

The Covenant between Heaven and Earth

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My text is

Genesis 9 v12-17

¹² And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: ¹³ I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴ Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, ¹⁵ I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. ¹⁶ Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth.” ¹⁷ So God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth.”

It is Earth Day; and this lesson from Genesis speaks about the Covenant between Heaven and Earth. This Covenant is an agreement, a pledge, a commitment between God, humanity, and all of life.

Genesis says that when a rainbow appears in the clouds, God remembers his part in the Covenant – to protect all life on Earth. But when we see a rainbow do we remember our part in the Covenant? To be good stewards of this planet and all that lives upon it. To care for it with love, and leave it unsullied for the generations to come; for our children and grandchildren; and for the whole of Creation – for all living creatures.

The story of the Great Flood that was passing down to the writer of Genesis was probably the series of catastrophes that happened 14 to 8 thousand years ago, as the last ice age ended and the climate warmed; and the great ice sheets that covered the continents collapsed into the oceans. Sea level came up hundreds of feet in massive floods, destroying the coastal cities in the Mediterranean (and all over the globe). We need to ponder it carefully since another great flood is coming – and this one is clearly our responsibility.

Our part in this covenant is the Stewardship of the Creation. We are responsible and accountable for looking after the Creation; for all of life on Earth. This has proved difficult for us, because we are so self-centered. We have come to see ourselves as tremendously powerful, and the Creation as something to be exploited for profit.

I am sure you know the story of the climate changes we are facing. We found the fossil fuels - that represent the energy and carbon stored long ago from 60 million years of sunshine. This drove our industrial revolution, and the swift growth of our energy use. But it is increasing the greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, and this traps heat. We are on a path to burn all the fossil fuels this century, and push the climate of the Earth back to the tropical hothouse climate of the

Carboniferous Era, long before even the dinosaurs. We have the power to melt the icecaps and flood the coasts; and bring severe weather, floods and droughts across the Earth.

Are we using our immense power to steward the Creation wisely? We avoid discussing this. We invent new things, and if they can be profitably marketed, they are. Some people get immensely rich, and usually the poor and the Earth get exploited. And we expect the Earth to absorb all the waste-streams, from CO₂ in the air to plastic debris in the oceans; while we happily consume stuff and amuse ourselves with Netflix.

Pope Francis in his Encyclical of 2015 discusses the use and misuse of our technological power. He maps out clearly the result of power without responsibility, without a moral foundation; and how the exploitation of the Earth and the poor have become inseparable. If you haven't please read it. The Catholic Church is trying to face these issues, but our leaders ignore this advice as heresy, because it made clear that "Short-term profit as a primary guiding motive for society is immoral."

We refuse to consider changes to our "lifestyle" unless they are "cost effective" for us, and the present owners of wealth. We discount the future, while the Earth simply accumulates in the oceans all the energy that cannot be radiated back to space, as GHGs accumulate in the atmosphere. So we shift the staggering costs of accelerating climate change to our children and grandchildren, and all of life on Earth. We have the technology to solve the climate problem, but not the moral will. We close our minds to avoid seeing that "business as usual" is flatly incompatible with a livable climate.

This is the first time that humanity really must face the long-term global impact of our choices on Creation, that is, on the Earth's natural ecosystems. The historical attitude: "With God's help, the future will take care of itself" is not valid. Our technology is no longer a small part of a vast natural world: its impact on the Earth's ecosystems is now global; and needs moral and practical guidance, as we and all life depend on the natural created world. *[The ultimate hubris of our technocrats is the fantasy that if we trash the earth, we can always move a few hundred people to try to survive on Mars.]*

The task we face, to transform our infrastructure and energy economy from an inefficient one based on burning fossil fuels to an efficient one based on renewable energy sources in just one generation, is huge. At first it seems overwhelming, but the remarkable thing is we already have virtually everything we need. The same technology that created our current human-driven world has at the same time given us all we need to change it; and the cost of transforming our society is tiny compared with the downstream cost of doing nothing. So why doesn't our society just face up to the challenge. When our human world is threatening the created world, it is surely time to examine our priorities? The question of course is a familiar one: where does our real allegiance lie? And society's allegiance is not to the Creation, but to money and profit!

But it is spring, and gratitude for Creation is the first step! What are you grateful for, and what seeds do you need to plant this spring for harvest in the years to come?

Gratitude and Joy can motivate us to start!

My personal advice is to step outside this human world, and its narrow fearful vision; and ask first how you can be reconciled with the natural world, the Creation. Turn to the Earth itself, because love and respect for Creation is a deeply spiritual issue. Can you connect in the stillness to the spirit of love? Remember that time after time, Jesus went away into this stillness to reconnect to the Father's world.

It is here in relation to Creation that we have misused our power. It is here where there is so much to be forgiven, where there is so much to be healed. But it is here where in the face of the vastness of Creation, we are both humbled and strengthened, and can surrender more easily to the spirit that connects all things. And in surrender find healing and peace; courage and our true power. In the face of nature, which just accepts us as we are, we can see beyond our foolish mindsets. We too are part of Creation, but we do not lord over it: it is our Father's world. It is here where we can learn to love what seems outside of us. Where we can see the reciprocity of love: we are accepted and loved, so we can reach out in love. Love is part of the web of life that strengthens us, supports us and teaches us.

So start with gratitude and understand reciprocity. This is so simple: If we care for the Earth as sacred, then the Earth will sustain us.

If you are a pragmatist, we need the support of the Creation to get us out of the mess we have created!

If you are spiritually lost: take the Creation into your prayers: "Thy Will be done on Earth" – what is the will of the Creator for this Earth? Clearly not our current path! We create the future for our children. Are we willing to work with Creation to create a sustainable future for life on Earth?

We have to link our science and our spiritual vision.

What are the strengths of science?

- It is based on integrity, honesty and communication
- This is a critical contribution in a society lost in deceit.

There is a sea of 'false evidence' around us about climate change: mostly outright propaganda, designed to appear plausible, but with the intent to produce uncertainty, confusion, fear, apathy and above all delay; so that some can profit in the short-term. Only honesty and respect for the truth can free us from this deception.

But science is not enough. Consider again the prayer: "Thy Will be done on Earth"

This vision "Thy Will be done on Earth" requires that people of faith have a deep understanding of the Earth and the whole Creation. We cannot understand and fully accept our responsibility for the stewardship of the Earth, unless we embrace the science of the Creation as central to our faith. Then is it possible for us to glimpse and fulfill the Will of the Creator for the Earth.

This is a radical shift for many Christians in our society, as many have been taught that if doctrine and science disagree, then they should choose doctrine over science. But in essence this is to deny the Creation and the Creator in favor of human doctrine; human belief systems. And right now our human doctrines are threatening God's world and "all that is in it", so we must rethink our priorities.

So think about fixing the global climate challenge this way. The task is huge, the threat seems overwhelming; and yes, we will need God's help; but the astonishing thing is that we already have everything we need - if we look deeply and mobilize our communities. We cannot be effective alone; and we have to mobilize, or our society will go on with 'business as usual'. We cannot just pray that God will fix things, because we are the cause, and we know it! If we ignore what is happening to the Earth, and pretend that only our consumer society and its wealth matters, the Creation cannot help us. This is human arrogance: in biblical terms a great sin against God's world; calling for repentance, a change of heart and a change of direction! But "Healing flows from repentance". If we change direction and work with the Creation rather than against her, then the Creation will work with us.

Yes, the Earth will warm for decades and severe weather will increase, because we have taken little action in the past two decades, but the choices we make in the next 20 years will have vast implications for the Creation, its ecosystems, and our children and grand-children. We need humility because we need to be open to all that is possible. We need to help the poorer parts of the world, as their suffering will increase immensely, remembering it was the actions of the rich countries that set the Earth on this path. But above all, we need deeper connections to each other and our communities and to the Creation to give us the courage to see clearly and face change. We need to take the Creation into our spiritual practice, so that "Thy Will be done on Earth."

Let us pray.

Gracious Father, fill us with thy Spirit and understanding. Help us to reconnect with the web of life on Earth that is Your Creation. Help us to see that it is not ours to exploit and pollute.

Help us to reach out to one another in love and gratitude, generosity and courage. Together we can change the direction of our society; and find a path forward for the Earth, humanity and life itself on this glorious planet that nurtures and sustains us all.

Let us remember those that will come after us; our children and grandchildren and their grandchildren.

Let us remember those who live in poverty around the world, and reach out to them with a grateful heart: we who have been given so much.

Give us the understanding, the courage and humility to face change, so that

"Thy Will may be done on Earth". In thy name we pray, Amen