

14 April 2008

Utah Interfaith Power and Light  
P. O. Box 112016  
Salt Lake City, UT 84147-2016

Dear Interfaith Power and Light Team,

Enclosed is my homily/sermon for the Earth Day contest. I hope that it will be acceptable whether it is a "winner" or not.

I am an Episcopal priest presently volunteering at St. James' Episcopal Church in Midvale (7486 S. Union Park Ave.).

Other information:  
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I hope that this contest will generate many sermons and musical compositions, so many so that it will be a difficult decision to make. My hope is that each entry will be a "winner" in its own right because the subject is so incredibly important and vital to all.

Take care,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Mary +".

The Rev. Mary Sheridan Janda

REFLECTIVE HOMILY ON THE ENVIRONMENT  
EARTH DAY  
April 22, 2008

Happy Earth Day! We have come to yet another celebration to honor Mother Earth. We have also come to that moment on this planet of ours, especially in the United States, when we must all do something about our environment. No longer can we make jokes about tree huggers, pretend global warming is just part of a natural cycle, or rely on others to take care of the problem. We have taken baby steps with recycling programs, but only slapped at wrists for watering too much in this high desert state of ours. We have developed wind power and solar energy, but we defeat ourselves in the short term with fears and worries about initial costs and fail to realize the long-term benefits of these clean energies. We have even considered allowing hazardous wastes to be dumped on our land from other places that have generated it. Now we want to continue the usage of fossil fuels by starting up new coal plants in Nevada and Utah that will affect yet another section of our country. What is going on here? Thomas Edison even said: "I'd put my money on the sun and solar energy. What a source of power! I hope we don't have to wait 'til oil and coal run out before we tackle that." (<http://www.cultureofpeace.org>)



Now I am no expert in the field of global warming, or on new or old coal plants, or even their scientific explanations, but I am an inhabitant of this planet, our Mother Earth. I do have questions and a major one is where do faith and religion enter into this? The Christian Bible's first book is Genesis which describes the beginning of this world. Out of chaos God brought order by creating all forms of life on this earth. There are two versions of the Creation found in the Book of Genesis. In the first story, depending on the translation used, God blesses and tells human kind to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth (Gen.1:28) [or master it; and rule the fish, birds, and "everything that creeps on earth, in which there is the breath of life<sup>1</sup>]." The second Genesis story of Creation, "the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life (Gen. 2:7)" and when God realized man was lonely, "out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. (Gen. 2:19)" What does this mean to us today in regard to humankind's relationship with this world of ours?

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<sup>1</sup> The Torah. Edited by W. Gunther Plaut. Union of American Hebrew Congregations: New York, 1981, p. 20.



“Dominion must be understood as the same kind of rule God would exercise in the natural world, a world God created good in all of its parts.”<sup>2</sup> We humans are not to be malevolent dictators over this creation. In the second version “the first human is made out of the soil and is given the command to *cultivate* (*‘abad*) *it*. This Hebrew term means literally ‘serve’. . . . “The human being is seen to be in the service of the earth, upon which its life and livelihood depend” thus being in a “position of dependence on nature rather than dominion over it.”<sup>3</sup>

Another way of examining these creation stories comes from Robert Gordis back in 1971:

To claim that [this verse] provides ‘justification’ for the exploitation of the environment leading to the poisoning of the atmosphere, the pollution of our water, and the spoilation of natural resources is . . . a complete distortion of the truth. On the contrary, the Hebrew Bible and the Jewish interpreters *prohibit* such exploitation. Judaism goes much further and insists that man has an obligation not only to conserve the world of nature but to enhance it because man is the ‘co-partner of God in the work of creation.’ . . . All animal life and all growing and life-giving things have rights in the cosmos that man must consider, even as he strives to ensure his own survival. The war against the spoilation of nature and the pollution of the environment is therefore the command of the hour and the

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<sup>2</sup> The New Interpreter’s Study Bible. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 2003. p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 8.



call of the ages.”<sup>4</sup>

Matthew Fox in his book, Original Blessing, wrote: “Surely a return to a spiritual tradition that understands humility as earthiness promises a blessed and creative New Creation! Here there is hope that we might come to our senses and let life on earth and in the good earth go on.” (p. 65) He quotes the poet and farmer Wendell Berry: “I have been groping for connections—that I think are indissoluble, though obscured by modern ambitions—between the spirit and the body, the body and other bodies, the body and earth . . . It is impossible to care for each other more or differently than we care for the earth . . . There is an uncanny *resemblance* [sic] between our behaviour toward each other and our behaviour toward the earth.”(p. 65) Perhaps if we can begin to heal our earth, curb the pollution and scourging of our planet, we can also begin to heal the multitude of problems in our society and the world. If we do not take care of our creation, our foundation, our oneness with Mother Earth, then we will continue to drift apart in our callous and unconscionable behavior.

The time has arrived for us to implement other resources for energy. We need to do this in a way that will not destroy the livelihoods of those who

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<sup>4</sup> The Torah, p. 25.

work in present-day coal mines. Rather, we need to fix the problems of the current coal processing plants until we can fully institute more eco-responsible energy sources. We have the brains in this country to do this. More importantly, we have the moral and ethical duty to ensure that this does take place.

We have entered the Easter season in the Christian world. We have also entered into spring, another season of rebirth, along with the annual celebration of Earth Day. What better time for us to spread the message that now is the time to reclaim our proper roles as servants to this good earth, this creation that God has given us? We must not destroy that which is an integral part of our very essence. We cannot afford to allow for one day of the year to be a celebration of Mother Earth and the other 364 days to be ones of destructive behavior towards her. On the day of Ash Wednesday (the beginning of Lent, the 40 day time period before Easter), we take ashes and make the sign of the cross on our foreheads saying: "Almighty God, you have created us out of the dust of the earth: Grant that these ashes may be to us a sign of our mortality and penitence, that we may remember that it is only by your gracious gift that we are given everlasting life." (Book of Common Prayer, p. 265) Let us not leave poisonous ashes that have found their way into our earth for our children



and their children to contend with and be destroyed by. Let us find practical ways to restore this precious creation God has given us so that we may prevent future damage and begin the healing. We must believe that there is hope in all of this. We must gather together in our communities to understand fully what is happening to our environment in order for us to take proper action. We must cross denominational lines and share the practical information that is available to make positive changes for our planet. All branches of faith need to join hands to take care of Mother Earth. A theological scholar, Walter Brueggemann ("The Trusted Creature," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol. XXXI (1969), p. 488.) wrote:

What God does first and best and most is to  
trust his people with their moment in history.  
He trusts them to do what must be done for  
the sake of his whole community.

This is our moment in history. We must reclaim our relationship with this precious earth, God's gift of creation to us. Back to Genesis, the beginning: out of Chaos, God created all things living. We are in danger of returning to that chaos as too many of our living creatures become endangered and go extinct; our soil becomes depleted and poisoned; our air un-breathable; our water undrinkable. We must take on our mantle of servanthood and resume our nurture of earth. We must also remember

that regardless of what we have done, God gives us the strength, courage, and gifts to repair and replenish. So let's make this not only our moment in history, but our **month**, our **year**, our **decade**, and our **century** in history.