

**A Disease We Can Cure  
(In celebration of Earth Day)  
Psalm 104:1-25, 30**

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Dr. Francis Collins is the scientist who led the team that cracked the human genome. He says that science does not conflict with faith – something that many of us have believed for years. For him, scientific discovery merely draws him closer to God.

Mapping the human genome resulted in a “3.1 billion letter instruction book” on what it is to be human. As Collins flips through that book page by page, he feels as if he is glimpsing the mind of God. He feels closer to God because now he perceives something that only God knew all along.

Francis Collins was an atheist until the age of 27, when as a young doctor he was impressed by the strength that faith gave to some of his most critical patients. “They had terrible diseases from which they were probably not going to escape, and yet instead of railing at God they seemed to lean on their faith as a source of great comfort and reassurance,” he said. “That was interesting, puzzling and unsettling.”

He decided to visit a United Methodist minister and was given a copy of C S Lewis’s *Mere Christianity*, which argues that God is a rational possibility. The book transformed his life. “It was an argument I was not prepared to hear,” he said. “I was very happy with the idea that God didn’t exist, and had no interest in me. And yet at the same time, I could not turn away.”

His epiphany came when he went hiking through the Cascade Mountains in Washington state. He said: “It was a beautiful afternoon and suddenly the remarkable beauty of creation around me was so overwhelming, I felt, ‘I cannot resist this another moment’.” (Steven Swinford, *The Sunday Times*, June 11, 2006)

God has always spoken through the majesty and wonder of the earth. The world is a sanctuary, and how many times have people experienced the presence of God through its beauty? However, creation is not what it used to be. Half of our forests are gone, due to human presence on earth. Over half of our wetlands are gone. And we can’t count the number of species of animals and fish that are extinct due to over-hunting, over-fishing and urban sprawl.

A New Jersey elementary school teacher wrote to me about a field trip she led to Utah’s Lake Powell. One night the students gazed at a spectacular blanket of stars in the sky. Many had never seen anything like that before. One girl thanked her teacher for taking them to Utah. “We don’t have stars in New Jersey,” she said. And in some ways, she is right. I don’t believe this is what God had in mind...a world where we can’t see the stars, drink the water or breathe the air.

The Bible speaks of God renewing the face of the earth (Psalm 104:30). Humanity has a co-creative mission with God. God’s mission is the church’s mission. The ancient story of Adam naming the animals suggests that humanity has always participated with God in creation.

We are co-creators with God. We create cities to live in. We create metals by combining raw ores. We create new materials and even new molecules. But the history of humanity has been more one of abuse and destruction of the world we live in. And our task today is God’s task: to partner with God as God renews the face of the earth.

This is a task that is both important and urgent. How can we renew this earth?

**Learn about the issues.**

Step number one is to learn about the issues. I was stunned to learn last week from an NPR broadcast that fully 50% of Americans do not believe that humans contribute to global warming! One school teacher told me that she taught her class about the problems associated with global warming. An irate parent came in the following day and asked, “Do you believe in global warming?” When did science become a matter of belief?

I’ve just completed David McCollough’s important biography John Adams. He reminds us that before the U.S. Constitution was drafted, John Adams made personal notes concerning what a good government should be like. He mentioned that a

representative democracy should educate all of its citizens, not merely the elite. No amount of money spent on education "should be considered extravagant," he asserted.

What happened to that idea? The educational crisis in America is not the fault of educators; we have systematically under-funded it for generations. One half of Americans today can name at least two characters on The Simpsons cartoon television program, but not even one third can name at least two fundamental freedoms granted by the U.S. Constitution (NPR, April 2008).

Most of our students and adults do not know facts concerning environmental issues. They have not read about and studied the factors related to our most urgent ecological problems. The first step toward renewing the face of the earth is to learn about the issues. Each of us should begin there.

### **Own the problems.**

Step two is to own the problems. It is easy to say, "It's not my problem. I'm not responsible for polluting our oceans. I didn't cause the brown cloud over Asia. It's not my problem."

However, we need to remember that no snowflake ever feels responsible for an avalanche. It is all of them together that contributed to the tumult.

And we need remember also that we did not inherit this earth from our ancestors; we borrowed it from our children. And their children. And we have a responsibility to them and to generations yet unborn.

I like the attitude of Cynthia Cooper. Cynthia recently retired from professional basketball. She grew up in poverty, raised by a single mother. As a WNBA player, she made enough money to help her family out and she decided to support her five nieces and nephews. She did not shower them with money, and couldn't even if she wanted to, for women's basketball has never paid like the men's game does. But she did move them to a safe neighborhood and gave them good schools to attend.

Cynthia could have said, "It's not my problem. They are no my children. I don't have to do anything." But, rather, she chose to own the problem.

Nothing ever gets fixed until the problem is owned by somebody. And the problems associated with ecology must be owned by everybody if they are to be corrected.

In order to renew the face of the earth, we must not only learn about the issues, but then we must own the problem.

### **Work together to solve the problems.**

Finally, we must work together to solve the problems.

One farmer had a fine ewe which gave birth to two lambs. When one lamb died the farmer remarked, "Well, I'd rather have one fat lamb than two skinny ones." Still later, the other lamb died, and he reflected, "Well, it's all for the best. Now the ewe won't be bothered with them." A week later, when the ewe died, the farmer was still philosophical. "Well, it's all for the best," said he, "but I'll be darned if I can figure it out."

Sometimes we accept what happens too easily. If it happened, it must be what God wanted, we figure. It must be for the best.

But not everything that happens is for the best. If we believed that, we would raise money for mosquito netting, feed the hungry in our cities of work in an orphanage in Mexico, as our teenagers do every year. Not all is for the best.

In the same way, we can't accept ecological problems as being for the best. We must do what we can to make the situation better.

So my family does what it can. We take cloth bags to the grocery store instead of using paper or plastic grocery bags. We buy organic foods when possible. We walk where we don't have to drive. Our home, like many of yours, is filled with compact fluorescent bulbs and we use water-saving faucets.

But does it do any good? When I am the only one in line at the grocery store with cloth bags, does it really do any good? Does my walking to the store or freezing under the drizzle of my shower really make a difference? Can one person affect any change? Our environmental problems are so immense; can one person really do anything significant toward renewing the face of the earth?

Let me tell you about flamingos – which probably behave like many migrating birds. They flock in huge groups of one thousand or more. Every year, when the time came for migration, a few flamingos start the process by taking off from the lake. Since none of the others take any notice, they soon turn around and come back.

The next day they try again. This time a few others struggle along with them but again, the vast majority carry on as usual, so the pioneers returned to the lake.

This trend continues for a few days. Each time a few more birds join in but, since the thousands of others still take no notice, the migration plan is aborted.

Finally, one day, the same few birds take off again. This time, however, the tiny increment to their number is enough to tip the balance. As one, the whole flock takes flight and the migration begins. What a spectacular sight it must be – a thousand flamingos or more taking to the sky!

True, a few CAN make a difference. Indeed, any change wrought in the world has come about because of the committed efforts of a few. And it will be a committed few that will change the social conscience to renew the earth.

It's time to take responsibility. Responsibility is the "ability" to "respond." We do have the ability to respond to our global challenge.

Together we can thank God for the gift of the world we live in. It is magnificent beyond words. And then, with God, we can work together to renew the face of the earth.

An unknown poet wrote these words:

One song can spark a moment,  
One flower can wake the dream.  
One tree can start a forest,  
One bird can herald spring.

One smile begins a friendship,  
One handclasp lifts a soul.  
One star can guide a ship at sea,  
One word can frame the goal.

One vote can change a nation,  
One sunbeam lights a room.  
One candle wipes out darkness,  
One laugh will conquer gloom.

One step must start each journey,  
One word must start each prayer.  
One hope will raise our spirits,  
One touch can show you care.

One voice can speak with wisdom.  
One heart can know what's true.  
One life can make the difference,  
you see it's up to you!