

Job 38:25-30

Who has cut a channel for the torrents of rain, and a way for the thunderbolt, to bring rain on a land where no one lives, on the desert, which is empty of human life, to satisfy the waste and desolate land, and to make the ground put forth grass?

Has the rain a father, or who has begotten the drops of dew? From whose womb did the ice come forth, and who has given birth to the hoar-frost of heaven? The waters become hard like stone, and the face of the deep is frozen.

Job 38:39-41

Can you hunt the prey for the lion, or satisfy the appetite of the young lions, when they crouch in their dens, or lie in wait in their covert? Who provides for the raven its prey, when its young ones cry to God, and wander about for lack of food?

Job 39:1-8

Do you know when the mountain goats give birth? Do you observe the calving of the deer? Can you number the months that they fulfil, and do you know the time when they give birth, when they crouch to give birth to their offspring, and are delivered of their young? Their young ones become strong, they grow up in the open; they go forth, and do not return to them.

Who has let the wild ass go free? Who has loosed the bonds of the swift ass, to which I have given the steppe for its home, the salt land for its dwelling-place? It scorns the tumult of the city; it does not hear the shouts of the driver. It ranges the mountains as its pasture, and it searches after every green thing.

“Gospel and Landscape: Christians and the Good Earth”**Dr. Holmes Rolston****April 19, 2009**

Thank you. I appreciate the invitation to come to this church. I’ve been in Fort Collins forty years, and been in this church several dozen times, I’m sure, though my regular church, when I’m in town, is First Presbyterian Church. I’m sorry about that. But maybe Presbyterians and Methodists and others can celebrate Earth Day, and we do have going, at the moment, in town, a multi-church study of the new millennium assessment goals.

The Christian religion is a faith for people, not for chipmunks, and the commandments are to love God and love neighbor. Israel is to be a holy people that Jesus calls his disciples to a more abundant life, and in that sense I realize that the focus of Christian faith is human beings and their life together. At the same time, the Bible is full of constant reminders of the landscape that surrounds the Hebrews. In fact, all the creatures of the landscape are included in their covenant in the days of Noah. “Behold I establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds the cattle, and every beast of earth with you.” We’ve searched for a more inclusive ethic. My great-great grandparents, some of them, not all of them, owned slaves. We’ve liberated slaves in my lifetime. We’ve realized that we needed more equality for blacks, for women, for minorities. We’ve come to realize that our

relationships with native Americans or with handicapped or with children with special needs, our future generations, we've got a more inclusive sense of ethical concern, yes, and maybe now a more inclusive ethic will have a concern for the plants, the animals, species, ecosystems, for the whole community of life on earth.

It's not simply what you do to minorities, but perhaps what you do to animals, or trashing up the landscape, that reveals the character of a society. I think the Biblical faith originated with a land ethic, in that sense. The Hebrews had commandments from God, but they entered a promised land. In the Book of Deuteronomy, that land which you are going over to possess, the land of hills and valleys, which drinks water by the rain from heaven, a land which the Lord your God cares for, the eyes of the Lord are always upon it from the beginning of the year to the end of the year. Justice is to roll down like waters, as one of the prophets says, and the land flows with milk and honey. The idea is that the land is to be inhabited with justice and charity, and then and only then, can a people receive the blessings on their landscape. We sometimes fear that the Bible has become irrelevant, written a long time ago, far away. What relevance does it have in a high-technology space age? Maybe if these Hebrews had the idea that justice and charity belong with an abundant life on a good earth, maybe that's something we need in our age of global crisis. Maybe that's a perennial truth.

Perhaps you're thinking, yes, but religion, Christianity, Judaism, they became less sort of land-based. Christians of course left Palestine, went to many nations of earth. Jews, too, were scattered from Palestine, their Diaspora, you can be a good Jewish person any place on earth, a good Christian. True. But now maybe we made a bit of a mistake in sort of disconnecting faith from a sense of place. Maybe it would have been better if we'd sort of kept the idea of a promised land, and that all peoples, all nations, see their lands as promised lands. And some of that is in our ancestral heritage, the good earth, or seeing America as a land blessed by God to be inherited with justice and charity.

Maybe the thing to do, actually, is to not sort of give up on a promised land, but expand it. Think of earth as a planet with promise. It looks as though a good planet is hard to find, and ours is a marvelous wonderland earth. That's the promised land. Well, if you don't like, you wonder about hearing this from a preacher, let's get a little rocket science. Here's Edgar Mitchell, a rather poetic rocket scientist. "Suddenly from behind the rim of the moon, in long slow motion moments of immense majesty, there emerges a sparkling blue and white jewel, a light delicate sky-blue sphere laced with slowly swirling veils of white, rising gradually like a small pearl in a thick sea of black mystery. It takes more than a moment to realize this is home." Edgar Mitchell thought a moment more, and he said, "My glimpse of our planet was a glimpse of divinity. Something sacred, something divine, taking place on this wonderland planet."

Perhaps you're thinking, "Well, when I went to Sunday School, they taught me that Jesus said, 'My kingdom is not of this world.'" That's true. But when Jesus says "this world," where is he? Well, he's got a Roman centurion just a few yards away. He's thinking of Imperial Rome, of trust in empires and kings, and he says, "My kingdom is not of this kind of political world." Well, a political world too is important, but we do think that

Jesus' kingdom is not of that kind of imperial trust in empires and kings. To the contrary, Jesus looks around at the world, and finds in it much evidence of the coming kingdom of God. God loves the world, and sends his son in redemption of that world. Jesus sees the powers at work on his landscape closely related to the powers bringing in the kingdom. Many of his parables are earthy. The kingdom is like planting a seed, and it's growing. Faith is like a mustard seed, a small seed that grows to a great plant. Earth brings forth of itself. Well, the natural world is disenchanting, but it's still sacred. It's a sacrament of God, an incomplete sacrament of God perhaps, but still a sign of divine power. God notices the sparrows that fall, the lilies growing in the fields of Palestine had a glory exceeding the glories of Solomon, that icon of power. God sends rain on the just and the unjust. Spirit is the giver of life, animating the dust.

In some sense, the natural world inescapably surrounds us, wherever we work or wherever we live, and yet the built environment can come to command our attention, command our presence. But then, I like to think, well, there's something artificial about living in an environment that's entirely an artifact, entirely built. Sometime we say, that's what humans do. They build, they develop, they build houses, they build roads, they build bridges, they build industries. That's what human life is all about. True, humans do have to build and rebuild their landscapes. Our landscapes ought to embody our cultures. And yet, there's a way in which, if life does not have contact with the natural world, something important is missing. Something vital is missing.

I've got two nephews and one niece, both doing quite well in life, they're in their forties. They think you've got to live in New York City. If you're not there, you're not where the action is. Well, I make them mad by saying, "Your life is underprivileged. Come to Colorado where you can look out on the landscape and see Long's Peak. It's hard to see that from your thirteenth story apartment in Manhattan." There is something one-dimensional about life that's only urban. You need the urban, you can't be human without it. You're a political animal, living in the *polis*, the town. But there's also another dimension of life, the rural third dimension of life, the wild. We need these, to be fully human.

There's been a way in which, in the last hundred years, religion has become increasingly sort of private, personal. You know, if you hire somebody on the job, you're maybe not even permitted to ask what their religious faith is. That shows prejudice. Or at least, you may work beside someone, and not know what they do, or whether they go to church on weekends. That's sort of their private affair. But that doesn't work very well when you're thinking environmentally, because the environment is a common good. We've got to have a policy that's collective choice about how we are going to conserve our environment. There I think Christians, whatever they may think about separating church and state, whatever they may think about religion being a private affair, environmentally, Christians are going to have to speak out and speak up for the goods on the landscape collectively. So you're going to have to join with others in shaping a public ethic.

What would Christians have to say? Well, of course, they will say, as they've said commendably often, people need a place to live. People need to be able to earn a living.

They need shelter, they need food, they need clothing, and we heard some of that in the announcements this morning. Habitat for Humanity, yes, yes, develop these sorts of things. Well, Christians do need, we just said, justice and charity and sharing the goods of the landscape. But I think there's something else that Christians can add in this conversation, and that's a sense of the non-economic values of the landscape, a sense of reverence and respect for life, a sense of wonder, a sense of beauty, a sense of the sublime. Maybe Christians are going to say, "Well, we need to get people fed and clothed and sheltered. We need for them to have work." But let's do that on the 90% of the landscape that we've already put to multiple use. Maybe we need a tithe, the ten percent of the landscape, set aside for what it is in itself, set aside as God's creation. Didn't we hear in the Scriptures read that God sends rain on the desert for the wild ass who scorns the tumult of the city? Don't we learn, reading the books of Job and many of the Psalms, that there is a deep goodness in the created order?

Christians in environmental policy can speak up for those sorts of things. In fact, there's a way in which a natural world ought to do and maybe do as well, or do better, what churches do. I mean, you come to church, I guess you want to think about the workday week, about home, but in church there's a different environment, a different ambiance, from the shopping centers or from the latest on the stock market or even the economic crisis. The ambiance is that you're taken out of the ordinary world of business, trade, industry, and lifted upward. You're taken beyond you're daily thoughts, and that's why we have a lovely, loft sanctuary. That's why we have church spires. But the forest can do the same thing, you know, the line of the mountain runs upward toward the sky. The trees are like cathedral groves. So in a way, the outdoors has in common with churches a sense of transcending ordinary human life with a larger view, world view. The trees of the Lord are watered abundantly. The cedars of Lebanon which he planted, that's from one of the Psalms. John Muir said the forests of America, however slighted by man, must have been a great delight to God, for they were the best he ever planted. In this forest is a sense of roots, a sense of reaching upward, a sense of life continuing in the midst of its perpetual perishing. That generates religion, I think.

In that sense, a mountaintop experience, if you like, or the wind in the pines, or solitude in a sequoia grove, or autumn leaves, spring rain, spring flowers, we have a sense of to recall the British poet Wordsworth, we have a sense of emotion and spirit that impels and runs through all things. High mountains are for the wild goats, the rocks a refuge for the badgers, the young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God. O Lord, how manifest are thy works In wisdom hast thou made them all. You've heard a lot of sermons from preachers in this church. I bet you've never heard a sermon on this text. "The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God." But that sense of rejoicing in the rich bio-diversity of earth in all its wonder, and it's very much already there in the Scriptures. Though a study of biology, a study of evolutionary history, may give us a deeper and even richer sense of that.

I've been trying to attract you to an environmental ethic, but if that won't do it, maybe I can get you there by fear. I see a little gray hair out there. Methodists used to preach hell fire and damnation, some of you've heard that, but I'm sure it never happens here any

more. There's a way in which the greatest threat that you and your children and grandchildren face is a deteriorating environment. I think that's a greater threat, long-term, than terrorism from the Middle East or something like that. You see, it's hard to have a healthy life in a sick environment. It's hard to have a healthy economy if your environment is polluted and toxic. So now I'd like to say that environment is not sort of something peripheral, it's not an ethic for the chipmunks and daisies. It's central on the world agenda. The four main items on the world agenda are war and peace, population, development, and environment, and they're all deeply interconnected. It's the struggle for resources, for power, that often creates war. It's escalating population and escalating consumption that's brought about an environmental crisis. We're at one of the junctures of history, in which we've got to figure out what a sustainable relationship with this planet is. The next 500 years can't be like the last 500 years. This is a challenge that we face as no other human generation before us has faced. What does it profit to gain the world, only to lose it, Jesus asked. Maybe there's a sense in which we might be gaining the world economically, fence it in, pave it over, harvest it, develop it, exploit it, only to discover that we've lost it. We've lost it aesthetically, recreationally, religiously. We've lost a sense of the wonderland of natural history. The earth's a kind of providing ground. There are ample provisions for life. That's the marvel of earth. And now Christians, I think, are in a good position to celebrate this, and to see it as something sacred. We're in a sacred place, a church is sacred space, but can you go out and look at your landscape, and also see it as sacred ground? If there is any holy ground, and land of promise, this promising earth is it.