

Trees

“Healing the earth begins at the Cross.”

Romans 8:18-25

God’s Thinkers and Tinkers: taking care of God’s stuff #6

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October 11, 2009

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Trees and Life

I love trees. I love how they are the first to herald spring and the earth’s return to life after the February mud. Buds swell on branches and then burst with new green. Of all the sights burned in my memory is an April valley on the west slope of the Smoky Mountains. A friend and I, prepared to drive over the crest, stopped the car and stood in awe. The valley was mountain laurel lavender and dogwood white mixed thoughtfully with reborn, hardwood green. These blended to dark greens of spruce and hemlock as the carpet lifted with the slopes. Up, up, our eyes lifted to higher altitudes where thin hazy air hung like drapes to branches adorned with the white of the night’s snows, then on to the mountaintops where the trees wanted to touch the face of heaven.

I love trees. I love walking through groves of spruce, fir, and pine – cooling the forest floor in mid-summer heat – accenting the air with sharp-sweet evergreen aroma. I love watching broad leaves of maple and beech sway like flags in the breeze while jittery leaves of aspen just want to dance. Listen and you hear their light percussion-whisper stir the earth to joy. God’s symphonic splendor.

I love trees. I love the disclosure of maple’s yellows and hues of red when summers’ age yields to fall and chlorophyll expresses a final effort of green. The other colors have always been there, hidden but now appear like brushstrokes. Last Saturday on a First Adventure hike, we watched an Eastern peewee dance among their branches, a downy woodpecker nervously poked from spot to spot. Sometime take in forested autumn hills as they blush with beauty against the deep blue sky. God’s world set afire yet not consumed.

I love trees. I love how, once stripped of leaves by harsh winds of late autumn and winter and blanketed by coats and caps of snow they raise from the white and gray earth, standing as sentinels over the land. Wind blows: they creak and crack in complaint, yet stand resolute in hope.

Grasslands sooth the senses and tease eyes to look afar. Deserts enchant the soul with stark beauty and hidden life. Oceans roll in watery expanse.

Trees...stand as God's monuments.

Two Trees

The ancient Bible story describes trees planted by God in the midst of Paradise.

Out of the ground God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.¹

Monuments: symbols for the care of every kind which humankind receives from God. It was also a tree in the garden that stood as a standard, calling all people to be ever-mindful of the presence and authority of God. Stay in love, stay in obedience, stay in relationship to be as God intended. Who knew that the health of creation depended on it?

You know the story. Adam and Eve, man and woman, curious creatures given everything, are yet so full of their own willfulness like every...one...of...us. Eve is tempted and eats the forbidden fruit. Adam follows. And they fall.

Placing their own desires before all else. They push God out of their lives to decide what they want for themselves...by themselves ...without God. And that is sin. Underlying all that we call sins: lying; and stealing; and killing; and obsessing over that which is not ours; is this one sin. Sin is pushing God out.

And now the Apostle shows us that the consequences of sin are not just about you. He says that creation itself was subject to futility because of it. Fallen humanity begot a fallen world. Separate ourselves from God, and we all take the earth down with us – at least to some extent.

So if you were to ask him what the source of pollution and the scars of strip mining are about, Paul would say: sin.

Air quality has been a concern since coal fires filled cities with dark smog and continues to concern us with smog alerts on hot and stuffy summer days. The EPA reports that more than a third of surveyed rivers, and about half of all lakes and estuaries in the United States are too polluted for swimming or fishing.²

Higher temperatures, caused by heat-trapping gasses released to a great extent by factories and vehicles, threaten drought, disease, floods, and lost ecosystems. From sweltering heat to rising seas, global warming's effects are no longer the abstract threat I learned about in college; they are a present reality.³

Tropical forests rich in resources are devastated because policies allow their conversion to other uses at great environmental and social cost. Land has been degraded, wildlife habitat has been lost, and people have been displaced from their homes. Tropical deforestation at current rates is expected to result in the extinction of 5-10% of tropical species per decade over the next 50 years. More than 50% of God's tropical forest creation, roughly 10 million species will be destroyed forever.⁴

I could go on to describe urban sprawl, temperate forest land mismanagement, or toxic substances in the biosphere Rachel Carson first alerted us to nearly 50 years ago in her book, *Silent Spring*.

Some might blame our technology: that we have invented too much for our own good. Yet, I don't think technology's the problem. Scientists have described an oppressive form of air pollution that created a two-mile-thick blanket of smog over South Asia, perhaps causing the premature deaths of a half-million people in India each year, causing deadly floods in some areas and drought in others. It was caused by "a grimy cocktail of ash, soot, acids and other damaging, airborne particles...as much the result of low-tech polluters such as wood and dung-burning stoves, cooking fires and forest clearing as it is of dirty industries."⁵ The problem is not our science or our technology.

It's the way humankind's been living after the tree in the garden. Paul says,

*...we know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.*⁶

I'll say it another way. Creation groans, *waiting for our redemption* because when we become like Jesus we will finally get it right. Our restoration to *God's Image*: will mean the healing and completion of creation.⁷

Waiting for our redemption: we are God's thinkers and tinkers given responsibility to care for the earth. Paying attention to its needs and its brokenness is not in the end just a matter of science or politics or a question about whether you are sentimental about trees. It is a matter of our spirituality. Does the earth belong to us, no questions asked? Or do we belong to God and will we live like it in the world?

Your relationship with God has everything to do with how you treat the earth. And all creation depends on your redemption: something that, if you allow it, has been settled on a cross...

...which occurs to me, was also a tree.

Dependence and Dependability

The Book of Revelation, the last writing in the Bible, offers a picture of the end of history, when the last of sin and evil are overcome and God's victory in Jesus is complete. The author offers a picture of a Holy City in which God dwells with people and people live in God's light and love. At the end of history death and decay are no more, every tear is dried, and there is no mourning. The writer describes the City and says a river runs through it; and on either side of the river is the tree of life; its leaves are for the healing of the nations.⁸ This is the promised tree; the tree to which we aspire.

It started with a tree in a garden. It will all come home with a tree in the City. So what comes in-between the trees will matter: earth's trees of today and tomorrow will bear witness on how well we do our job.

Will they say we belong to Jesus? Will they say we are people of the Cross?

¹ Genesis 2:8-9 (NRSV)

² *Houston Chronicle*, Tuesday, October 1, 2002.

³ Global Warming Web Page, Natural Resources Defense Council Web Site.

<http://www.nrdc.org/globalwarming/>

⁴ *Forest Resources*, *Tropical Forests* web page, World Resource Institute Website.

<http://www.wri.org/biodiv/tropical.html>

⁵ Jill Lawless, AP, *Low-Tech Pollution Darkening 'Asian Brown Cloud'*, *Houston Chronicle*, August 21, 2002.

⁶ Romans 8:22-23

⁷ N. T. Write, *Romans*. New International Bible, vol. X. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002. pp 596-597.

⁸ Revelation 22-23.