



Gregory Sterling, Dean of Yale Divinity School
"The Groaning of the Earth"
Focal Scripture: Romans 8:18-25

Once or twice—in a good year—we pay a visit to Woodstock, Vermont, a place that is dear to my heart. I grew up in the American West and the mountains and trees of Vermont remind me of the California and Idaho of my youth. Several years ago, we visited the Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park just outside of Woodstock. Two things made an indelible impression on me. The first was a photo of the area around Woodstock in the nineteenth century. I was shocked: the mountains were stripped bare of the beautiful timber that now adorns them. The landscape looked like a mountainous desert, like the Sinai peninsula where the sight of a single tree is enough to create excitement. I had walked past a tree—I think that it was a hemlock—behind the Rockefeller house whose trunk had a wide diameter. It was a smaller version of the Redwoods or Sequoias that I remember from my youth in California. I once walked through the Wawona Tree in Yosemite when I was a boy. A rectangular opening had been cut in the trunk of the tree large enough for a small car to pass through. The memory of walking through that giant Sequoia has remained with me all my life. The hemlock tree reminded me of the Wawona Tree. It made the photo of the denuded woods around Woodstock all the more shocking.

The second thing that impressed me was the story about the original owner of the house: George Perkins Marsh. Marsh was a famous diplomat and linguist: he was America's minister to the Ottoman Empire and later to Italy. He is, however, best known today for a book that he published in 1864 entitled *Man and Nature*. In it he argued that humans were part of nature. It was this argument that led some—especially residents of Vermont—to consider him America's first environmentalist and the forerunner of the sustainability movement, although it might be more accurate to call him a conservationist.

I suggest that the text from Romans that we have just read anticipated Marsh's argument about the relationship between humans and nature by more than nineteen hundred years. The text occurs near the end of

Paul's long and sustained argument about human salvation. In this passage, Paul deliberately echoes the language with which he opened Romans, language like "creation" (1:20, 25; 8:19, 20, 21, 22), "futility" (1:21; 8:20), and "glory" (1:23; 8:18, 21). The apostle does more, however, than to encourage us to think about how this text recalls the opening salvo of his analysis of the human condition, it invites us to think about salvation within the context of the stories of creation and the fall in Genesis 1-3.

Sin and Nature

Paul invites us to do so in several ways. The most obvious is that he uses the word "creation" four times in the first five verses of our text. There is a centuries old debate about the meaning of the term "creation" in this text. Although there have been at least eight different interpretations of the term, it seems to me that Paul is referring to non-human creation. I say this because he goes on to remind us of the story of the fall of humanity and its impact on creation in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3. His reference to the "futility" of creation— a futility to which creation was subjected by God (8:20), its bondage to decay (8:21), and its groaning (8:22) reflect the thought of Genesis 3:17-19 when the ground was cursed because of human sin:

Cursed is the ground because of you;
in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you . . .

The entrance of sin not only affected humanity, but nature itself.

We know this and know it quite well. Have you seen the film *Erin Brockovich* starring Julia Roberts that recounts the contamination of the water supply of Hinckley, CA, by Pacific Gas & Electric (PG & E). PG & E used hexavalent chromium to prevent corrosion in a cooling tower of a compressor station for a natural gas line from Hinckley to San Francisco. The tower sent the wastewater into unlined ponds and some of the water from those ponds seeped into the groundwater system. Brockovich was a clerk in a law firm that filed suit on behalf of Hinckley residents and won a settlement of \$333m, the largest settlement in a direct-action lawsuit in US history. While I can not vouch for all of the details in the film, the film illustrates the fact that human actions have affected nature in adverse ways. You need not be a scientist to know how devastating human actions can be on nature.

But someone will say: Aren't Jews and Christians responsible for such behavior? Don't you believe that humans were given *dominion* over the earth and therefore feel free to do with it as they please? I have heard this accusation a number of times. I heard it in an interview of President Jimmy Carter at the American Academy of Religion's annual meeting in 2015. One of the interviewers said to President Carter: You are proud of your environmental record as president and, at the same time, quite openly Christian. Isn't there tension between these two? President Carter responded: I have lived my life in Plains, GA, on a peanut farm and attended the same church. Every year the minister of that church preaches a sermon from the text to which you alluded (Genesis 1:26, 28) and reminds us that we are part of creation and responsible for the care of it. Our livelihoods and the welfare of our community depend on how we treat the land. President Carter's recall of the homilies that he had heard is biblical: we are held responsible by God for the way that we care for nature. His comment that his environmental record was due to Christianity not in spite of it is the same comment that we should be able to make.

The Groaning of Nature

But our text says even more. Paul proceeded to make the identity between humans and nature even closer. He suggested that humans and nature groan together under the effects of sin. Paul uses the image of a mother in labor pains ("we know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now"), a metaphor that we echo when we speak of mother earth. In his statement, Paul uses two verbs that employ the prepositional prefix *syn-* meaning "with." The NRSV translates the two with the phrase "groaning in labor pains" but they are literally translated "all of creation *groans with* and *suffers labor pains with* (us) until now." Paul made the connection between nature's groaning and our groaning explicit when he repeated the expression and applied it to us: "the entire creation has been groaning" became "we ourselves . . . groan inwardly." We are a part of creation and share in its sufferings.

We understand that we groan when we suffer, but how does nature groan? How does nature suffer labor pains? Paul was specific: nature is subjected to "futility" and to "decay." The two are closely related and are evident to us. For sixteen and a half years I served as the part-time minister for the Warsaw Church of Christ in Warsaw, IN. I drove down every Wednesday evening to visit individuals in the church. One summer evening, I

became quite concerned about the color of the clouds as I was driving: the sky became ominously dark and had a surreal greenish cast. As I approached an intersection, I saw a dark cloud cross the road about a quarter of a mile in front of me. Suddenly sparks flashed everywhere in the road in front of me as transformers on the power line poles hit the ground. Huge oak trees went down. An industry size garbage bin went flying through the air. Then a barn exploded. An Amish man came out of his house and pointed down the road to me; I assured him that the tornado had my undivided attention. I had already stopped and was ready to jump out of my car into a ditch beside the road if the tornado came up the road. I watched the tornado as it passed diagonally across the field on my left. I will never forget what I saw that evening. I thought of it every time that I drove past the remains of the trees that the tornado destroyed. The wreckage left behind reminded me of this text: nature groans with natural disasters, disasters that we know all too well via news coverage and sometimes in person.

Nature also groans when it is devastated by human actions. I have a friend who grew up in Sudbury, Ontario, Canada. The community was a place of dense forests and deep blue lakes. Things began to change when copper mining came to Sudbury at the beginning of the twentieth century. The mining industry flourished, but the community did not. The smelter facility emitted so much lead that it turned virgin forests into moonscape. What was once a lush green environment with sparkling clear lakes, became a desolate wasteland. It was so much like the moon that NASA selected it as a site to train the astronauts for travel on the surface of the moon. The mining industry responded by constructing the largest (at that time) smokestack in the world, the Inco Superstack, towering 1250 feet above the earth. It built it in an effort to send the harmful lead into the air current that would carry the lead away from Sudbury down to the United States. It became the world's largest source of acid rain. All of nature groaned, not only around Sudbury, but in the US where the acid rain destroyed our forests.

We know what it means to be in pain, so does nature.

The Hope of Nature

Paul did not, however, end in despair. He wrote of our hope, the hope that “creation itself will be free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” Our text is filled with the language of hope: the Apostle used “glory” twice (8:18, 21), “hope [4 x]/to hope [2x]” six times, (8:20,

24, 25), and “eager longing” three times (8:19, 23, 25). This is not a text of despair, it is a text of apocalyptic hope. The scope is not simply human; it is cosmic. Humanity and nature are part of one great system. In this way, Paul echoes the vivid language of the Hebrew prophets who thought of the future as a reversal of the present conditions of nature. The most famous poetic expression of this is in Isaiah 11:

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
 The leopard shall lie down with the kid,
 the calf and the lion and the fatling together.
 The cow and the bear shall graze,
 their young shall lie down together;
 and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

This same language reappears in the vision of the new heaven and the new earth that a later prophet of Isaiah’s school offered.

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth,
 the former things shall not be remembered or come in mind. . .
 The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
 the lion shall eat straw like the ox;
 but the serpent—its food shall be dust!
 They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD.

It was in this spirit that Paul envisioned the hope of the earth.

How should we think of this hope? We need not be as apocalyptic as Paul in our own thinking to appreciate what he is saying. My friend who grew up in Sudbury, Ontario, was so upset by the ravaged landscape that he saw that he devoted his life to changing it and the world. With many others, he helped to reverse the pollution of Sudbury and today it is once again a land of forests and lakes rather than moonrocks. The Inco Superstack is still there, but it has filters on it that have appreciably reduced the levels of pollutants that it emits. Trees have been planted and the terrain has begun to return to its former state.

Wendell Barry, a great environmentalist of our day, captured the spirit of this text when he wrote: “We should be listening to the stars in the heavens and the sun and the moon, to the mountains and the plains, to the forests and rivers and seas that surround us, to the meadows and the flowering grasses, to the songbirds and the insects and to their music especially in the evening and the early hours of the night. We need to experience, to feel, and to see these myriad creatures all caught up in the celebration of life.”¹

Conclusion

We are living in a period when the size of earth’s population and the technology that underlays modern industry have made our relationship to nature a pressing issue. This is not simply a technological or a political issue. It is a moral or religious issue. I was deeply grateful that Pope Francis issued *Laudato Si* (“Be Praised” or “Praised Be”). I wondered how Francis would address this issue. What impressed me most was that he did not argue the case scientifically; he argued it morally. He called on all Christians to do what we can to protect our world. In this way, he stands in solidarity with Paul in Romans.

One may approach ecological issues as an environmentalist—a laudable approach. As Christians, we need to recognize that we must approach them as a matter of our faith. As we watch the world change before our eyes this fall, may we remember that we are one with this world. We believe that we are part of the creation of nature. We believe that we and nature groan as a result of our sins. We believe that our future is bound up with nature’s. The question is how we will respond as Christians?

¹Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grimm, eds., *Thomas Berry: Selected Writings on the Earth Community* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2014), 77.