

CREATION GROANING: A THEOLOGY FOR ECOLOGY

Romans 8:18–25

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*O God, you love our earth;
From sunrise to sunset
you fill land and sea with riches;
The hills rejoice at your touch;
The valleys shout for joy.
Yes, they sing.*

*Open our eyes to your resplendent world,
That we may care for the earth
As our companion in creation.*

*May the pure song of air, water, and trees
Broaden our minds, lift up our hearts,
And guide us to you. Amen.
(Thomas Berry, CP)*

Some of you might have heard that the Brevard County Manatees, the Class A minor league affiliate of the Milwaukee Brewers located in Florida, have done away with batting practice before their games. They now have “hitting rehearsal.” Why? Batting practice is generally called “BP.” (“Let’s go have some BP!” would not be a real popular slogan!) That’ll show ‘em, won’t it?

That is about as helpful as when the Congress changed the name of “French fries” in their cafeteria to “liberty fries” when France refused to join the coalition forces in invading Iraq.

It’s hard sometimes to know what to do with our anger, and to be sure, there are plenty of individuals and entities receiving the brunt of our anger these days. Starting, of course, with BP, which, according to memos sent prior to the explosion at Deep Horizon, paid little or no attention to engineers’ concerns about safety and the possibility of failure. Time and time again it has seemed that BP executives just didn’t “get it,” didn’t understand the severity of the spill, the economic and environmental impact. The credibility was continually strained when their estimates of how much oil was pouring forth were constantly minimized despite scientific and governmental evidence to the contrary. And though C.E.O. Tony Hayward has been replaced as the chief spokesperson while he (hopefully!) gets treatment for foot-in-mouth disease, the anger is still very much there.

Nearly 400,000 people have signed up on a “Boycott BP” Facebook page. I certainly sympathize with that feeling, but my question then becomes “Where do we go?” To Exxon, which until three months ago was responsible for the largest oil spill in our history, the Exxon Valdez? To

Chevron, which has despoiled thousands of Amazon forest acres in South America? To Shell, which only recently capped a major oil spill in the Niger Delta in Africa? I could go on.

Maybe the focus of anger should be on “big oil” in general. After all, their CEO’s were the ones who admitted recently before Congress that the only backup plan they had to cap underwater oil spills was to make sure spills didn’t happen. Their lack of attention to detail was highlighted when their reports all sounded alike, word for word, warning us that walruses could be endangered if there was a spill in the gulf. And of course they are the ones who spent big money hiring lobbyists to make sure any laws pertaining to energy were favorable to their bottom line, generally at the expense of the environment.

So let’s expand the anger to include politicians, especially Congress and presidents. We love to bash our politicians. After all, many of them in the past 30 years or so worshipped on the altar of de-regulation. If the federal government were only out of our way, we were told, everything would be fine and oil companies and coal companies could do their job. We don’t need government to tell us how to do our business. Their prayer might be a paraphrase of the rabbi’s prayer in “Fiddler on the Roof.” “May the Lord bless and keep the government...as far away as possible.” Of course, now many are praying a different prayer: “Lord, please send government to help us.”

No, there is plenty of anger to go around. And anger can be a good thing. Frederick Buechner says that of all the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. “To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback,” he concludes, “is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.”¹

Psychologists tell us that beneath much of our anger is deep pain, deep hurt, and maybe we would do best by looking in our mirrors and trying to figure out how we got here. After all, from the very first page of scripture to the very end, one cannot separate God and creation. To be one with God is to be one with creation. To be in love with God is to be in love with God’s creation. What went wrong?

Part of the problem is that for centuries our theology has been misguided, to the point where our present attitude to the natural world tends to be that of a consumer to a commodity. The world is there to be used; somewhat like a gigantic cookie jar, with a never-failing supply of goodies for our hungry little fingers. All we have to do is to stretch out and help ourselves.

The roots of this exploitative attitude to nature lie deep within our hallowed Western Christian heritage. It can be traced back centuries, back to the medieval church. But we don’t have to go back that far, especially as we look at how our theology in our own country developed during the industrial revolution. It was then that many of our most beloved hymns that we still sing today were written, and if we were to remove ourselves from the emotions they stir up as we remember singing them with grandma and grandpa and take a look at what the words say, we would find that the notion of earthly creation wasn’t all that important.

There is one of our NaCoMe favorites:

*“One glad morning when this life is o’er I’ll fly away
To a home on God’s celestial shore, I’ll fly away.
When the shadows of this life have grown, I’ll fly away.
Like a bird from prison bars has flown, I’ll fly away.”*

Or a favorite of mine in our hymnbook:

“Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah, pilgrim through this barren land.”

Or do any of you remember this:

*“Rise my soul, and stretch thy wings, thy better portion trace;
rise from transitory things toward heaven, thy native place.
Sun and moon and stars decay, time shall soon this earth remove
Rise my soul, and haste away to seats prepared above.”*

Beautiful hymns, some of which might strike an emotional chord in our hearts, but they are also symptoms. They betray a theology, a view of God, the world, and humanity, which consistently downgrades this world in favor of the next. A theology which views this world as, at best, a place of pilgrimage, which we have to endure, like a prison, or a barren land, in order to achieve the heavenly bliss of those “seats prepared above.”

Small wonder, then, that when the industrial and scientific revolutions combined with the puritan ethic to find a use for “this barren land,” religion had little to say. If some return could be reaped from the vale of tears then so much the better. So earth became a commodity; the rawest form of raw material; to be used by humanity as we saw fit, for our own pleasure and profit.

And so here we are, we have profited, we have pleased. But in profiting and pleasuring, we have also polluted. We have so grossly profited, pleased, and polluted, for the first time in our confessional history, our *Brief Statement of Faith* written in 1990, makes the claim that in rebelling against God, we “threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.”² So if we don’t soon learn how to be meek, there won’t be any earth left to inherit. Our whole creation is groaning in labor pains.

So what of the future? We need a new vision, and in order to do that we need to go back, beyond our hymns, beyond the middle ages theology, to the very oldest of our traditions—the writings of scripture where we find the fundamental understanding of the world as the creation of God.

“The earth is the Lord’s, and all that is in it. The world, and those who live in it. For he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers,” sings our Psalmist.

Or go even further back all the way to Genesis, where we find another positive statement about the nature of the world. This world most emphatically is NOT an inferior realm of sinful material

things, out of which we must rise into the realm of pure spirit. This world in its heavens and its earth, its oceans and its seas, its mountains and its hills, its flora and its fauna, is GOOD, very, very good. Seven times in the first chapter of the first book of the first testament of the Bible, it says that.

And in the very next chapter our relationship to creation is made clear. We are to take care of it, to be responsible for it, or as one scholar has said, “to preserve the garden from all harm.” Unfortunately we have done a poor job of good Bible study. That word “dominion” which we are to exercise over the rest of creation (“radah” in Hebrew) reveals that it must be understood in terms of care-giving, even nurturing, not exploitation. As the image of God, human beings should relate to the nonhuman as God relates to us.³

But that’s not all the Bible says, for the world is to be viewed more than just creation by God and preservation by humanity. To the biblical writers, the world is not merely a backdrop, the stage upon which the drama of God and humanity is played out. Rather, in the Bible the world takes its place, not as a dumb spectator, but as an alive and lively participant.

The seas divide, the desert blooms like a rose, the hills break forth into singing, the creatures—whales and donkeys and ravens all play their part—even the stars have their role: the morning stars sing together and the Star of the nativity leads to the manger in Bethlehem; part of our view of salvation is that of hills being made low and valleys lifted up.

The biblical vision is clear: *We do not stand alone before God*. Rather, we are part of something more vast and more complex—a total creation—today we call it an ecosystem. And if one little part is damaged or taken away, the entire system is brought into bondage... or decay...or death.

And only through salvation, only through the restoration of humanity can the creation also be restored to its rightful state of peace and harmony and beauty, to a true state of shalom.

We’re all in it together, friends, in partnership with the world in the drama of restoration, of salvation. The trees, the hippopotami, the little child, the waters.

Let me carry this vision one step further. When the Bible speaks of a new creation, it’s not talking about another world, but this world. There are those who believe that the Bible says that this world really isn’t all that important, that it will be evaporated away into some ethereal heavenly realm of the spirit. So we can subdue it, we can dominate it, because eventually in God’s new creation, all of creation will disperse into the realm of the spirit. We have inherited that theology from the ancient Greeks.

Not so, say the biblical writers. We have talked about the first page of the Bible. Now go to the last page. “Then I saw a new heaven AND a new earth.” And it is that “and” that is something that the medieval church, the pietists of the 19th century, and today’s fundamentalists seem to have forgotten.

“I saw a new heaven and a new earth, and he showed me the pure river of the water of life, bright as crystal flowing from the throne of God, through the middle of the street of the city. Also on either side of the river the tree of life, yielding its fruit each month, and the leaves were for the healing of the nations.” (Rev. 22:1–3, paraphrase)

God’s aim for all creation is the healing of the nations. Therefore, as we view the Gulf oil spill through theological lens, we are forced to ask basic questions of our faith, of who we are, and who we were created to be; of the make up of the family, how we as families and individuals can serve God’s creation; how the family of God is not just limited to individuals, but all of creation. And it has to do with justice and the healing of the nations.

This is a tall order for the people of God, and it will take everything we have to live up to this vision. It certainly starts by looking in the mirror at our own lifestyles, from the cars we drive to the foods we eat to the light bulbs we use to the recycling we do.

But it doesn’t end there. It will take more than individual actions. We have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God not only in our individual lives, but also in our corporate entities, in our institutions, and in our nation’s priorities. Over the past 20 years the United States has developed a reputation internationally as a laggard in so many of these environment issues.⁴

Thus it takes getting involved in politics and making sure our government protects us and our environment, just as we expect and hope our government protects us from Al Qaeda. It is a national security issue. I know that there are many who wax eloquent about what great things the free market and the free American could do if government would just get off their backs.

But I, for one, am grateful that the meat that I eat does not ooze with salmonella; that paint in my children’s room is not filled with lead; that my car gets more than 12 miles to the gallon; that anyone could not be breezily denied a job for reasons of race, creed, gender, or sexual orientation; and that, yes, when I breathe the air around me, I do not need a mask. It was the government that has made all of that possible. You see, our government is not our enemy. Government is the imperfect embodiment of our common will.

Let me close with a little story, a Sufi tale filled with ecological wisdom. It is about a little stream that wanted to cross the desert. Each time it tried it would be swallowed up in the hot desert sand. But one day a voice was heard reassuring the stream that it could cross the desert. When the stream inquired of the voice, this is what it was told:

“By hurtling in your own accustomed way you cannot get across. You will either disappear or become a marsh. You must allow the wind to carry you over, to your destination. The stream could cross the desert by allowing itself to be absorbed in the wind. But the stream objected to this idea, since it had never been absorbed before. The stream wanted to maintain its individuality. If that were lost, how could be stream be itself?”

“The wind,” said the sand, “takes up water, carries it over the desert, and then lets it fall again. Falling as rain, the water again becomes a river.”

The voice reminded the stream that its essential part is always being carried away to form a stream again, and this essential part is always elusive. So the stream raised its vapor into the welcoming arms of the wind, which bore it along gently and easily, letting it fall in the mountains miles away.

In this way, the stream learned its true identity from the sands which extend from the riverside all the way to the mountain.

We can learn our true identity and be fulfilled with respect and reliance upon our partner in creation, the world. For we have learned to fly through the air like birds, swim in the sea like fish, to soar through space like comets. It is high time we learned to walk the earth like the children of God we were created to be.⁵

Amen.

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¹ Frederick Buechner, , *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*. New York: Harper and Row, 1973. p. 2.

² “A Brief Statement of Faith,” *Book of Common Worship*, Louisville: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1993, p. 95.

³ Terrence Fretheim, “Genesis,” *The New Interpreters’ Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994, Vol. 1, p. 346.

⁴ We signed but never ratified the Convention on Biological Diversity; the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants; the Rotterdam Convention, which relates to the use of pesticides and hazardous chemicals in international trade; and of course, the Kyoto Protocol, signed by President Clinton but spurned by President Bush and the Senate.

⁵ A paraphrase from a sermon of Dr. Martin Luther King.

Romans 8:18–25 NRSV

18 I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. **19** For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; **20** for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope **21** that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. **22** We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; **23** 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. **24** For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? **25** But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.