

“Interconnected, Interdependent”

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4-15-18 (Earth Day Sunday)

Based upon Psalm 104, Hosea 4:1-3

“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,” *Psalm 24:1* proclaims. Whoever wrote this psalm did not elaborate on that statement, preferring to shift to the topics of righteousness and worship. But if you skip ahead 80 psalms to today’s psalm, 104, then you will find a detailed image of the Lord’s earth and all that is in it, including but not limited to trees, rocks, streams, lions, leviathan, birds, and of course, human beings. We didn’t hear the whole thing read this morning because it’s a bit long. But God makes the springs that quench the thirst of “every wild animal,” causes the grass to grow for cattle, trees to provide shelter for the birds, and mountains to be homes for wild goats. There is even what seems to be a foreshadowing of Communion in this tribute to God’s peaceable kingdom, in that God makes “wine to gladden the human heart... and bread to strengthen the human heart.” (*Ps.104:15*). Everything lives together peaceably and happily in this psalm. There are no oppressors or conquerors, because God has given everything what it needs to thrive. This is a picture of Eden, God’s original perfect Creation.

Even back when this pretty song of praise to God for Creation was written, however, there was a big disconnect between the words and reality. Human sinfulness had long since spoiled the harmonious existence of Eden, as the prophet Isaiah pointed out when he prophesied: “The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant.” (*Is. 24:5*). In today’s text from the prophet Hosea, the state of the earth is so bad that God decides to bring a lawsuit against Israel for the destruction they caused. “Hear the word of the Lord, O people of Israel,” Hosea proclaims on God’s behalf. “For the Lord has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land.” I’ve preached before on the lawsuit metaphor which recurs throughout the prophetic texts. The people of Israel had entered into a covenant with Yahweh in the Sinai wilderness, one which they broke again and again, despite the fact that they renewed it twice before stepping into the Promised Land. So, the prophets, like lawyers, often charged the people with criminal breach of contract, and plead their case against humanity to the heavenly court of God, or the mountains, or whoever would listen.

In today’s selection from *Hosea*, the indictment includes three specific charges against the people of Israel: lack of faithfulness, lack of *hesed*, which can be translated either as “loyalty” or “steadfast love,” and lack of knowledge of the Lord. In *Hosea*, “knowledge of the Lord” usually means more than knowing that God exists; it means valuing the gifts that God has given us, and appreciating that God is our means of salvation. What interests me most about Hosea’s lawsuit, however, is not these three charges, which appear in various forms throughout the prophetic texts. It is some of the evidence Hosea offers in support of the charges. After citing five ways the Israelites have violated the Ten Commandments by swearing, (which really means cursing others in God’s name, not simply using vulgar language), lying, murdering, stealing, and committing adultery, Hosea also points to the broken state of Creation as proof of humanity’s crimes. “The land mourns, and all who live in it languish.” Do you hear that familiar language again, straight out of the psalm? “*All who live in it*” are suffering, and that “all” is not limited to

all human beings. It includes all of the wild animals on the ground, the birds of the air, and the fish in the sea, three of the tiers of Creation that *Genesis* Chapter One describes God making. All are perishing along with human beings, because humans have failed to keep God's covenant and live God's ways.

"Now wait a minute," your inner defense attorney may be thinking. "The Ten Commandments do not include anything in them about caring for the land, the wild animals, the birds, or the fish," and you'd be right. There is no explicit command that we care for Creation in the Ten Commandments. But that is because according to *Genesis*, God had already given us that command in the beginning: "fill and subdue the earth; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and over every living thing on the earth," God told Adam and Eve not long after they were created. Although in English translation words like "subdue" and "have dominion" imply having power over in a crush-and-consume sort of way, the Hebrew does not. In the Hebrew, this passage is essentially the kind of charge a lord of the land gives to his estate manager. It implies caring for resources which are not your own, preserving more than consuming. It implies reverent service for one's Lord. In other words, God did not give humanity the Earth to use or abuse as they please. God gave humanity the Earth in trust, making us stewards of all that God created.

Hosea takes this ancient charge and combines it with a classic breach of covenant charge to make something expressly clear which was only implicitly clear before: in God's eyes, Creation's health and our health are tied together, and both depend upon our being faithful to God. The covenant way of living that God taught those chosen to embody God's will, which requires loving God with every fiber of our being and loving our neighbors as ourselves, is the way that God believes will return everything to an Eden-like state again. God gave us the Covenant as a way of blessing both humanity and Creation. So if we disregard that way, if we fail to recognize that all of Creation counts as our "neighbor" according to God's Covenant, then the consequence will not just be more lying, murder, theft, and "bloodshed following bloodshed" for us, it will also be death for God's Creation. God made us interconnected and interdependent whether we like it or not.

Science now confirms this biblical conceit. The more we know about ecosystems and habitats, the more we know about quarks and chaos theory, the more we discover that, as Lewis Thomas once put it, there is no such thing as a solitary being. "Every creature is, in some sense, connected to and dependent upon the rest."¹ Scientists now know, for example, that cloud formation over the open ocean is hugely dependent upon the metabolic functioning of oceanic algae.² They emit a sulfur molecule as a gas which becomes the condensation nuclei for raindrops. The clouds the algae generate affect the global temperature; the rain the clouds generate affects whether all God's creatures, including human beings, have enough water to drink, whether terrestrial ecosystems have enough sulfur to thrive, and whether we all are endangered by fire. Everything is connected. We depend on the algae, and it depends on our not destroying its ocean habitat.

¹ As quoted in Capra, Fritjof, *The Turning Point: Science, Society, and the Rising Culture* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1982), 278.

² See *Overview/Gaia Theory*, retrieved April 10, 2018 from <http://www.gaiatheory.org/overview>

Our relationship with other small creatures we deem pests or inconsequential to us is similar. We need the pollination work of bees in order to have much of our food. We need the bacteria in our guts in order to process the food the bees have produced. We need mold and microorganism for antibiotics. Plants, tree bark, even snail slime all carry medicinal gifts for humanity in them. But we do not even need to ingest creation with our bodies to be blessed by it. Our brains and hearts function better simply by walking in the woods or staring at the water. The more we learn about Creation, the more connections we find. In fact, according to physicists, right now we are all trading electrons and protons with each other, as well as with the walls, the chairs, and the air. There's no getting around it, we are all a part of a whole, a web of life, dependent upon each other for health, happiness, and life.

After years of studying this web of life for years, a scientist named Dr. James Lovelock proposed an idea called Gaia theory, which argues that the earth is basically one single, living, self-regulated system he called "Gaia."³ The system has been designed to protect us from the vacuum and radiation of space. Like a human body, which has a nervous system, a circulatory system, a lymphatic system, etc., and which depends upon everything from the tiny telomeres in our genes to the healthy functioning of our organs in order to thrive, the earth and all that are in it must work well together if we all want to thrive. Gaia theory is now the foundational basis of climate science and has inspired other sciences to discover greater connections and recommend additional conservation as well.

The latter is especially needed because as Lovelock observed in 1996, "If we are 'all creatures great and small' a part of Gaia, from microorganisms to whales, then we are all of us potentially important to her well-being. The ecologists' warning about the undesirability of eliminating species takes on a new significance. No longer can we merely regret the passing of one of the great whales, or the blue butterfly, or even, conceivably, the smallpox virus. When one of these is eliminated from the Earth, perhaps in the careless pursuit of our own selfish interests, we may, if Gaia exists, have destroyed a part of ourselves, for we also are a part of Gaia."⁴

If we consider Lovelock's single organism idea in light of biblical theology about Creation, then it would seem to me that humanity has been given the role of the lymphatic system. We are charged by God with keeping Creation healthy. But instead of being healthy white blood cells protecting the gifts of God in Creation from harm, we have become the greatest source of harm. Like the lymphatic system of someone with an autoimmune disease, we have attacked essential parts of our own body, poisoning them with pollution, taking resources for ourselves that were needed by them to function well. We cannot even appreciate how much damage we have caused yet because we do not yet understand all of the connections between us and every other living thing God made. But the evidence of our unfaithfulness, of our dysfunction, is everywhere you look. It is clear from the lying, stealing, murdering, and cursing each other that seems to be becoming more and more normative. It is also clear from the harm being done to the birds, and the fish, the wild animals and the land.

³ See *Overview/ Gaia Theory*, retrieved April 10, 2018 from <http://www.gaiatheory.org/overview>.

⁴ Lovelock, James E., "Biosphere as a Single Organism," in *Crisis and the Renewal of Creation: Church and World in the Age of Ecology*, Jeffrey Gollhofer and William Bryant Eds., (New York: The Continuum Pub. Co., 1996), 47.

This is happening not because God is punishing us, but because we are not doing our God-given jobs. We are not keeping our promises, despite reaffirming them regularly. So, the only way for the harm to stop is for us to change our behavior. We don't need to wait for scientists to establish an unequivocal connection between human behavior and climate change (although 90% have already done so). We don't need to wait for definitive evidence of how we can benefit directly from a creature for us to have sufficient grounds to save its life. Our faith teaches us that every creature is our responsibility because they and we are neighbors. Our faith teaches us that the first step of faithful living is recognizing that everything in Creation is a gift from God, and the second step is working to preserve and protect them.

I'm not naive about how difficult it will be for us to change our ways. My years working as an environmental attorney taught me well how complicated the problem of Creation's suffering is. The interconnectedness and interdependence which is our greatest blessing, also makes finding a solution to Gaia's woes challenging because we cannot correct a problem simply with one or two localized interventions; we must think systemically. As our *Confession of 1967* affirms, "God's redeeming work in Jesus Christ embraces the whole of human life: social and cultural, economic and political, scientific and technological, individual and corporate. It includes our natural environment as exploited and despoiled by sin." (§9.53). We need to examine everything we do in light of our understanding from God that everything and everyone on earth is our neighbor. We need to acknowledge our interconnectedness and interdependence, and then explore how to maximize that connectedness for good instead of harm.

Thomas Aquinas once insisted that errors in our understanding of creatures can easily lead to a false knowledge of God.⁵ Hosea certainly seemed to think the people of his day, who were not caring for Creation, did not know God well. But whether the people's failure to know Creation led them to not know God, or their failure to know God led them to have incorrect understandings about Creation is anybody's guess. Either way it is clear from Scripture that the two are connected, just like everything else in this world. That means the solution is for us to embrace more completely God's Covenant way. It is a way which enables us to see the earth and all that dwells in, on, and over it, as a gift from God, and it is a way which enables us to know the one who created and saved us all better as well.

May all that crawls, swims, and flies, as well as all that grows, flows, and inspires in Creation lead your heart into a closer relationship with God. And may your relationship with God, lead you to see all of Creation as a gift to cherish, and a responsibility to protect in the name of the risen Christ, who even now is at work redeeming the Earth, and "all that live in it." Amen.

⁵ See Aquinas, Thomas, "*That the Consideration of Creatures is Useful for Instruction of Faith*" Summa contra Gentiles, Book II, cc. 2-3, available at <http://inters.org/Aquinas-Knowledge-Creatures>