

Peace on the Land

The Bible and the Environment

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United Methodist campus minister at Oregon State University in Corvallis

The Environment is a hot issue right now. Even breakfast cereals and Saturday cartoons are cashing in on the trend. Beneath the fad, however, lies a serious issue. For us as Christians the crucial question is: What unique perspective does our faith give us on this important matter? For answers let's look at the sourcebook of our faith, the Bible.

The starting point regarding the environment, as with everything else in the Bible, is the covenant between God and the community of God's creation. The first words of the Bible in Genesis 1 tell us that God is creator of the energizing source of all life. The Creator then forms a covenant with the created, and the rest of the Bible is, in a sense, the record of this unfolding covenant or agreement.

The ultimate goal of the covenant is *shalom*, the Hebrew word usually translated as "peace." ("I will make with them a covenant of peace [*shalom*]," says God in Ezekiel 34:25.) But *shalom* is so much more than what we usually think of as peace. *Shalom* means well-being, wholeness, and a reality where everything exists in total harmony with everything else. This state of peace and harmony includes not just all people but animals, plants, and even the soil.

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So we learn early on that the covenant is not only with God's people but with *all* of God's creation. (Genesis 9:1-17) Visions of the ideal existence that such a covenant would create include images of all creation living together in harmony, where even the wolf and the lamb can lie down together and little children can play fearlessly with poisonous snakes. (Isaiah 11:1-9)

When we title an article on the environment, "Peace on the Land," this is what we mean. Everything that has to do with life ultimately is tied to this wholistic concept of peace.

The covenant required to reach such an ideal existence involves a three-way relationship of respect and justice between God and humanity *and* the rest of creation. This relationship recognizes that the created world has value because of its own relationship with God, not just because it might be useful to humans. (See Psalms 19, 104 and Job 38 – 41.) The three-way relationship is based on the affirmation, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it." (Psalm 24:1)

Yet if the earth is the Lord's, then it is not someone else's. More specifically, *it is not ours*. What this means is that we are not free to do with it as we please. Rather we are to be stewards of the earth, caretakers for the one who is not only the owner but our landlord as well. Such a responsibility is what is referred to in Genesis 1:26-28 when God gives us "dominion" over the earth. We are not to exploit and waste what surrounds us; rather we are called specifically to "till" the garden, a strong caretaker image. (Genesis 2:15)

Justice for Land and People

The covenantal relationship is one not only of mutual respect but also one of justice. There can be no harmony for some while there is exploitation, whether of people or of the land. The covenantal approach to environmental issues is based on this sense that while the gifts of nature are to be used, they are not to be exploited or wasted, just as people's gifts are to be used and not exploited. "I brought you into a plentiful land to eat its fruits and its good things," says God. "But when you entered you defiled my land, and made my heritage an abomination." (Jeremiah 2:7) What were the consequences to Israel for such wastefulness? They were carried out of the land into a several-hundred-year exile.

The justice called for in this three-way covenant is not just for the environment. The Bible is full of calls for social justice in relationships between people as well. Not following these commands of God results in dire consequences. And, as in all agreements, what affects one affects all. Just as God's original covenantal promise involves the gift of land flowing with milk and honey, so the consequences of breaking the covenant involve being cut off from that land.

For example, the first sin where Adam and Eve decided to take control of their own environment and not listen to God resulted in their being banished from the Garden of Eden. (Genesis 3) The second sin, the murder of Abel by Cain results in Cain's being cut off from the land. The very ground cried out against Cain, and he was forced to wander as a fugitive from the earth, a "punishment . . . greater than I can bear." (Genesis 4:1-15)

Furthermore, the defiling of the land mentioned above was just one reason why the Jews were forced into exile. Other reasons listed in Jeremiah for losing the land include oppressing the alien, orphans, or widows and shedding innocent blood. (Jeremiah 7:1-15)

Environmental Issues

But wasn't this article supposed to be about the environment? Are the Bible's only comments on the environment just a by-product of its discussion of social justice? No way! Because the covenant with God includes the whole environment, the Bible has things to say specifically about some of the environmental issues which most plague us today. Let's look at some of them.

Consumerism. Our culture values consuming—using things up. But the Bible counsels taking only what we need and sharing the rest with others. Read about manna in the wilderness (Exodus 16), and the sharing of early Christians. (Acts 2:44-45)

Accumulation of wealth. The Bible has strong messages about the accumulation of wealth for wealth's sake. Jesus talks about the folly of storing riches on earth (Luke 12:13-21) and about the barrier to faithful living that is created by amassed fortunes. (Matthew 19:16-26) The prophets note that Israel's unfaithfulness includes amassing wealth at the expense of others. Amos 2:6 and Micah 3:5 are but two examples. But the strongest statement is the requirement that, in the shalom community, every fifty years the land will be taken from the wealthy and redistributed to those who were too poor or too powerless to keep it. (Leviticus 25)

Overproduction. The tendency to cultivate our land until all the nutrients are gone and the soil blows away in a dust bowl is opposed in the Bible, which advocates a fallow, or sabbath year, every seventh year. (Leviticus 25:1-7)

Destroying habitat. Destroying rain forests and amassing huge corporate farms runs contrary to Isaiah 5:8, "Woe to those who . . . join field to field, / until there is no more room, and you are made to dwell in the midst of the land [without the other creatures that are a part of our community]." (*Revised Standard Version*)

Sustainable yields. Sustainable yield is an agricultural policy which uses only the fruits without taking the tree that produced them—or as in the old fairy tale—taking the golden eggs without killing the goose that laid them. The Bible also says to take the eggs but not the bird and to cut the fruit but not the tree. (Deuteronomy 22:6 and 20:19)

Pollution. God, the true shepherd, is very clear in Ezekiel 34:18-19: “Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet?” (See also Jeremiah 2:7)

Community of Peace

So where do we end up in our biblical exploration of environmental issues? The same place we started. The goal of our faithfulness is the building and nurturing of the *shalom* community to which our covenant calls us. This involves care and justice for the land—the soil, the trees, the crops, the animals. But it also involves justice between people. In the end, true *shalom* will not be possible for any being until *shalom* is a reality for all of creation.

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We will leave the final comment on this subject to the Word of God as recorded in Leviticus 26:3-6, 14, 34a: “If you follow my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them faithfully, I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. Your threshing shall last to the time of the vintage, and your vintage shall last to the time for sowing; and you shall eat your bread to the full, and dwell in your land securely. And I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid . . . But if you will not obey me, and do not observe all these commandments . . . then the land shall make up for its sabbath years as long as it lies desolate, while you are in the land of your enemies . . . As long as it lies desolate, it shall have the rest it did not have on your sabbath when you were living on it.”

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