

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

First of Four in a Sermon Series “Sacred Creation”

Sunday, 28 April 2019

Hebrew Scriptures: Genesis 1:1-5 and Psalm 104:1-9

Christian Scriptures: John 1:1-5 and Revelation 22:1-2

“A Bible Obsessed with the Environment”



The following video was to be shown. But due to technical difficulties, I led the congregation through a guided meditation (while I hoped the technical issues would be fixed).

“Midway: Trailer on Vimeo”: <https://vimeo.com/30919668>



Friends, I invite us to close our eyes for a moment. I invite us to take a very slow and deep breath. Inhale. Hold it. Exhale. Take now another deep breath. Inhale. Hold it. Exhale. We are beginning this morning with that which is most important to me and to you: Life. It is with our life and breath, our children, the Gospel, and the Bible that we approach the greatest issue that we and our descendants will ever face: the integrity of God's Creation, our environment, the Earth.



The world recognized Earth Day this past Monday [22 April 2019]. As you can read on the reverse of your bulletin, Earth Day began in 1970 “to call attention to the growing ecological crisis, focusing on such things as pollution, using up non-renewable resources and creating waste that threatens the survival of the environment”.¹ In this four week sermon series entitled “Sacred Creation”, we will begin a long journey together in which *each and every year* we will focus on

¹ John Hart, “Earth Day (April 22)”, *Preaching God's Transforming Justice*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012).

the environment. We will do this because I firmly believe that it will be the most significant theological issue for the next hundred years.



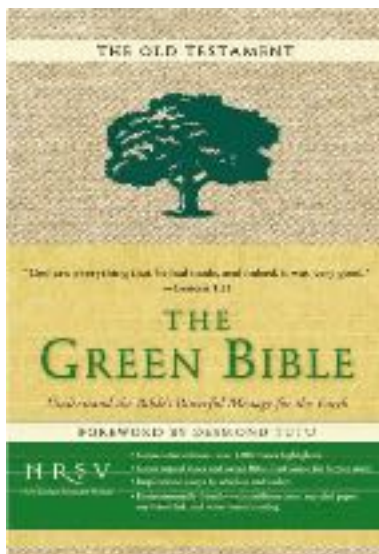
I recognize in this series that the gospel is GOOD news. So while we will in time contemplate the gravity of the ecological crisis, I will not use it as a weapon with which to bludgeon you. As a minister of the gospel, I will teach a message of celebration, not 'doom and gloom'. Our faith encourages us - and I shall not preach contrary to our faith by discouraging us.

Today in our series we will answer the fundamental question, 'Does the Bible and Jesus speak to the issue of the environment?' I answer today with an emphatic, 'Yes! You bet it does!' Next week, we will learn the degree to which God extends 'salvation', to all of the Earth and just not to human beings, us, alone. In doing so, I pray we will begin to think about the cosmos as the centre of God's concern and not necessarily human beings (though human beings are a crucial component of the cosmos and therefore remain worthy of emphasis).



During our third week, we will wed our faith to science, for the two inform one another beautifully. We will realize that we are at a moment of crisis (*kairos*) that calls us to act boldly, prophetically.

During our fourth and final week, we will explore ways in which we can act faithfully, both collectively as Christians and as individuals.



Friends, one of the most precious gifts I have ever received is what is called '*The Green Bible*'. It changed my life and enabled by faith to grow to be passionate about God's creation and my Christian responsibility to preserve it for future generations. Many of you may

remember 'Red Letter' Bibles that distinguished the words that Jesus spoke with red ink. Well, *The Green Bible* highlights the words that God has spoken through the writers of the scriptures with green ink. This Bible answers the question: "Is God Green?" Many of you may be familiar with the call and response refrain of many of our African-American brothers and sisters in Christ. I would like to alter it and say, 'God is Green'. To which you respond, 'All the time!' 'And all the time', to which you respond, 'God is green!' This green Bible answers the question, "Did Jesus have anything to say about the environment?" with an unequivocal "Yes! He did!" If one thumbs through this Green Bible, and I pray you all purchase one, you will see that "there are over one thousand references to the Earth and caring for creation in the Bible, the message is clear: all in God's creation - nature, animals, humanity - are inextricably linked to one another. As God cares for all creation, so too we cannot love one dimension without caring for the others".² One thing this Bible makes very clear is that the preservation of the environment is fundamentally a *theological* issue, and not fundamentally a political issue. Because the scientific facts are incontestable (climate change is not a hoax), both Republican, Independent and Democratic Christians should all be singing the same

² No author attributed, "Preface", *The Green Bible* (New York: New York, HarperCollins Publishers, 2008), 15.

environmental hymn. I can promise you, there is nothing in the Bible about making economic growth and the Gross Domestic Product of our nation or our world, the highest priorities as followers of Christ. There is though, I promise you, thousands of references to related to the Earth and its preservation.



The scriptures begin and end with the environment. Today, we read only the first few verses of Genesis: ‘In the beginning’, when God created “the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). In Revelation, the last book of the Bible, we hear of “a new heaven and a new Earth” (chapter 21). We will read more of Genesis in the following three weeks. Suffice it to say, the last verse of chapter one declares that, “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). *Everything* was good. In Genesis, chapter 2, a garden is created by the Lord.



More specific, the Bible begins and ends with what is referred to as the Tree of Life. In fact, the Tree of Life is the symbol of the Lord, our God. “The Tree of Life forms the bookends of the scriptures; trees, together with branches, vines, leaves, and bushes, punctuate a thousand passages in the Bible”.³ In the book of Revelation, after humans have destroyed that which was perfect, restoration occurs: “Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the Tree of Life with its twelve kinds of fruit producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations” (Revelation 22:1-2).

³ *The Green Bible*, 21.



A whole sermon series could be done about the bookends of Genesis and Revelation, but what of in-between? The prophets and the Psalmist(s) frequently spoke in environmental terms. The Bible is pregnant with emphases on the Earth. The Bible reeks of images portraying the natural world. The Bible is saturated with environmental themes. As my sermon title articulates, the Bible is obsessed with the environment. Noah is handed an olive branch (Genesis 8:11). Abraham meets angels and the Lord under the shade of oaks. Isaac and Jonah's lives were saved by a ram and a fish, respectively. The prophetess Deborah held court under a palm tree. Job hears from the Creator of the cosmos. Just this past Tuesday at Loaves and Fishes, to bless the food I recited Psalm 104, "You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the Earth, and wine to gladden the heart [Well, to be honest, I left that part out]. The trees of the Lord [there we go again with the trees] are watered abundantly, the cedars of Lebanon that he planted. In them the birds build their nests; the stork has its home in

the fir trees” (Psalm 104:14-17). Jesus described the kingdom of God like a mustard seed where birds can nest (Mark 4:31-32). Jesus offers Living Water to the woman at the well. Indeed, Peter and Marion Abell and I could do an entire sermon series on clean water and we could relate it to baptism when I celebrate my first one at Centre Church. Jesus offers us a horticultural extravaganza, with many if not most parables having agricultural themes. What is spread before Jesus as he entered Jerusalem? Palms. After the crucifixion, Jesus is mistaken for, what? That’s right, the gardener. When one reads *The Green Bible* one wonders how it is that all Christians have not pejoratively become ‘Environment freaks’ rather than ‘Jesus freaks’.



Friends, my only conclusion, in this our first week of our sermon series, is that the scriptures make clear we cannot be faithful Christians without being ‘environmentalists’. Indeed *The Green Bible* makes clear that if the environment was removed from our scriptures, they would be utterly gutted and useless. The Bible is obsessed with

the environment. And so should we be. Not because we are political. But because we are theological. Because we live and because we breathe, because in the Lord we have our being, the environment has become the preeminent issue of our time and our faith.

This was the word of God, and it was delivered to the people of God, and the people of God responded, “Amen”.