

An Eco-Theological Reflection for Ash Wednesday and the Beginning of Lent
By Peter Sergienko

For me, the Ash Wednesday liturgy includes two of the most powerful and sobering things we say and hear in church each year: “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return;” and, in the Litany of Penitence, “For our waste and pollution of your creation, and our lack of concern for those who come after us, Accept our repentance, Lord.” BCP pp. 265, 268. These holy, inspired words help bookend my understanding of creation, co-creation, and environmental stewardship.

With apologies for vastly oversimplifying the Big Bang Theory, all life and all matter originates from stardust. In remembering that we are dust and that we will return to dust, we are affirming our personal connection to the entirety of the known universe going back in time some 14 billion years and going forward into eternity. Yes, we are dust, but what an awesome thing dust turns out to be!

Because we share our dusty origins with all things, we should think of humanity as a part of the creation, not somehow above, apart, or separate from all other life. God saw **all** the creation and declared that it was very good. Gen. 1:31. Still, something makes us different from other life forms, doesn't it? While we are not uniquely creative, social, or communicative animals (beavers build dams, geese fly in formation, and Orca pods apparently each have their own unique languages) we are God's beloved children. As such, we have a unique obligation, with God's help, to understand what it means to be a wise ruler or a good steward with a special responsibility for the creation.

Importantly, we should acknowledge our misuse of scripture to excuse our waste and pollution of the earth's bounty. In our translation of the creation story, humankind is made in God's likeness, told to be fruitful and multiply and to fill the earth and subdue it, given dominion over every living thing that moves upon the earth. NRSV Gen. 1:26 – 28. Other translations refer to humankind as rulers of the creation with the authority to exercise control of it. In contrast, The Message describes humankind as Godlike with a special responsibility to care for all life on earth.

Historically, the creation story reflects the culture and circumstances of its inspired tellers. Domesticated agriculture was the primary source of life-giving food and the foundation of civilization. The people worked the soil and were organized in communities around agricultural production. They were separated from our hunter-gatherer ancestors by several thousand years. They experienced a very different relationship with the natural world and, in fact, exercised a good deal of control over it.

Still, it is not enough to cite to Genesis and claim free license to do whatever we want with or to the creation because we were given dominion or control of it. For example, simply applying the greatest commandment to actions that affect the

creation requires us to consider how they might detract from our love of God and our love of our neighbors. Since all creation is good, any harm we might bring to it deserves our prayerful attention. Since our exploitation of the creation may harm our neighbors even as it may benefit us, we need to evaluate our decisions within the foundation of justice--treating our neighbors as we wish to be treated.

Additionally, the Litany of Penitence helps inform our roles as stewards of the creation. We are called to see our impacts on the creation beyond our own lives. We have a moral duty to restore, preserve, and protect the creation for all the people who will inherit the Earth after we are gone. This is a Godlike responsibility. We must think beyond the consequences of our actions considering only how they benefit us, prayerfully considering how our actions might adversely affect all of God's beloved children yet to come.

To understand the scope of this duty, we must also acknowledge the adverse impacts that we have already caused and take the necessary steps to leave the planet in as good or better condition than inherited from the previous generation. Identifying our adverse impacts requires deliberate and thorough study. Acknowledging our failings can be painful or depressing. However, genuine engagement will lead to creative opportunities to move forward and do better.

To end on a personal note, ten years ago I attended a class on the concept of commodifying "ecosystem services," which include natural water and air purification as well as carbon sequestration. In order to preserve these services, policy-makers have proposed paying private landowners to leave their land in a natural state or let it return to nature based on the value the land provides in purifying the air or water or serving as a carbon sink. Putting a price on nature struck me as an awful concession to make. Unfortunately, there simply isn't enough public land available to reverse the environmental degradation we see all around us even if managed optimally to enhance ecosystem services. Thus, without giving private landowners the opportunity to be compensated for preserving their land, we cannot change course.

Finally, I also realized that the important ecosystems of the Earth, such as wetlands and forests that provide clean water and air, and that serve as important carbon sinks, are being compromised faster than they can regenerate. This means there is almost boundless opportunity to advocate and work for environmental restoration. It is urgently needed, co-creating, Godly work that all Christians and Episcopalians are all called to do.