from our stewardship of Creation. We pray regularly for all creatures, for peace for the whole world, for just sharing of resources and for well-being for all who suffer. This includes creatures who are being killed or made sick by the long-term effects of deforestation, oil spills, and a host of other ways in which we intentionally and unintentionally destroy or poison their habitat. In this country's cities, towns and villages, as well as around the globe, climate change affects the most vulnerable through contaminated drinking water, loss of farmland, and loss of livelihoods. It is the poor, especially children and the elderly, who suffer the most from environmental irresponsibility. At our best, we recognize and acknowledge that we are not living in harmony as God longs for us to live, when our sister and brother creatures are suffering.

And so we repent, asking God for the will and the power to amend our lives.

Repentance is not simply saying we are sorry, it is taking positive action regarding past actions, and about living differently in the here and now so we may be "repairers of the breach" (Isaiah 58:12). As sages throughout all ages exhort us, we are to live simply, so that others may simply live. "Privileged Christians in

our present global context need to move from a culture of consumerism to a culture of conservation and sharing. The challenge is to examine one's own participation in ecologically destructive habits. Our churches must become places where we have honest debates about, and are encouraged to live into, more sustainable ways of living. God calls us to die to old ways of thinking and living and be raised to new life with renewed hearts and minds." (HOB Pastoral Teaching on Climate Change 2011).

Turning to Rejoicing

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." Luke 15:1-10

The lesson from the Gospel of Luke, which we use for the first Sunday of our 2013 Creation Season, reminds us that God longs for us to turn back to the path of righteousness. Jesus, through his Holy Spirit, seeks us out to save us when we are lost, rejoicing in our return to right relationship with one another, with Creation and therefore with God. We Christians live in hope, faith and trust that while our salvation does not depend on our repentance, returning to right relationship with the one who gave himself out of love for us will heal our hearts, and begin to heal the ravages of what unrepentant hearts have wrought on God's creation.

What does actively turning our repentance to rejoicing look like? Our Episcopal House of Bishops suggests, "In order to honor the goodness and sacredness of God's creation, we, as brothers and sisters in Christ, commit ourselves and urge every Episcopalian:

- To acknowledge the urgency of the planetary crisis in which we find ourselves, and to repent of any and all acts of greed, overconsumption, and waste that have contributed to it;
- To lift up prayers in personal and public worship for environmental justice, for sustainable development, and for help in restoring right relations both among humankind and between humankind and the rest of creation;
- To take steps in our individual lives, and in community, public policy, business, and other forms of corporate decision-making, to practice environmental stewardship and justice, including
 - (1) a commitment to energy conservation and the use of clean, renewable sources of energy; and
 - (2) efforts to reduce, reuse, and recycle, and whenever possible to buy products made from recycled materials;
- To seek to understand and uproot the political, social, and economic causes of environmental destruction and abuse;
- To advocate for a "fair, ambitious, and binding" climate treaty, and to work toward climate justice through reducing our own carbon footprint and advocating for those most negatively affected by climate change.

Joyful Stewardship

One of the commitments that the body of Christ that is Church of the Ascension, Seattle, has made is to become more conscious stewards of God's beloved Creation. We are partnering with GreenFaith.org and Earth Ministry/Interfaith Power and Light in our mission: *Making Disciples Creative Stewards*.

Turning our repentance into rejoicing, we have taken steps to reduce our carbon footprint through: more effective monitoring and usage of energy in our physical plant; more effective recycling and composting; new policies on cleaning and gardening products used at church; use of ceramics instead of disposables at events; eco-theological education for all ages; use of 100% recycled paper products for production of bulletins, letters and for disposables; advocacy at the regional and national level for clean water, toxic-free products for children and the ability to buy fresh, organic produce for those in need; and connecting with people of other faiths in our city to invite, inspire and ignite joyful stewardship.

Forgiven, healed and with renewed rejoicing, Ascension is equipping its members and the local neighborhood to take the practical steps that demonstrate the joy of saying "Yes!" to living with compassion for all Creation.