Sent to Lutheran 11/22/08

GOD'S GARDEN PLANET: EARTHCARE MEANS MORE THAN STEWARDSHIP

H. Paul Santmire

Imagine that planet earth is the Garden of Eden, a not unreasonable thought for all of us. We have seen amazing photos taken by astronauts of this our earthly home, a spectacular blue globe in the midst of a vast darkness, a world of water and a web of life, rare in our universe of billions of galaxies, if not unique.

Imagine, too, that this garden planet is full of violent upheavals, like earthquakes and tsunamis, and that it is replete with an infinitely complex and intricately interrelated world of creatures, from microbes to killer whales. And many these creatures prey on each other, causing great waves of death, so that the whole vast web of life might reproduce itself and so that every living creature might flourish in its own niche, for its own time.

Imagine, finally, that one fragile, yet dreaming animal has emerged from the earth on two feet, with hands that have opposable thumbs and with a brain of unusual magnitude, and that that creature has the capacity, unlike any other animal, for self-giving love and personal communion. This animal has the capacity for a life of peace on earth, with all the cultural blessings that such peace can entail, if only that animal will heed its calling to flourish within its own niche. Imagine that two of those fragile but extraordinary animals, perhaps living in Africa many thousands of years ago, might be given names by later generations, Adam, meaning "of the earth," and Eve, meaning "mother of the living." This much, precarious as such an effort is, we can imagine about human origins from the earth.

But this, of course, is by no means the whole of the earth-story, as we can imagine it. On this garden planet, something went profoundly wrong as the heirs of that imaginary first couple, Adam and Eve, worked out their destiny, with fear and trembling – but with little faith. This wrong far surpassed the scope and the intensity of the violence and the destructiveness which were part of the original processes of things. Horrible as volcanoes can be for many creatures, when they erupt, they are "doing what comes naturally." Likewise for Canadian lynxes when they pounce upon snow hares and devour them. But when the children of Adam and Eve, who emerged on the earth with the promise of peace and self-giving, do violence to one another and then – as in our own time – arrogantly expand beyond their own niche in the web of life to threaten the very stability of that web itself, that is excruciatingly unnatural. That is evil. And that evil feeds on itself so as to multiply its effects, sometimes without limits, it seems.

Thankfully, however, that is not the end of that particular story as we have imagined it. Faith has this vision, that "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son...." (John 3:16). Faith envisions that God has come into the midst of the evils of human life, by the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, to forgive sins and thereby to forge what can be a new beginning for every human creature. Even more, faith envisions that, by that same Divine intervention in Christ, God inaugurates a new beginning not just for the earth, but for the whole universe, for the sake of peace on earth here and now and for the sake of peace in the entire cosmos, then and there, one

great and glorious day, when all things will be made new (Revelation 21:1ff.).

If this vision of faith is true, as I believe it is, how then are we Christians to live on this garden planet today as God originally intended us to live? How are we to "walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4) in that sense? The Scriptures give us three clues about how God originally intended humans to be in nature and to live with nature. We can therefore see that, in Christ, we are now called, as renewed creatures, to be in nature and to live with nature in three closely related, but distinct ways. Call these the ways of stewardship, partnership, and honorship.

Stewardship

Stewardship, biblically interpreted, tells us an important truth about one of the ways that we human creatures, who have been restored in Christ to the life of faith that God originally intended for us, may faithfully live with nature. In this context, we can cautiously re-read the famous – and, for some, infamous – "dominion" text of Genesis 1. That text has sometimes been read as offering humans free reign to do what they please with nature. "Dominion" has thus been understood as "domination." But, in my view, that interpretation "reads into" the text secular meanings that are not there. So we must read that text in its own biblical context.

The way of reading the Genesis 1 dominion text that makes best sense to me, after many years of wrestling with it, is best spelled out by the method Luther recommended, letting Scripture interpret Scripture. Says the Letter to the Ephesians: "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love as Christ loved us and give himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." (Ephesians 5:1-2) Created in the image of God, we are to imitate or image-forth the love of God in everything that we do. Which God? The God confessed by texts like Genesis 1, as Walter Bruggeman has argued, is the "shepherd-king," the caring God.

Sheep-herding by a good and wise shepherd may indeed be the most suggestive biblical image we have for "good" or "responsible" stewardship. I have argued elsewhere that the Bible leaves us with this image of good stewardship: creative intervention in the earth, for the sake of building up a just and sustainable human community. In other words, stewardship, rightly interpreted, means shepherding the blessings of the earth to build human communities so that all people share equitably in those blessings and in a way that does not destroy "the commons" of the earth. An example: cutting down the rain forests of the earth is neither good nor wise. That damages "the lungs of the planet" and often forces native peoples who hitherto had lived sustainably in and with the rain forests for centuries into economic servitude. Another example: designing cities with good housing for all and with neighborhoods where walking is both possible and encouraged, cities powered by renewable energy sources, and dependent for food and other necessities of life mainly on their own bioregions, is surely good and wise stewardship.

Partnership

Partnership is a biblically attested way of being with nature that shifts our attention away from building just and sustainable human communities to caring for the needs of nature itself, particularly in relationship to the ripple effects of even the most creative and just of human interventions in the earth. This much we can learn from a close reading of the creation narrative of Genesis 2.

Why was the human creature placed in the garden, according to this text? The answer given by most people who know the Bible will be wrong, more often than not. Why? This is due to what now must be regarded as a fundamentally mistaken traditional translation of Genesis 2:15, namely,

that God took the newly created human creature and placed that creature in the garden "to till it and keep it." This familiar translation wrongly suggests that the human creature was placed in the garden by God to use it as a means of production and to own it.

On the contrary, the correct translation of the Genesis 2:15 text is that God placed the human creature in the garden "to serve and protect it." Hence the suggestiveness, in this context, of the word partnership. This means that humans are placed on the earth as partners with – not lords over – all the creatures of nature, particularly those who are situated closest to the niche in the earth where humans live. We have a beautiful narrative of this partnership in the Noah story. Noah took not only his family, but two of every kind of living creatures with him on the ark, both the unclean and the clean, both the wild and the domesticated. He cared for and protected all these creatures, not just those that he needed to meet the physical needs of his family.

In my experience, some church people tend to know what such partnering with nature means, better than others—particularly family farmers. Many of them have been good stewards of the land that God allotted them, farming it both productively and sustainably, unlike the unsustainable practices of many agribusiness firms today – the very firms that more or less have pushed the heirs of family farmers off the land. But those family farmers I encountered or read about were also more than stewards. As I listened to their stories, I knew that they also were caretakers and protectors. They were not driven by greed or by the goal to maximize profits. They were "God-fearing" people. They cared for the land and protected the land not just so that it could be sustainably productive, but also because they loved the land. They partnered with the land in name of their Creator and Redeemer.

Honorship

Honorship is surely not a household word. But we need such a word if we are to give a full account of the biblical understanding of our relationship with nature. I take my cue in this respect from the resonance of the words of the fourth commandment, "honor your father and your mother." I believe that Scripture also calls us to honor heavens above and their virtually infinite glories, the mountains and the streams that gush forth from those heights, the forests and the fields and the seas and the creatures who dwell therein, and, above all, the lilies of the fields.

The eminent American Lutheran theologian of nature, Joseph Sittler, taught us to see things this way. Sittler argued forcefully and often provocatively that Christians are called to honor the integrity of nature. So he recommended that Jesus' beloved saying about the lilies of the field should be translated "*Behold* the lilies of the field," rather than using the more familiar word, "consider." "I am called upon in such a saying," said Sittler, "not simply to 'look' at [something else], but to 'regard' things with a kind of spiritual honoring of the immaculate integrity of things which are not myself." This kind of beholding is what I am calling honorship.

Good stewardship means working creatively and sustainably to build human communities where justice prevails. Partnership means caring for all the creatures of nature within reach of our human niche on the earth for their own sakes, especially those which have been or which could be impacted by the stewardly interventions of humans. Honorship means stepping back from the creatures of nature, near and far, contemplating them, wondering at them, giving thanks to God for them, and resolving to let them be in their own God-given niches. Honorship presupposes that God our Creator and Redeemer has God's own purposes for all the creatures of our cosmos, not just us humans, from the lilies to the galaxies, from the rain forests to the black holes, which purposes we may at most only dimly understand.

We can hear testimony to this honoring of nature in many of the Psalms, especially songs of praise like Psalm 29, which celebrates the thunder and lightning of God in the mountains, and Psalm 104, which is a paean of praise for all the creatures that God has made, including the lion that comes out after dark, seeking its prey from God, at a time when humans have retired to their own protected niche, and the great sea monsters, the leviathans of the creation, which the Psalmist says that God has created to "rejoice in" or to "play with."

The book of Job (38-40) is likewise full of references to the great creatures of the wilds, for whom God cares, in their own right, apart from the human world. Imagine God rejoicing in the virtually infinite energy storms of the cosmic black holes or playing with the billions and billions of galaxies in our known universe – that is the scope of the Psalmist's imagination and Job's, too. As new creatures in Christ, accordingly, we who have been freed to be the humans God originally intended us to be can lift up our eyes to the hills and join in the praise of all creation. Best of all we can behold the lilies of the field, for even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed as one of these. This is our honorship of God's good and majestic world of nature.

If this, then, is God's promise for us as members of the Church, that in Christ, as renewed creatures, who now are freed to live with the whole world of nature as God first intended humans to live, what are we to do, once we have been claimed by this vision of good stewardship, partnership and honorship?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote a famous book entitled *The Cost of Discipleship*. In that spirit, we will want to avoid the temptation to look for some theological "quick-fix," as if all we needed to do would be to figure out the right "action steps" with regard to our life with nature. No, new life in Christ means death to our old ways of being and doing, a radical repentance. And that takes time and thought and working things out with fear and trembling – and with much faith.