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ECO-REVERENCE OR ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS STRIFE
 A MESSAGE DELIVERED ON MLK WEEKEND AT THE THIRD BAPTIST CHURCH
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A man decided to seek his fortune by packing up and going to America. Having little money, all he could do was to book passage on a leaky old ship that was not particularly sea-worthy. After six days at sea, a storm came up. The fury of the storm rocked and pitched the ship. Everyone on the boat was sick. Word began to spread that the ship was in danger of sinking. Pandemonium broke out. People everywhere were crying and praying. But the man appeared to be unconcerned by what was going on. One of the other passengers noticed how calm he seemed to be and called out, "How can you be so composed and unconcerned when the ship is sinking?" "Why should I worry?" the passenger answered. "It's not my ship!"

"It's not my ship!" Aren't we all passengers on the same ship? Aren't we all in this together? Didn't the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. warn us that whether on sea or land, we are all inhabitants of the same house and that we had better find a better way to live together? Doesn't the fate of everyone hang on the condition and repair of the good ship Earth? Are there people who are so foolish, composed, and unconcerned that they think that their fate is not tied to everyone else's? Of course, there are. There are people who are so small-minded to think that they can sail through life, ignoring what is happening around them. Like the man on the leaky ship, they are so insular, so dismissive, so blind to the environmental concerns that are staring them right in the face that they are in their own little worlds. It is hubris for us to think that the world was created for our sake alone and that it does not matter how wasteful of resources or how dismissive we are of the disintegration of the environment.

Incredibly, there are those who utilize the Bible to justify the exploitation of nature, reasoning that violation of the earth is not only permissible, but mandated by the divine words: "Be fertile and increase, fill the earth, master it; and rule...all the living things...on the earth" (Genesis 1:28). These words sting when they are misread and misinterpreted, when they are utilized to justify the right to utilize science and technology to plunder, abuse, and profit from the exploitation of the earth's natural resources, without regard for the consequences, and in violation of God's warning to Adam and Eve: "See My world, how beautiful it is. Do not corrupt or destroy it, for if you do, there will be no one to set it right after you" (Koheleth Rabbah 7.13).

In contrast, to the biblical mind, the earth was viewed as an organic, living system with a unique metabolism. The Bible greatly attributed

anthropomorphic characteristics to the earth—breath, growth, decay, change, rest:

Six years you may sow your field and six years you may prune your vineyard and gather the yield. But in the seventh year the land shall have a sabbath of complete rest, a sabbath of the Lord: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap the after-growth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your untrimmed vines; it shall be a year of complete rest for the land (Leviticus 25:3-6).

The Jubilee or 50th year in the cycle of growth and decay was a time when property was to be returned to original owners, when harmony and the wholeness of creation are supreme. Our biblical antecedents believed that God owns the land and we are merely tenants charged with the responsibility of caring for our Landlord's possession as the levitical writer admonishes us: "The land must not be sold beyond reclaim, for the land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me. Throughout the land that you hold you must provide for the redemption of the land" (see Leviticus 25:8-19).

Two men once fought over the same piece of land. Though each claimed ownership, they agreed to put the matter before a judge. The wise man listened but could not render a decision. Finally he said, "Since I cannot decide to whom this land belongs, let us ask the land."

This seemed odd to the disputants, especially as they watched the wise man put his ear to the ground. Then he straightened up and revealed the decision of the earth. "Gentlemen," he stated, "the land says that it belongs to neither of you—but you belong to the land" (Rabbi Ezekiel Landau of Prague).

The term eco-reverence has been coined to express our relationship with nature. Martin Buber, great 20th century theologian contemplated this veneration of the natural world in his landmark book, *I and Thou* (1958). Buber wrote of a highly personal awareness, a communion of grace, a covenant with God's world. He contrasted this to a relationship in which the treasures of nature are simply objects to be plundered, depleted, and discarded. Listen to the poetic way in which Buber describes a tree:

I can look on it as a picture: stiff column in a shock of light, or splash of green shot with the delicate blue and silver of the background.

I can perceive it as movement: flowing veins on clinging, pressing pith, suck of the roots, breathing of the leaves, ceaseless commerce with earth and air—and the obscure growth itself.

I can classify it in a species and study it as a type in its structure and mode of life. . .

I can dissipate it and perpetuate it in number, in pure numerical relation.

In all this the tree remains my object, occupies space and time, and has its nature and constitution.

It can, however, also come about, if I have both will and grace, that in considering the tree I become bound up in relation to it. The tree is now no longer *It*. I have been seized by the power of exclusiveness.

Ismar Schorsch (1992) described the decline of the sacred in nature in these powerful terms:

To destroy trees wantonly is an act of disbelief, an affront to the Creator. . . (There is) a link between faith in God and reverence for nature. Without a sense of the sacred, there are no limits to human behavior; everything is subject to human assault.

Yet we continue to destroy trees. Indonesia, for example, recently made it into the *Guinness Book of World Records* for having the fastest rate of deforestation in the world. In contrast, for its brief 60-year history, Israel has been the only nation on earth that has annually increased the number of trees within its borders.

The wanton destruction of trees and the concomitant decline of the sacred is responsible for the aberrant behavior that daily fills our news stories. It is emblematic of the greater disregard for all things that once were held to be hallowed and consecrated.

Disregard the environment today, and tomorrow you will see human beings become disposable as well. And that is what is already happening; tomorrow is already here! The disregard for God's creation is infecting every other aspect of life.

It has become PC to jump on the environmental bandwagon. We all feel that simply by changing out our incandescent light bulbs for compact florescent lamps, or composting food scraps, we are doing our part. Although I do not want to minimize the impact of these efforts, they are just not enough. What will really have impact is governmental action to reduce greenhouse gases, to promote fuel efficiency in homes and cars, to mandate recycling so that each week when we put our trash, we have full blue recycle bins, full green compost bins, and a black garbage bin that has at most only a cup of unrecyclables. How's that for an objective?

Look at this book: *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking The Way We Make Things* by landmark environmental architect William McDonough (2002). It looks just like any other book, except it is not. It is printed on waterproof plastic pages so that when it is no longer useful, a reader can just dump it in a recycle bin and it will come back to life in a new form—maybe even in the form of a new book also printed on recyclable plastic. McDonough is an advocate of eco-

effectiveness—reduce, reuse, recycle—do more with less. In short, he advocates products designed so that after their useful life, they will provide nourishment for something new. It makes sense, why don't the leaders of the industrial and political worlds think this is important? Why do they condone gas guzzling cars and factories that belch out hydrocarbons and gas emissions? We are all paying the price for governmental lack of reasonable and rational public policy that results in \$50.00-gas-tank fill ups that poor people, in particular, just cannot afford.

When man was being created, the heavenly host discussed why man would be a disappointment. One angel said, "It difficult for man to discern truth from falsehood." Said a second, "His desire will always exceed his need." The third said, "Man will fall from grace because when he needs to step up and take action, he will use the refrain 'What's the rush? There's plenty of time.'"

What's the rush? Well, there is not plenty of time, time to waste before the downward spiral of the environment becomes a runaway situation, when we pass the point of no return. Now is the time to do something, especially because there is a sinister side to waiting until there are more Katrina-like disasters due to increasingly violent weather patters and other environmental disruptions. Who suffers the most from floods, droughts, and other natural, or should I say unnatural disasters? When warnings of Katrina were posted, those who could get into their cars and rode off to safety; the poor and indigent were left to hunker down and fend for themselves. Poor people, people of color died in Katrina, poor people die in floods and environmental disruptions. As polar ice melts and the oceans rise, poor people will be inundated by floods and those who have the means will scamper for higher ground. But no one will be safe because there is an even darker side to exhausting natural resources and abusing God's world.

This past week, a front page news article proclaimed: "Europe Takes Africa's Fish, and Migrants Follow" (2008). The article reports that Senegalese fishermen are not catching enough fish to make the effort worthwhile. The flotilla of factory trawlers from the European Union, China, Russia, and other countries have so over fished northwest Africa's ocean floor that fish populations are collapsing and sliding toward extinction. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization estimate that 75% of fish stocks are over fished. This lack of fish has deprived Africans of their main source of protein as well as their livelihoods. And so they are adding to the wave of illegal immigrants stealing into Europe in the hope of providing food for their families by starting new lives in western nations. But Europe does not want them. Spain claims that these illegals are coming into Spain through the Canary Islands and that the other European Union nations should take their share of them. We will see further draconian measures to keep immigrants out of industrialized nations.

Even darker is Philip Jenkins (2007) suggestion that we can see the end of time coming by looking at the equatorial swath between 23 degrees north

and south of the equator. Within 50 years global warming will broil that region to a crisp, accelerating the already unrelenting transformation of fertile ground into arid deserts. Global warming and environmental disruptions will cause crop-killing droughts, water shortages, inundation of coastal fishing villages and violent struggles over diminishing resources. Ethnic cleansing in the name of resource protection will become more common and vast waves of refugees looking for aid will inundate prosperous countries. We in the African American and Jewish American communities have reason to be concerned because in the breakdown of societies, it is always the minorities who suffer the most.

The connection between climate change and religious climate is not improbable. We have powerful historical models of conflict, the result of climate disruptions. From the ninth to the thirteenth centuries, the Northern Hemisphere experienced a modest warming phase. The longer growing season led to bountiful harvests, Europe's population boomed, and there was an enormous flourishing of arts, science, education, medicine, particularly in southern Europe. But in the thirteenth century, what is known as the Little Ice Age began. Oceans began to cool, increased ice in oceans made trade more perilous, summers became cooler and wetter, reducing agricultural output. Populations that had boomed had to deal with severe food shortages. During the Great Famine of 1315, widespread rumors of cannibalism spread and then one-third of Eurasia's weakened population died in the Black Death of the 1340s. Desperate governments condoned mob attacks on religious minorities as a check valve for the deprivation and rage of the local populations. Jews were among favorite targets. England expelled them in the 1290s; Spain follow suit two centuries later, pogroms, increasingly popular in the 1320s and 30s and accelerated by the Black Death, forced an eastward migration of most of Europe's Jews to Poland, Lithuania, and Russia. But Christians also suffered at the hands of Muslims in Asia and the Middle East and, conversely, Christians forced Muslims out of southern Europe. Not a pretty picture.

We have reason to fear that just as the Little Ice Age redrew the world's population maps, making it more difficult for religious and ethnic minorities to survive in inhospitable majority regions, and forced mass migrations of minority populations, global warming will incite internecine warfare, with many poor nations obliterating their religious and ethnic minorities. We are already seeing this competition for resources and its disastrous results in Darfur where competing ethnic Muslim groups are at war while the rest of the Muslim world is silent. This sectarian violence is infectious and will spread as the resource-starved world explodes in violence of true biblical proportions.

In later centuries, the rapid settlement of the West and the industrialization of America violently impacted native American populations who were brought to their knees by the advocates of American manifest destiny. In 1866, Chief Sealth, called Seattle by the white settlers, delivered profound remarks in his native language, Duwamish, at the signing of a treaty by the Assembly of Tribes, surrendering native American lands in the Pacific

Northwest to the settlers who had overrun them. These elegant words speak to the sacred in our lives:

How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us.

If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them?

Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing and humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people. The sap, which courses through the trees, carries the memories of the Red Man...

The perfumed flowers are our sisters; the deer, the horse, the great eagle, these are our brothers. The rocky crests, the juices of the meadows, the body heat of the pony and man—all belong to the same family.

This shining water that moves in the streams and rivers is not just water, but the blood of our ancestors. If we sell you land, you must remember that it is sacred and that each ghostly reflection in the clear water of the lakes tells of events and memories in the life of my people. The water's murmur is the voice of my father's father.

There is no quiet place in the White man's cities. No place to hear the unfurling of leaves in the spring or the rustle of insects' wings. But perhaps it is because I am a savage and do not understand. The clatter only seems to insult the ears. And what is there to life if a man cannot hear the lonely cry of the whippoorwill or the arguments of the frogs around a pond at night? I am a Red man and do not understand. The Indian prefers the soft sound of the wind darting over the face of a pond and the smell of the wind itself, cleansed by the midday rain or scented with the pinion pine.

The air is precious to the Red man, for all things share the same breath—the beast, the tree, the man, they all share the same breath...You must remember that the air is precious to us, that the air shares its spirit with all the life it supports. The wind that gave our grandfather his first breath also receives his last sigh. And, if we sell you our land, you must keep it apart and sacred, as a place where even the White man can go to taste the wind that is sweetened by the meadow's flowers...

This we know: the earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the earth. This we know: all things are

connected like the blood, which unites one family. All things are connected.

Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth. Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself...

Even the White man, whose God walks and talks with him as friend to friend, cannot be exempt from the common destiny. We may be brothers after all; we shall see. One thing we know, which the White man may one day discover—our God is the same God. You may think now you own Him as you wish to own our land, but you cannot. He is the god of man and His compassion is equal for the Red man and the White. The earth is precious to Him and to harm the earth is to heap contempt on its Creator...Contaminate your bed, and you will one night suffocate in your own waste.

(It is) for some special purpose (that God brought you to this land) and gave you dominion over it and over the Red man. That destiny is a mystery to us, for we do not understand when the buffalo are all slaughtered, the wild horses are tamed, the view of the hills blotted by talking wires.

When the last Red man has vanished from this earth, and his memory is only the shadow of a cloud moving across the prairie, these shores and forests will still hold the spirits of my people. So, if we sell you our land, love it as we have loved it. Care for it as we have cared for it. Hold in your mind the memory of the land, as it is when you take it. And with all your strength, with all your mind, with all your heart, preserve it for your children and love it...as God loves us all.

On Friday night, Rev. Brown made note of Isaiah who lived during the reign of King Uzziah. But Isaiah was so long lived that he prophesized under the reign of several kings, including King Manassah, who soldiers sought to capture and kill him. Legend recounts that Isaiah took refuge in a forest where he asked a Cedar tree to hide him from the corrupt king's soldiers. And although the tree complied with his request, he was betrayed by the ritual fringes of his garment that peaked out from under the tree's canopy. Manasseh ordered the tree cut down and as the tree was felled, blood flowed from it, making the sap of the tree and the blood of the prophet indistinguishable (Yer. Talmud, San 51b, retold in Hammar, 2006). Our lives and the lives of trees and the environment are inextricably bound together in an intimate relationship in which one cannot live without the other. We would be mindful to remember that and remember that time is not on our hands. Now is the time for action. Thank you!

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