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Leviticus 25:1-7

### REST FOR THE EARTH

Where were you on April 22, 1970? I was a senior in high school, just a few weeks from graduating, and I was blissfully unaware that 20 million people demonstrated around the country that day for something that would turn out to be the most important issue facing the survival of the human race.

The song of the year was Simon and Garfunkel's Bridge Over Troubled Waters; gas costs 36 cents a gallon; Paul McCartney announced that the Beatles had disbanded; the Apollo 13 mission to the moon was abandoned in a near catastrophe; 100,000 people demonstrated against the war in Vietnam; the largest rock concert of all time was held, and both Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin died of drug overdoses. The first New York City Marathon was held, but of all those events, one was more important than all the others. And what was it?

Earth Day was celebrated on April 22, 1970, and 20 million people demonstrated across this country to sound the alarm about environmental degradation and call for a new relationship with spaceship earth — quite the popular phrase in those days thanks to the most important photograph ever taken — the photo known as "Earthrise at Christmas." Taken by the crew of Apollo 8, it showed us our world as seen from deep space, hanging like a blue jewel in the immense blackness. Or as Archibald MacLeish put it in his poem inspired by this photograph, "To see the earth as we now see it, small and beautiful in that eternal silence where it floats, is to see ourselves as riders on the earth together."

Those astronauts, Frank Borman, Jim Lovell and William Anders had become the first humans ever to leave Earth's orbit, entering lunar orbit on Christmas Eve, 1968. In an historic live broadcast that night, the crew took turns reading from the Book of Genesis, closing with this holiday wish from Commander Borman: "We close with good night, good luck, a Merry Christmas, and God bless all of you — all of you on the good Earth."

A less well known incident occurred just a year later, when another astronaut, Russ Schweikart, found himself stranded outside his Apollo capsule high above the earth in 1969. Floating in that complete silence and not certain, as none of those men were ever certain, that he would even make it home, he gazed back at the earth and was so overwhelmed by his

emotions that he said something very unusual for a left-brained, non-emotive macho fight pilot. He said that he wanted to “hug and kiss that gem like a mother does her firstborn child.”

I like to imagine that he thought of sending this message back home: “Houston, I need a little time alone.”

Such is the power of a new point of view, a completely new perspective – and this paradigm shift gave birth to the modern environmental movement. We looked at our home as it is: round, blue, wrapped in a thin layer of life-giving oxygen; we saw no borders, no political divisions, and no trade zones. We saw, in fact, we saw what Tolstoy had imagined without even going into space. There are no nations. There is only creation. And a radical Roman Catholic theologian named Matthew Fox went so far as to say in the 1980’s that we need to think of the earth itself as a kind of Cosmic Christ, and in destroying it we are actually crucifying this cosmic Christ all over again.

In 1970, for a number of reasons, the extent to which we had fouled our rivers and poisoned our lakes became dramatically clear. The most famous of which was when Cleveland’s Cuyahoga River caught fire and burned for 30 minutes. That river used to bubble like a cauldron full of chemicals. Not only could you not swim in it, but if you fell in you needed to be checked by a doctor. In Southern California an oil spill fouled 30 miles of beaches and thick smog choked many large American cities.

For almost a decade, a senator named Gaylord Nelson had been warning people that the environment needed to become a popular and political issue. In the tumultuous decade of the 1960’s, with an increasingly unpopular war raging, it wasn’t easy to get people to pay attention to the environment. In fact, we had simply taken it for granted.

So, Senator Nelson began to pester then President Kennedy, trying to persuade him to make the issue a part of a new national conversation. Kennedy agreed to do so. Then at a conference in Seattle in 1969, Nelson announced that in the spring of 1970, a mass demonstration on behalf of the environment would be held and everyone was invited to participate.

Just five months before Earth Day, the NYT’s ran a story about the rising tide of environmental concern that is “sweeping the nation’s campuses with an intensity that may be on its way to eclipsing student discontent over the war in Vietnam.” It was to be a national “teach in” (we used to have those) and the response was quite spectacular. 20 million people showed up, and on Thursday we celebrated the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Earth Day. What did you do?

The honest answer for most of us would probably be: not much. Went to work, tried to be nice, maybe thought about doing a few things differently, or thought to yourself: I try to be an environmentalist year round, or I’ve grown weary of the way we are trying to make being green into a new marketing strategy. But an even more intriguing question might be: what did the church do? Or, why should the church care?

Isn't being an "environmentalist whacko" as Rush Limbaugh likes to put it, an invention of secular humanist liberals? Isn't it a secret plot to destroy American business and give China the advantage in global markets? If we care about the earth aren't we just tree huggers trying to assuage our guilt by changing none of our habits but claiming to be "green?"

Well the truth is that religious communities have been green for a very long time, although they would just have thought of it as being faithful. Living in harmony with the land was a sacred obligation and abusing it was a sin. It was also suicidal during most of human history when farmers were thought to be more essential to life on earth than attorneys, say, or graduate students. Just ask yourself when it was you last heard someone introduce themselves as a farmer and had your teenager gush, "a farmer — awesome!"

Imagine a world in which all children know, for example that peanuts grow underground, not on trees, and that eggs start out warm, in nests, before they are ever collected in Styrofoam trays and chilled to stop the life from growing inside them. You don't have to go back to the time of the Bible, just go back a hundred years or get out of the city. Remember that far more of the faithful have sat in churches looking out on fields of lush green and high gold than on cityscapes. And once a year, they celebrated something the church calls Rogation Sunday. Ever heard of it?

More people have heard of Rogaine, the miracle cure for baldness, than have heard of Rogation Sunday, even though they are similar petitions for fertility of the land, and/or scalp. What is Rogation Day and when is it celebrated? That would be an excellent final Jeopardy question that only an Episcopalian farmer or a bookish clergyman would know the answer to.

But in the church, the Rogation Days were the three days before Ascension Day, which marks the time that Jesus is said to have ascended into heaven in the presence of his disciples 40 days after Easter. The rogation days are the three days right before Ascension Day, which this year is May 13. I'm sure that you will want to go home today and mark that on your calendar.

But it would be wise for the church to remember that if we do not live in harmony with the land we are not being faithful, and we are literally robbing the future from our children. We have taken what we wanted from the land in order to have what we want in life, and pretended that we could not abuse it into submission. We could not break it beyond repair. Those days are over.

And at the heart of our sickness is the idea that we "own land" —that it is like clay in our hands, and we say, "Let there be a subdivision," and behold there is a subdivision. And if there is a river that runs through it, let it be a place to dump grass clippings, motor oil, and the run-off of our nitrate driven way of farming. We are a toxic nation living a throw-away lifestyle on a perishing planet. God help us, and I do mean God help us.

God help us to help ourselves to preserve what we have been given. The 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of Leviticus is not the first place people think to go to look for inspiration in the environmental movement but they should. There is a little snippet of the Law of Moses there where we learn that the land belongs to God. It is not ours and never was. We are all tenant farmers, and

permission is given to work the ground for six years, and you should set aside enough to make it through the seventh year but on that seventh year you should hang it up.

As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, who lives on a farm, “Park the tractor. Put the tools away. Oil your work boots and put them in the closet, because the seventh year shall be a Sabbath of complete rest for the land. There shall be no pruning, no gathering into barns. There shall also be no shooing strangers off your property. If some wheat grows up from last year’s seed, it is there for anyone who needs it. If some grapes still grow from the unpruned vines, they belong to anyone who is hungry for them — including the wild animals you used to shoot for stealing your fruit.”

Here we go again with that whole “jubilee” thing — it’s shot through the Bible from start to finish, but in our time, we not only ignore it, we make jokes about it. Imagine, a day on which people do not shop? How old school. How American Gothic. What a foolish way to hurt your retail sales numbers.

The idea of a year of rest for the land is known only to wise farmers now who still let their field lie fallow from time to time; knowing that you cannot draw nutrients from the soil without ceasing or it becomes sterile. You cannot plow everything under the moment you are done harvesting or the rains will wash away your topsoil and more fertilizer will be required to jack it up season after season. You can only abuse Mother Nature so long and then you get the ultimate nightmare. What Rachel Carson called a “Silent Spring” — the name of her remarkable book published in 1962 that warned of a world where the land was so compromised that the birds stopped singing.

But when was the last time you saw a toad in your yard, the ones you used to see hopping around all the time after a rain? They are gone because our yards are toxic, saturated with weed-killers and turf builders sprayed from tank trucks that roll through the neighborhood and operated by guys in hazmat suits. Now if you cut across your neighbors perfect lawn, the bottom of your feet will turn green, but their reward will be great — uniform blades of grass that are cross-cut by a Hispanic lawn crew you can’t communicate with, who will blow the clippings into the street, and it will all end up running to the lake or fouling the storm sewers where those toads used to live. Who needs toads anyway? What I need is some Roundup, to shoot at weeds like a suburban cowboy.

Once upon a time, everyone was supposed to give the land a rest so that the land could recover — because if it did not, neither will we. The purpose was two-fold. Sabbath is a foretaste of heaven, where there is no more toil, no more striving, no more division between those who had and those who had not. And it was a vision of the earth as a gift over which we had only temporary custody — and it too needs a nap. We all need a nap. We need to step back and be thankful. Turn off the cash register, put away the fertilizer, and let the earth heal itself.

Now don’t get me wrong. Even back in the day there were people who found a way to get around the Sabbath laws. There were people who grew rich on the black market fruit business

(Get your Sabbath year peaches here while they last!). Others slapped their heads and said they had lost all track of time. Was it really the seventh year again? Already?

Some extreme orthodox groups in Israel still observe Sabbath rest for the land, but most of them get around it by arranging a fictitious sale of their land to a friendly Gentile every seven years, farming it as a sub-lessor, and then buying it back again after the Sabbath year is over.

“You know why, don’t you? Because there is hardly a human being alive who can sit and watch a field, a yard, or even a flower bed “go to waste” for a year. That is what we say about things that have been removed from our control, by the way. We say they are “going to waste,” as if their worth depended on our involvement with them.

Shawn and I have begun to do some serious gardening, and we are raising a lot of our own vegetables these days. These are in raised beds and we have a compost pile that we dump our table scraps into and yesterday when I took a pitch fork and turned it it started smoking. Who said gardening isn’t hot? But Shawn is patient, and sometimes when there is not a crop planted in one of the beds I will complain: “what’s going in there?” Nothing, she says. We’re just working the ground. It’s lying fallow. “Sounds like the waste of a perfectly good bed to me,” I think to myself.

Right now, the earth needs a rest. A rest from enough is never enough and from thinking that a field lying fallow is a wasted field. More is not always better, and we cannot show Mother Nature who is the boss. We are inseparable from Mother Nature and if we don’t live in harmony with the land we will be separated not only from that which sustains us but from one another and from God. Look out the window — what you see are not resources. They are fellow creatures, with their own rights and responsibilities before God. They have their own sacred duties to perform, if only we will let them.

“Thou shalt not kill.” “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.” “And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day for all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it.” Rest for God. Rest for the land. Rest for the earth. Rest for our souls.

Happy 40<sup>th</sup> Earth Day Mayflower. Let’s give it a rest.