

Spirituality and Environmental Health Lesson 4

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By Lahronda Welch Little

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The following scriptures are taken from *The Inclusive Bible: The First Egalitarian Translation*.

Genesis 1: 27-28, 31

27 Humankind was created as God's reflection: in the divine image God created them; female and male, God made them.

28 God blessed them and said, "Bear fruit, increase your numbers, and fill the earth - and be responsible for it! Watch over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air and all the living things on the earth!" 31 God looked at all of this creation, and proclaimed that this was good -very good. Evening came, and morning followed-the sixth day.

Romans 8:19, 22-23

19 All creation eagerly awaits the revelation of the children of God. 22 We know that from the beginning until now, all of creation has been groaning, in one great act of birth. 23 And not only creation, but all of us who possess the firstfruits of the Spirit-we too groan inwardly as we wait for our bodies to be set free.

Psalm 8

1 YHWH, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

You have placed your glory above the heavens!

2 From the lips of infants and children

You bring forth words of power and praise, to answer your adversaries

And to silence the hostile and vengeful.

3 When I behold your heavens, the work of your fingers,

The moon, the stars, which you set in place-

4 What is humanity that you should be mindful of us?

Who are we that you should care for us?

5 You have made us barely less than God,

And crowned us with glory and honor.

6 You have made us responsible

For the works of your hands,

Putting all things at our feet-

7 all sheep and oxen, yes, even the beasts of the field,,

8 the birds of the air, the fish of the sea

And whatever swims the paths of the sea.

YHWH, our Sovereign,

How majestic is your Name in all the earth.

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I enjoy long walks in nature. (In fact, these walks have been my saving grace over the past several weeks) During trying times, these walks are my saving grace. They allow me an opportunity to see and to reflect on how God's grace and peace surrounds and enfolds me. On one particularly clear spring day, the sky was a brilliant blue, and I could see every hue of green; and all of the varieties of flowers; and the air was crisp and fresh. I thought, "Wow, how God must love us so much to have given US such beauty." Then, as I continued to observe the different types of trees, birds, insects it occurred to me that God loves diversity.

This is how the environment thrives - by variety throughout nature, the inter-relations between plants, insects and animals, and the wind (because insects and the wind assist in pollination), and humanity to nurture and protect.

In light of the Creation narrative we are eternally connected to the earth. That is to say we were created from the earth and our bodies will return to the earth. Clean air, water, and earth are our right and our privilege given to each and every one of us by God. This is our spiritual connection to environmental health. The commandment to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves includes the environment, which we are to love and respect.

Sociologist of religion, Professor Kofi Asare Opoku offers the West African saying, "If you want to speak to God, speak to the winds." Herein, I suggest, is the essence of spirituality and environmental health. Our prayers, whether spoken in our hearts or on wind, carry messages to God that name the issues and affect change - even in the environment. Furthermore, the health of the environment is dependent upon us because we, humanity, are its caregivers.

Further thoughts to consider:

Creation and the mandate of humanity

The earth is sacred. Therefore, when we care for the Earth we honor God. There is little room for doubt that "No man is an island." These words, penned by the seventeenth century poet, scholar, and cleric John Donne reinforce the interdependent relationship between nature and humanity. The ecosystem feeds us and we feed it. The air we breathe keeps us alive, and in turn, our actions determine the quality of the air we breathe.

Environmental Injustice

As interdependent, spiritual beings, with creation and with another we must be concerned with how the environment affects those among us who are on the margins of society. Landfills in residential areas, chemical waste in waterways, and other pollution disproportionately affect the poor. This also underscores the issue of environmental injustice. The unjust treatment of the environment always adversely affects people and animals.

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Romans 8 teaches us that the liberation of our own bodies, our salvation, also sets creation free of its own bondage to decay. We know that decay is a part of life. But what I'm referring to are the effects of poor management of the earth. Humanity and the environment share in the bounty of God's grace.

Hope Expressed in Nature

The hope of God is made manifest through us. Psalm 8 is a song of praise to the sovereign God who created the entire universe. Taking care of the earth is a spiritual practice, and this practice facilitates life. The writer of Psalm 8 writes as one who experiences God in nature in a profound way. What does God convey to you when you're outside considering the beauty in all things?

Environmental justice means that if we love God with our minds, bodies and spirit then we must love God's creation. The hope of the environment lies within our ability to live into the purpose for which God has created us. We were created to care for one another and care for the environment. We are empowered by the Holy Spirit to responsibly care for the environment and everything within the ecological system. When we care for the earth we honor God.

Scripture Reflection:

Psalm 8 offers a cosmological view of creation in view of the majesty of God. How does this text affect how you see yourself in the world?

Practical Lesson:

What are some ways in which the church may faithfully respond and extend grace to the planet?

Prayer

Creator God, we are in awe of the beauty that is revealed in the earth. We are humbled that you love us so much so that you gave your Son Jesus Christ and gifted us with the responsibility to care for your world. May we continuously realize the overwhelming grace of God that frees us to fulfill our role as caregivers of the earth. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

Lahronda Welch Little is an elder track certified candidate for elder and a member of Stone Mountain First UMC. Presently, she is a PhD student in the Graduate Division of Religion at Emory University. She and her dear spouse, Tommy, live in Ellenwood, GA with their 2 sons, Lance and Kyle.