

“Things The Bible Doesn’t Talk About: Climate Change”

The Reverend Pen Peery

Date: November 26, 2023



The first person I remember who really taught me to respect the earth was my Uncle Ed Walpole. Ed had an office job, but his real love was farming. He and my aunt lived on farm with a few hundred acres in Chesnee, South Carolina – and when we would visit, Ed would take me out for a ride on his tractor. He would tell me about the topography of the land...why the pond at the bottom of the farm was the key to the circle of life...he would teach me how to feed the horses in the barn, brush their coats, and clean out their stalls. Over breakfast on the porch (with her 410 shotgun close by in case some unwise squirrel came too close to her birdfeeders), my Aunt Betty would tell me about all the things she and Ed grew in their garden – and what work had to go into before we would get to enjoy the vegetables that would come out of the ground. Betty told me about rotating crops – and letting land lie fallow. Uncle Ed died more than 15 years ago, and whenever I think of him it is a memory that is always associated with the farm...because he embodied what it meant to be connected to the land.

When I was in middle school, my Scoutmaster taught me how to camp...which came with it the motto of “Leave No Trace.” As in, after you leave a campsite, make sure that there is no trace of the fact that you were ever there. From him, I learned to appreciate a good, hard hike...the importance of trail maintenance to avoid erosion...how satisfying a meal can taste after gathering wood, building a fire, and cooking over an open flame. I don’t imagine camping with 15-20 middle school boys on his weekends off was easy, but he taught all of us about the kind of character it built to learn to be self-sufficient in the wilderness while making sure we left things better than we found them.

Many years ago when I was a summer camper at Camp Grier, one of the activities that was a staple in our week was arts and crafts. As a kid who could ruin a stick-figure drawing, I developed my insecurities around arts and crafts at an early age. But crafts at Camp Grier were different...because the counselor (who was an elementary school art teacher during the year) challenged us to use things in nature as our materials: rocks, leaves, pinecones. She made making art seem possible because she viewed the outside world as a canvass that already possessed its own beauty and wonder. Before I knew what the word “recycling” meant, she taught me how to practice it.

All three of these people who helped shape my understanding of how I am in relationship to the earth were people of faith. And, in every case, they were clear about what motivated them to care about the land, and the air, and animals, and the trees and water and plants...it was because nature, too, was part of God’s good creation. And what I see as I look back on the ways these people shaped my thinking is that...by the ways they approached the earth...they taught me that as human beings, we have a special responsibility as stewards of that creation. Because creation has been entrusted to our care...as in...God trusts and depends on us to treat the creation well.

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Sometimes, when faced with big challenges like climate change, it can feel so overwhelming that we don’t even know where to start the conversation. That’s why I started this sermon – not with statistics or public policy or quotes from scholarly theologians – but with people.

And I think it is *precisely because* it feels overwhelming that any conversation about climate change gets too easily manipulated by the hyper-partisan forces at play in our day-to-day lives. Because if we feel overwhelmed and powerless to make a difference, it is easier for us to be told what to think and why those who think differently are either against economic progress (on the one hand) or completely selfish and short-sighted (on the other).

To put it plainly: The way our culture discusses and debates this issue is entirely broken and not at all helpful. Honestly, what is served by talking heads and politicians using climate change as a wedge issue to drive voters in particular political camps? Certainly, not the planet. What is served by demonizing people who dare to ask about economic interests on the one hand, or belittling those who dare to express concern about the sustainability of the planet for our children on the other? Certainly, not a constructive path forward.

I suppose it shouldn’t come as a surprise that it is hard for people to cooperate for the sake of our shared future, but I confess that every time I watch the care of the earth get turned into a political football it drives me absolutely bonkers. And what makes this partisan debate tragic is that – because we are all tired of hearing people fight about it – we would rather spend our energy and focus elsewhere, or avoid it altogether...which means we still aren’t serving the needs of the planet.

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There are 8.1 billion people who call the earth their home. In 2050, when my kids are about my age, the world will have 9.7 billion people.

Here is an assumption that I am making that I hope makes sense to you: That there is a compounding and collective impact of having 8.1 billion people share the earth, need its resources, and create pollution because of the energy they need to sustain life and the economy.

Another way to say it is that I don’t for a minute doubt that climate change is real; that human beings are a cause for stress on earth’s capacity to sustain life.

And I’m not going to quote a study...or cite a source...because I’m weary enough of the political debate around this to know that even getting specific on the science is a cause for suspicion or attack...but just think about it logically: where are 8.1 billion people going get water? How many more acres of land are going to be needed to be cleared for more crops for 8.1 billion people to eat? How many more tons of carbon will be released

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into the air so that 8.1 billion people can get to work, or heat their homes, or travel to see their families for the holidays?

And then multiply that by 20% about the time the babies born today enter the workforce.

Even though it doesn't seem like it, because we haven't had to face the music yet, but what we do (not say) about climate change matters. It matters because it is urgent. And, because it is urgent, we can anticipate that there will be more passion and emotion around the conversation and debate in the near future.

What I want to say to you this morning is that rather than be fearful or hopeless about that, this is where I think there is a place for the voice and leadership of people of faith.

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Today's Psalm was likely written around 1000 years before Jesus was born. At that time, it is estimated that the world had about 50 million people...not quite as much as the population of North Carolina and California combined.

The Psalmist obviously had no concept of over-population, rising sea levels and temperatures, melting ice-caps, deforestation, or diminishing water aquifers.

But what the Psalmist did understand was a simple truth that we – in all of our advancement and busyness and...with that...tendency to put our self-interest in the center of things – have forgotten:

The Psalmist knew that God did not create us separately from the rest of the world...as if we could consider our existence and future on the one hand, the rest of creation on the other. The Psalmist also knew that part of what makes human beings special to God is that we have a particular calling...and responsibility...**for the sake** of the rest of creation...the word the Psalmist uses is “dominion” – which, to the untrained ear, might sound like we can do with and to creation whatever we want...but the word actually means that – as human beings – we have a **responsibility** for creation's well-being...and that that responsibility is primary...even above our own desires and self-interest.

Rather than arguing talking points and trying to win political arguments, I think what matters to people is if they can see you care. As people of faith, we have a reason to care for the creation that God has entrusted to us and that reason has nothing to do with politics.

And, no, we cannot make much of a dent in climate change on our own.

And, yes, we will make mistakes and be less than perfect in our attempts to be faithful to our calling to be good stewards of the earth.

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But, together, perhaps we can turn down the temperature on how we talk about this critical issue so that we might shine a light on a path forward...in order that...together...those of us who share this planet might find the will to innovate, adapt, and act.

May it be so...

Amen