

Saving the Earth Now

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Columbus, OH
May 4, 2025

What good is all the data in the world without a steadfast moral compass? What good is moral judgment without scientific facts on which to ground it? —Carl Sagan

If you believe, as many believers do, in a politically engaged spirituality, and you're trying to save the environment...and if you're an American trying to temper patriotic fervor with a healthy dose of national humility, you're bound at times to feel like quitting. But Jesus never allowed his soul to be conquered by despair, and if it was to those furthest from the seats of power that he said "You are the salt of the earth...you are the light of the world." Who then are we to quit "fighting the good fight of faith?" — William Sloane Coffin

Ancient Witness: Genesis 2:4-9, 15

Years ago, one of my all time favorite writers, Kurt Vonnegut, wrote a piece for *In These Times*. "Human beings," he wrote, "are chimpanzees who get crazy drunk on power." He went on about how we are prone to addictions in general:

I am of course notoriously hooked on cigarettes. I keep hoping the things will kill me. A fire at one end and a fool at the other. But I'll tell you one thing: I once had a high that not even crack cocaine could match. That was when I got my first driver's license! "Look out, world, here comes Kurt Vonnegut." And my car back then, a Studebaker, as I recall, was powered, as are almost all means of transportation and other machinery today, and electric power plants and furnaces, by the most abused and addictive and destructive drugs of all: fossil fuels. When you got here, even when I got here, the industrialized world was already hopelessly hooked on fossil fuels, and very soon now there won't be any more of those. Cold turkey. Can I tell you the truth? I mean this isn't like TV news, is it? Here's what I think the truth is: We are all addicts of fossil fuels in a state of denial...

This morning I am going to address this concern from a faith perspective. In the ancient creation stories in Genesis chapters one and two we get a picture of the kind of relationship intended for human beings to have with the Creator and the rest of the Creation. God put human beings, created in God's own image, in the garden "to till it and keep it." Let's take a minute to see what this phrase means.

"Tilling" represents everything that we humans do to draw sustenance from nature. It includes not only agriculture but also mining, manufacturing, and extracting. All of this depends upon taking and using what is of God's creation. Now humanity hasn't had a problem with this. In fact, one could say that we have tilled the heck out of the earth, tilled it to death!

"Keeping," on the other hand, means tilling with care. It means to maintain the capacity of the creation to provide sustenance for which the tilling is done. This means making sure that the world of nature may flourish, with all of its intricate, interacting, life-sustaining systems.

Humankind has failed to till with care! The crisis in which we now find ourselves is the consequence of *tilling without keeping*.

“Keeping” the creation means that we follow the principle of sustainability so that the living things that belong to this natural system may thrive. So God wants us to relate to the natural world so that its stability, integrity and beauty may be maintained.

There are two reasons for human beings to care about the world. First, we are unavoidably dependent upon it. We care for the natural earth, number one, for our survival as a species, for the love of our brothers and sisters, present and future, for the concern of coming generations. Because we are to love our neighbors as ourselves, we must keep the earth. The Pope, who passed away this past week, in his encyclical, *Laudato Si* (2015), referred to this as “inter-generational justice.”

In “An Open Letter to the Children and Young People of the Planet,” the W.A.R.C. (World Alliance for Reformed Churches) wrote:

We are accountable. We are accountable to God. We are accountable to one another. We are accountable to the myriad of creatures, with whom we share this beautiful planet. And we are accountable to you, dear children and young people. It is your future for which, under God, we are temporarily responsible. Pray that we may learn better than we have done how to take care of this treasure, so that when we shall turn our accounts over to your keeping we may not be covered with shame and so that you may learn from us a little wisdom.

The second reason to care for the natural world, other than human survival depends upon it, is nature’s own *intrinsic value*. God’s creation is good and should be cherished for its *own sake*, not just for human utility. There is integrity of creation, which affirms that *all* which has been created by God is good and is to be held dear. Whenever we participate in the sacrament of communion, we acknowledge that every creature is bound to every other creature in a great community and in a *communion of being*. So this is what keeping the earth means – to participate in the *communion of being* of the entire creation order, the way God intended. No one “owns” a species. Anyone who would destroy species in the name of development takes a monstrous and arrogant prerogative.

The apostle Paul, in the Christian New Testament, wrote that creation is in “bondage to decay,” and that it groans inwardly and waits with eager longing for redemption, for liberation, for restoration. “Creation,” wrote Paul, “was subjected to futility.” In other words, creation is a victim. We can see today how it suffers the consequences of humanity’s “progress.” William Sloane Coffin said,

It may be that as a civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines. But it is ironic that just as technology frees us to be full human beings, not mere survivors of the earth’s rigors, at this very moment we may be about to lose the whole planet because we have lost our sense of wonder. For finally only reverence can restrain violence, violence against nature, violence against one another.

So, it seems to me, ecology is basically a *spiritual problem*. It is the problem of humanity living out of relationship with Divine Intent and outside the limits of the created order. And it is also

both a moral and a technological problem. As Carl Sagan said, “What good is all the data in the world without a steadfast moral compass? What good is moral judgment without scientific facts on which to ground it?” This is a matter of *both the head and the heart*, and of integrating the two.

Years ago, Bill McKibben, a noted author and environmentalist, started a website called 350.org. For all of human history until about 200 years ago, our atmosphere has contained 275 parts per million of carbon dioxide. Now, it turns out that we need at least some CO₂ to trap some heat in the atmosphere or the planet would be too cold for human life.

Beginning in the 18th century, human began to burn coal, gas and oil, and at first, the amount of carbon dioxide began to rise only slowly. Recently, however, it has been rising much more quickly—exponentially. And 15 years ago we were at about 390 ppm of CO₂. It is now at 423 ppm, and we’re beginning to see a disastrous, catastrophic impact:

- Glaciers are melting.
- Drought is becoming more common.
- Wildfires increasing in frequency and intensity.
- Sea levels are rising.
- More severe and frequent hurricanes and storms.

Some now say that the Arctic Sea soon will be completely ice-free in the summer, some 80 years ahead of what was predicted only a few years ago.

So the world’s leading climate scientists say that to turn this ship around, we need to bring the CO₂ level down at least to 350 parts per million. Hence the important 350 number.

James Hansen, a former NASA scientist and the first scientist to warn about global warming over 25 years ago, issued a report last year with 16 other prominent scientists. Scientists project a catastrophic rise in sea level in the next 50 years, rendering many coastal cities uninhabitable.

Greg Johnson, an oceanographer, said, “Even if we were to freeze greenhouse gas at current levels, the sea would actually continue to warm for centuries and millennia.” Last year, the global average temperature exceeded 1.5C above pre-industrial levels for the first time, already exceeding the goal of the Paris Climate Accord in 2015.

Pope Francis concluded, “Doomsday predictions can no longer be met with irony or disdain.”

Human beings, it seems, are behaving as a cancer, growing at a destructive rate with *no awareness* that they depend upon its host. Cancer cells are stupid cells, that is, each is acting and growing simply in its own self interest and does not participate in the life and well being of the whole body. A heart cell, for example, “knows” that it is part of an organ and it *serves a higher purpose than simply living for itself*.

This is why we need *more than voluntary actions of individuals* to solve this problem. human beings need to act as a whole—collectively, politically, socially—like the cells of an organ serves a function of a body. It needs to be a concerted, organized effort. This means that we need laws and policies—organizational DNA—or it’s not going to happen.

And so, yes, we need a sense of awe, of wonder, of deep love and respect for all of creation, and we need an *awareness* and “*knowledge*” that we are part of this whole, and that our well-being and survival depends upon the well-being and survival of the whole.

Creation groans to be released from a bondage we created. We are meant to be part of God’s redemptive work and to share the groaning of every creature; it means to unite us in communion with *all* creation. It means that we *wake up* and fully realize, in the words of Chief Seattle, that the earth does not belong to us, we belong to the earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. We did not weave the web of life, we are merely a strand in it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.

We need to step up the transition from fossil fuels to renewable, clean energy. The true cost of fossil fuels is actually very expensive, too high, and we need to stop subsidizing the oil companies, to stop assuming the hidden costs and to stop building an infrastructure that would commit us to decades of use that we cannot have.

Now, this nation has had the technology and ability to move to 100% non-fossil fuels. Mark Jacobson of Stanford and Mark Delucchi of U.C. Berkeley wrote a paper back in 2009 in *Scientific American* outlining how we could wean ourselves off from fossil fuels in 20-40 years. Later, they they would conclude that we can get to 80-85% renewables—wind, solar, geothermal and hydroelectric—by 2030 and 100% by 2050.

This nation has had the ability to lead the world to a new, sustainable economy. But, as Jacobson says, “The main barriers to getting to 100% clean energy are social and political, not technical or economic.” But with an administration that denies climate change and climate science, we really have our work cut out for us.

In the past, this nation has met incredible challenges, and we can do so again. But, as people like Naomi Klein and Bill McKibben have said, we need to approach this like it’s World War II, when citizens endured rationing, massive conversion of industry, mobilization of people and resources, commitment and sacrifice. It would require investments of trillions and trillions of dollars. As McKibben would write, “We’re under attack from climate change—and our only hope is to mobilize like we did in World War II.” If there were an army threatening destruction on such a global scale today, this nation and our allies would already be mobilizing for a full-scale war, he said. I think he’s right. It would be a massive effort, but we can do it. *We can do it!*

Wendell Berry wrote a poem called “Work Song,” that talks about this vision of returning to a way of living that was not easy, that was strenuous and difficult. He wrote,

*If we will have the wisdom to survive,
to stand like slow-growing trees
on a ruined place, renewing, enriching it,
if we will make our seasons welcome here,
asking not too much of earth or heaven,
then a long time after we are dead
the lives our lives prepare will live
here, their houses strongly placed
upon the valley sides, fields and gardens*

*rich in the windows. The river will run
clear, as we will never know it,
and over it, birdsong like a canopy.
On the levels of the hills will be
green meadows, stock bells in noon shade.
On the steeps where greed and ignorance cut down
the old forest, an old forest will stand,
its rich leaf-fall drifting on its roots.
The veins of forgotten springs will have opened.
Families will be singing in the fields.
In their voices they will hear a music
risen out of the ground. They will take
nothing from the ground they will not return,
whatever the grief at parting. Memory,
native to this valley, will spread over it
like a grove, and memory will grow
into legend, legend into song, song
into sacrament. The abundance of this place,
the songs of its people and its birds,
will be health and wisdom and indwelling
light. This is no paradisaal dream.
Its hardship is its possibility.*

Friends, this vision, this harmony, this wholeness, this restoration—
its hardship is its possibility!

*(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail
from this manuscript version.)*