

THE FIFTH ANNUAL DAVID AND MARILYN KNUTSON LECTURE

“No Salvation apart from the Earth”

Mark Brocker

Introduction

David Knutson introduced me to the life and writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his “Modern Thought and Christian Consciousness” course here at Pacific Lutheran University in the late 1970’s. In our study of Bonhoeffer’s *Letters and Papers from Prison* Knutson emphasized a passage on the Christian hope for the resurrection. According to Bonhoeffer redemption myths focus “on redemption from cares, distress, fears, and longings, from sin and death, in a better world beyond the grave.” The Christian hope of the resurrection, however, sends us back to “life on earth in a wholly new way.” Christians, unlike those devoted to redemption myths, have “no last line of escape available from earthly tasks and difficulties into the eternal.” Like Christ himself Christians “must drink the earthly cup to the dregs,” and only in doing so is the crucified and risen Lord with them, and they are with the crucified and risen Lord. “This world,” insists Bonhoeffer, “must not be prematurely written off.”¹

Bonhoeffer’s insight into the Christian hope of the resurrection was manna from heaven for a Norwegian Lutheran college student from rural Wisconsin, who

¹ *Letters and Papers from Prison*, First Touchstone Edition (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 336-37.

as a young teenage boy had laid awake one night worrying whether he believed in Jesus enough to get to heaven. My Norwegian Lutheran forbearers were not strong proponents of rapture theology. I do not remember hearing talk about being “left behind.” Nonetheless, we tended to be afflicted with “getting to heaven anxiety,” a milder version of “left behind” thinking, reflecting an excessive focus on individual salvation and a loss of concern for the well-being of the earth. We had prematurely written off this world.

If anyone had reason to write the world off and seek a last line of escape from earthly tasks and difficulties, it would have been a Lutheran pastor in a Nazi prison in 1944 awaiting his probable execution. Yet Bonhoeffer affirmed a Christian hope in the resurrection that sends us back into life on earth in a wholly new way. This Christian hope does not allow any notion of salvation apart from the earth.

Comment [mb1]: Do I need a more comprehensive thesis sentence?

Loss of Love for the Earth

My intention is not to cast stones at my Norwegian Lutheran heritage. I deeply appreciate the focus on faith in Jesus that was bequeathed to me; and furthermore, the Christian tradition as a whole has not distinguished itself by concern for the destiny of the earth.² In *The Christian Future and the Fate of the*

Comment [mb2]: Keep this footnote? Here?

² My dad was ordained in 1962, the same year Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*; and he became a Bible camp director in 1966. From early on in his ministry he was a proponent of what he calls creation theology, and he incorporated stewardship of creation into summer Bible camp programs. Surely he helped sow the seeds of appreciation and concern for creation in me and others. But when it

Earth, Thomas Berry explains that “Christianity, as well as most other great religions, has been excessively oriented toward transcendence.”³ We have been preoccupied not only with divine transcendence but also with human transcendence of the natural world. We have focused primarily on God-human relations and human-human relations in accordance with Jesus’ identification of the two greatest commandments, love of God and love of neighbor.

For centuries these two commandments have shaped our Judeo-Christian tradition. Love of God and love of neighbor have been core values. We have not been perfect in putting these values into practice. Nevertheless, they have given us a plumb line to discern where we stand in relation to God and neighbor and to guide our actions. We have reached a point, however, where the survival of life on earth and hence the survival of human beings are at stake. It is no longer enough to love God and to love our neighbor, especially if our concept of the neighbor does not include creatures other than human beings.⁴ Even a noble concern for justice can lead us astray if it focuses exclusively on human to human relations. We need to love the earth and all its creatures. We may need a third great commandment: “You shall love the creation.”

came to matters of salvation, the prevailing mindset remained focused on believing in Jesus to get to heaven.

³ Thomas Berry, “The Third Mediation,” *The Christian Future and the Fate of the Earth*, 11.

⁴ Cf. Thomas Berry, “Women Religious,” *The Christian Future and the Fate of the Earth*, 71.

Jim Martin-Schramm and Bob Stivers observe that for much of human history “the great ecological systems of the earth were a problem for human beings. Now the reverse is true. This reversal represents a revolution in the natural history of this planet. In a short period of time the human species has emerged as the dominant species in almost all ecosystems.”⁵ The results of this domination have been swift and devastating to the earth. Christians have collaborated in the pillaging of the earth by ecological sins of commission and omission. In a 1994 essay Thomas Berry laments that “at the present time the protest of the pillage of Earth, compassion for Earth, and commitment to the preservation of Earth are left mainly to secular environmental organizations as though the matter were too peripheral to be of concern to Christians.”⁶ Since 1994 we have seen encouraging signs of an ecological awakening among people in a wide variety of Christian communities, but we can hardly claim to have taken the lead in promoting care of the earth.⁷

During our morning devotions this past Earth Day our daughter Hailey shared a phrase she had seen in New Orleans while attending the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’s youth gathering: *Tè a fatigue*. She had wondered what it meant.

⁵ *Christian Environmental Ethics*, 9.

⁶ Thomas Berry, “Women Religious,” *The Christian Future and the Fate of the Earth*, 71.

⁷ Consider, for example, Pacific Lutheran University’s commitment to becoming a green campus. St. Andrew Lutheran Church in Beaverton, where I serve as lead pastor, has taken steps toward becoming a green congregation. Our efforts to restore our wetland were cited in an article by Steve Lundeberg entitled “Sanctuary in the firs,” *The Lutheran*, June 2010. Another encouraging sign has been the rise of the Evangelical Environmental Network.

When her global studies class focused on Haiti, she learned that it means “the earth is tired.”

The earthquake that hit Haiti in January was a devastating natural disaster, but Haitian farmers had been already dealing with a major agricultural disaster that had been building for centuries. Haiti has to import over three quarters of the rice needed to feed their people. When the farmers were asked why so much rice needs to be imported, they responded, “*Tè a fatige*”—the earth is tired. Jangela Shumskas explains:

since 1492, when Columbus first set foot on the heavily forested island of Hispaniola, the mountainous nation has shed both topsoil and blood—first to the Spanish, who planted sugar, then to the French, who cut down the forests to make room for lucrative coffee, indigo, and tobacco. Even after Haitian slaves revolted in 1804 and threw off the bondage of colonialism, France collected 93 million francs in restitution from its former colony—much of it in timber. Soon after independence, upper-class speculators and planters pushed the peasant classes out of the few fertile valleys and into the steep forested, rural areas, where their shrinking, intensively cultivated plots of maize, beans, and cassava have combined with a growing fuelwood–charcoal industry to exacerbate deforestation and soil loss.⁸

No wonder the earth is tired in Haiti. Short-term thinking has taken its toll on the soil. A strong tradition in Native American culture is that decisions and actions need to be considered in light of their impact on the seventh generation to come.⁹

⁸ “Haiti’s Landscape: *Tè a fatige*,” in *Eu A-Mousoi: A Random Muttering of Thoughtful Things*, January 16, 2010.

⁹ “We cannot simply think of our survival; each new generation is responsible to ensure the survival of the seventh generation” (Linda Clarkson, Vern Morrisette, and Gabriel Régallet, “Our Responsibility to the Seventh Generation,” International Institute for Sustainable Development, Winnipeg, 1992).

Haitians need a long-term sustainable way of caring for the soil, one that takes future generations fully into account.

What has happened in Haiti is a microcosm of what is happening globally. The whole earth is growing tired, and more and more we are experiencing the consequences of failing to care for the earth.

The Risen Jesus Weeping over the Earth

In Luke's account of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, as Jesus comes near and sees the city, he weeps over it, saying, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!"¹⁰ When the risen Jesus looks out over the whole earth today and sees what we have done to it, surely he must be weeping, saying, "If you, even you, had only recognized the things that make for peace with the earth!" Jesus warns the people of Jerusalem that "the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you."¹¹ The day is surely coming—if it has not already arrived—when we will wake up and realize that we have been our own worst enemy, wreaking havoc upon ourselves and the whole earth. In Romans 8:22-23 the apostle Paul writes that "the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the

¹⁰ Luke 19:41-42.

¹¹ Luke 19:43-44.

Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.”

As followers of Jesus, we continue to wait for his second coming. When Jesus comes again, will there be any human beings or living creatures left to welcome him?

Peace on Earth and with the Earth

The biblical vision of *shalom* is a rich concept of peace. It is not simply the absence of war and conflict. *Shalom* refers to well-being of the whole person—mind, body, heart, and soul. It refers to well-being in our relationships with God, other human beings, and the whole creation. It entails harmony in the family, the community, the nation, and the earth. When Jesus speaks of “the things that make for peace,” he means anything that contributes to *shalom*. In “The Shalom Principle” Peter Sawtell asserts that “the Jewish and Christian traditions, through thousands of years, have affirmed that God wills shalom for all of creation. The goodness of this delicately balanced Earth is diminished when we abuse or exploit any part of it. We are bound to all other parts of creation in complex, fragile relationships, and shalom guides us toward justice, peace, and solidarity in all of them.”¹²

The prophet Isaiah’s vision of the peaceable kingdom provides one of the most beautiful pictures of *shalom* in the Bible:

¹² Peter Sawtell, “The Shalom Principle,” *Holy Ground*, 211.

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
 the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
 the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
 and a little child shall lead them.
 The cow and the bear shall graze,
 their young shall lie down together;
 and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
 and the weaned child shall put its hand
 on the adder's den.
 They will not hurt or destroy
 on all my holy mountain;
 for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
 as the waters cover the sea.¹³

Shalom in the peaceable kingdom fulfills God's intention for creation. In Isaiah's vision of *shalom* full knowledge of the Lord will not be limited to head knowledge. In fact, it will fill the whole person. It will fill the whole earth. It will be more of a relational knowledge. Peaceful, non-violent relationships will be the norm. God will be at peace with human beings and all creatures. Human beings will be at peace with one another and with creatures. All creatures will be at peace with other creatures. There can be no peace among the peoples of the earth if human beings are not at peace with the earth.¹⁴ There can be no peace with God if human beings are not at peace with one another and the earth. How can we be at peace with God whom we have not seen if we are not at peace with human beings and the

¹³ Isaiah 11:6-9.

¹⁴ "The Wisdom of the Cross," *The Christian Future and the Fate of the Earth*, 94.

earth whom we have seen?¹⁵ In Isaiah 11:3-5 the prophet Isaiah emphasizes that the peace he envisions will be a just peace. Justice and equity will reign in the peaceable kingdom—that is, God, human beings, and all creatures will be given their due.

In Colossians 1:15-20 Jesus Christ is identified as the one through whom all things will be reconciled to God and thereby the biblical vision of *shalom* will be fulfilled. He is the “firstborn of all creation” (1:15). “In him all things in heaven and on earth were created” (1:16). “In him all things hold together” (1:17). The fullness of God dwells in him. This passage comes to a climax in verse 20: “through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.” The reconciliation of all things to God and the establishment of *shalom* require a major sacrifice—Jesus sacrifices his life on the cross. If we take Colossians 1:20 seriously, Jesus sacrifices his life not just for sinful human beings but for the whole creation. There is no individual redemption apart from our relationships to God, other human beings, and the creation. Archbishop Desmond Tutu delights in Jesus’ desire to enfold all creation into a cosmic embrace. God’s supreme work, asserts Tutu, “is to reconcile us to God and to one another and, indeed, to reconcile us to all of God’s creation.”¹⁶ Our supreme work as human beings is to participate in God’s reconciling work.

¹⁵ Cf. 1 John 4:20.

¹⁶ Desmond Tutu, “Foreword” to *The Green Bible*, 1-14.

The book of Revelation may seem an unlikely source to seek support for an understanding of salvation that embraces the earth. Revelation has been a favorite of proponents of rapture theology and those who look forward to leaving the earth behind. Many Lutherans have been put off by the complicated imagery and have simply ignored it. This is a mistake. Revelation 21 and 22, the final two chapters of the Bible, provide a compelling vision of the fullness of salvation that does not leave the earth behind but includes it. In Revelation 21:1-4 John prophesies:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See the home of God is among mortals.
 He will dwell with them;
 they will be his peoples,
 and God himself will be with them;
 he will wipe away every tear from their eyes.
 Death will be no more;
 mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
 for the first things have passed away.”

The first heaven and first earth pass away—they die. But they are resurrected in a new creation. Salvation is not about leaving the earth behind and going to heaven to be with God. A select group of human beings are not raptured to heaven. If there is any rapture here, it is God who is raptured to earth.¹⁷

¹⁷ Cf. Larry Rasmussen, “The Baptized Life,” *Holy Ground*, 188. Barbara Rossing speaks of “rapture in reverse” (*The Rapture Exposed*, esp. 141-58).

John envisions that God's presence on earth will bring the fullness of salvation. There will be no more weeping, suffering, and death. All things will be made new. Revelation 22:5 affirms that God, the author of the tree of life, will provide for the healing of the nations. Salvation is a healing process. It entails the healing of mind, body, heart, and soul, the healing of relationships between God, human beings, and all creatures, and the healing of the community, the nation, and the earth. Salvation is not about getting to heaven; it is about healing leading to *shalom*. It is not about leaving anything behind, but about moving all things toward *shalom*. God initiates the process of salvation, and we are invited to participate in it. We do not have to be anxious about getting to heaven or about our individual salvation. If we are to be anxious about anything, it would be to focus on recognizing what God is doing with and on the earth so that we can participate in it.

No Salvation apart from the Earth

Although Bonhoeffer was preoccupied with the struggle against Nazism in Germany and did not focus on ecological concerns in his life and writings, his vision of the community of God, human beings, and all creatures provides followers of Jesus with a firm theological foundation from which to address ecological issues. He articulates this vision in the following passage from his *Ethics*:

Human beings are indivisible wholes, not only as individuals in both their person and work, but also as members of the human and created community to which they belong. It is this indivisible whole, that is, this reality grounded

and recognized in God, that the question of good has in view. "Creation" is the name of this indivisible whole according to its origin. According to its goal it is called the "kingdom of God". Both are equally far from us and yet near us, because God's creation and God's kingdom are present to us only in God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. To participate in this indivisible whole of God's reality is the meaning of the Christian question about the good.¹⁸

This vision reveals how intimately connected God, human beings, and the earth are in this life and will be in the life to come.

In this vision of community Bonhoeffer takes seriously the individual, but individuals can never be isolated from the human community and created community to which they belong. Bonhoeffer conceives of human beings as relational or social selves. It is an abstraction to conceive of an individual relationship to God or to seek an individual good apart from the communities to which we belong. The belief that individuals can get to heaven and leave the earth behind is also a product of abstract thinking. Salvation embraces the whole community of God, human beings, and the creation.

The resurrection of Jesus affirms that God cares for us and for the earth. Our Christian hope in the resurrection sends us back into the world to immerse ourselves in caring for God, human beings, and the earth. Those whose primary religious concern is their individual salvation have less incentive to care for the well-being of their fellow human beings, let alone for the well-being of the earth. Given that God has reconciled all things in Christ, human beings participate with other creatures in

¹⁸ *Ethics*, volume 6 of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, 53.

a single community in Christ. Inasmuch as we have done it to one of the least members of this community, we have done it unto Christ himself. Care of the earth, therefore, is not an option for followers of Jesus; it is intended to be a way of life.

Given the current ecological crisis, we need to expand the scope of our concept of the neighbor. Diana Landau maintains that in an age of climate change we need to recognize “that the great commandment to care for the neighbor is now a global imperative—and one that cannot be fulfilled in the absence of caring for creation.”¹⁹ The earth and all its creatures are like the victim alongside the road in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The earth is wounded. The earth is dying. The magnitude of the ecological crisis may tempt us, like the lawyer in the parable, to seek to limit the scope of our concern. But to ignore the suffering earth is to pass by on the other side. We ourselves are victims in this case—even though we often seem oblivious to our wounded condition. Our well-being is intimately connected to the well-being of the earth. If we ignore the well-being of the suffering earth, we are also ignoring our own well-being. Love of neighbor, broadly understood, embraces the whole earth. But as suggested earlier, to highlight the pressing need to care for the wounded earth, it may be time to speak of a third great commandment, “You shall love creation.” For followers of Jesus, love of earth needs to join love of God and love of neighbor as the core values we live by. We are commanded to love our neighbor as our self. This command implies that love of self is also a core value for

¹⁹ Dianna Landau, “Editor’s Preface,” *Holy Ground*, 16.

followers of Jesus. What we are waking up to in our time is that love of self compels us to love the earth. If we fail to care for the earth, we are sealing our own fate.

The Call for Conversion

The urgency of the ecological crisis has heightened the need for a great ecological awakening.²⁰ The Second Great Awakening led to active involvement by many Christians in a variety of reform movements, including the effort to abolish slavery. The hope is that an ecological awakening will lead followers of Jesus to engage in the effort to care for the earth.

Ecological enlightenment is not enough to motivate most people to engage in ecological reform. We do need, of course, to increase our knowledge of the ecological crisis. We need to pay attention to scientists and other experts who can shed light on what we face and on possible solutions. But in order to motivate people to engage in the needed reforms, the heart as well as the head must be changed. According to Mary Evelyn Tucker, environmentalists have arrived at a deep conviction that “though science and policy approaches are clearly necessary, they are not sufficient to do the job of transforming human consciousness and behavior for a sustainable future.” Tucker hopes that the 21st century will be

²⁰ For example, Thomas Berry speaks of a spiritual awakening on a global scale (“The Third Mediation,” *The Christian Future and the Fate of the Earth*, 6).

remembered as the time we extended our moral concerns to other creatures and ecosystems, to the earth community as a whole.²¹

Motivating people to fully engage in major ecological reform will require a radical conversion. As followers of Jesus, we believe that conversion begins with repentance. Indeed, we have much to confess: our failure to hear the groaning of the whole creation; our failure to have compassion on the suffering earth; and the many ways we have abused and degraded the earth.

The “Green Patriarch” Bartholomew I, the worldwide leader of the Orthodox churches, has been a leading voice in calling members of the Christian community to confess our ecological sins. “The plain truth,” asserts Bartholomew, “is that we are given the opportunity to enjoy and use God’s creation, but instead we have chosen to exploit and abuse it.”²² Nazi Germany, apartheid South Africa, Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia, and the Sudan are notorious as places in which crimes against humanity were committed. In an address at an environmental symposium in Santa Barbara in 1997 Bartholomew spoke in forceful terms of ecological crimes or crimes against the natural world:

To commit a crime against the natural world is a sin. For human beings to cause species to become extinct and to destroy the biological diversity of God’s creation; for human beings to degrade the integrity of the earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the earth of its natural forests, or

²¹ “Daring to Dream,” *Holy Ground*, 23-24.

²² “The Orthodox Church and the Environmental Movement,” *Holy Ground*, 33.

by destroying its wetlands; for human beings to injure other human beings with disease; for human beings to contaminate the earth's waters, its land, its air, and its life, with poisonous substances—all of these are sins.²³

Bartholomew insists that sin is at the root of the ecological crisis. Humanity has failed in its noble vocation of participating “in God’s creative action in the world.”²⁴

In the Pacific Northwest our most infamous ecological sin has been our failure to adequately care for our salmon populations. In “A Prayer for the Second Coming of the Salmon” David James Duncan emphasizes that Pacific salmon “are not just ‘canaries in a coal shaft’. They’re the signature wild creature of the Northwest—a creature upon which millions of humans, fauna, and megafauna depend for their very existence. A ‘modern Northwest’ that cannot support salmon is unlikely to support ‘modern Northwesterners’ for long.”²⁵ Efforts to save the salmon have come to a head in the battle over removing four dams on the Snake River. What terrifies Duncan is the *unwillingness* of Northwesterners to give up a mere four deadly dams (out of 200 on the Columbia/Snake river basin). He asserts: “no person, no family, no country, and no civilization in history has remained viable for long without engaging in corrective acts of self-criticism, self-sacrifice, and

²³ In *Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer: The Ecological Vision of the Green Patriarch Bartholomew I*, 221.

²⁴ Encyclical Letter, September 1, 1994, in *Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer: The Ecological Vision of the Green Patriarch Bartholomew I*, 46.

²⁵ *My Story as Told by Water*, 184-85.

restoration.”²⁶ The viability of the Christian community also depends on our willingness to engage in such corrective acts.

The Protestant Reformation returned to our biblical roots to issue a call to conversion. But that call to conversion is no longer radical enough. The church cannot continue in the conversion business as usual. *Metanoia* is not simply a matter of believing in Jesus or of developing a personal relationship with Jesus. Bonhoeffer wrote of *metanoia* as a conversion from self to God and other human beings.²⁷ But Bonhoeffer’s understanding of *metanoia* is still not radical enough. Larry Rasmussen advocates for a shift from an earth-abusing faith to an earth-honoring faith.²⁸ Rasmussen maintains that all Christian impulses are to be measured by “one stringent criterion—their contribution to earth’s well-being.”²⁹ In an earth devastated by ecological sin the call to conversion will include a turning away from an excessive focus on self and one’s own kind and a turning toward God, other human beings, and the whole creation. One sure sign of repentance will be genuine sorrow and contrition over our contribution to environmental degradation accompanied by a passionate desire to seek the well-being of the earth.

²⁶ “A Prayer for the Second Coming of the Salmon,” in *My Story as Told by Water*, 197.

²⁷ *Letters and Papers from Prison*, volume 8 of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 480 and 486.

²⁸ “The Baptized Life,” *Holy Ground*, 184.

²⁹ “Introduction,” *Earth Habitat*, 7.

The church's primary vocation is to preach and teach for conversion to God, other human beings, and the earth. That vocation includes calling sin by its rightful name—in its individual, corporate, and ecological forms. Our primary vocation also will focus on proclaiming the reconciliation of God, human beings, and the whole creation in Christ—that is, God's love for all God has created. Such "ecological" preaching and teaching shapes and forms individual followers of Jesus as well as the community of faith. Who else will fulfill this particular task? A faithful church can no longer ignore non-human creation in its life and ministry.

How can we love and worship God and yet ignore or destroy what God has created?³⁰

The church is also called to participate in the effort to establish eco-justice. The church does not have privileged expertise/knowledge on the best strategies, techniques, or policies to address specific ecological issues. But the church does have a role to play. No responsible person, family, community, institution, nation, or corporation can ignore the hard realities of the ecological crisis.

Taking Up Our Ecological Cross

In "The Wisdom of the Cross" Thomas Berry lifts up the central role of sacrifice in the redemption process as well as in the creation process. This sacrificial

³⁰ Cf. T. L. Gray, "Consider This," *Holy Ground*, 99.

dimension is a scandal in both processes. “Dying that others might live” is a daily reality in the process of creation, and it is part of the mystery of the cross.³¹

For Bonhoeffer the question that guided his christological reflections was “who is Christ actually for us today?”³² In *Letters and Papers from Prison* he identifies the individual form of Jesus Christ as the human being for others³³ and the corporate form of Jesus Christ as the church for others.³⁴ In our current situation of ecological devastation Jesus Christ is also taking the individual form of the human being for the earth and the corporate form of the church for the earth. Sacrifice for the sake of ecological healing is a cross the human being for the earth and the church for the earth are called to bear in our time and place. We are not well-prepared to make the major sacrifices that will be necessary. So far even the ecologically enlightened among us have tended to dabble in ecological reform. Certainly we want to continue to encourage people to reduce, recycle, and reuse. But the major ecological reform that lies ahead will require us to sacrifice our way of life. Our way of life is not sustainable. Patriarch Bartholomew spells it out in even

³¹ “The Wisdom of the Cross,” *The Christian Future and the Fate of the Earth*, 90.

³² *Letters and Papers from Prison*, volume 8 of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, 362.

³³ *Letters and Papers from Prison*, volume 8 of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, 501.

³⁴ *Letters and Papers from Prison*, volume 8 of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, 503.

starker terms: "Our way of life is humanly and environmentally suicidal."³⁵

Nonetheless, few of us are ready to make the necessary sacrifices. As Larry Rasmussen points out, in our culture it is hard for us to give up the illusion that "we can have infinite growth on a finite planet." "Even the notion of limits," says Rasmussen, "offends our way of life and its values."³⁶

The church can play a key role in motivating people of faith to love the earth so deeply that they are moved to take up this ecological cross. The church is called to proclaim with clarity that Jesus died on the cross for sinful human beings and for the suffering earth. To fulfill this role with integrity we will have to take the ecological log out of our own eyes so that we can see clearly to help take the ecological logs out of the eyes of others. No one in our culture has merely an ecological speck in their eye.

A mother once came to Mahatma Gandhi and asked him to tell her son to stop eating sugar. "I ask that you come back next week," he responded, "and make the request again." The mother was puzzled, but she left and came back the next week. Once again she asked Gandhi to talk to her son about the dangers of eating sugar. Gandhi simply said, "Please, come back and see me in a week." Though disappointed, the mother left and returned the next week. This time Gandhi

³⁵ "The Orthodox Church and the Environmental Crisis," *Holy Ground*, 36.

³⁶ "An Earth-Honoring Faith," *Sojourners*, June 2010.

agreed to talk with her son. She was grateful but asked him why he could not have talked to him two weeks ago. He replied, "Because I first had to see if I could go without sugar before I asked someone else to do so."³⁷

If we are to have integrity in calling people to engage in ecological reforms that provide for the well-being of the earth, we need to take up our ecological cross now and make the sacrifices that put those reforms into practice. Each one of us is called to discern what it means in concrete terms to take up our ecological cross.

For Bill McKibben, an active member of the Methodist church, that has meant devoting his life to work as an environmental writer and activist. In 1989 he published *The End of Nature*, "the first book for a general audience about global warming." Not a scientist by profession, he acknowledges the huge debt we owe to scientists who have brought climate change issues to our attention. At the conclusion of the "Introduction" to the 2006 edition of *The End of Nature* he writes that "I've spent every day since its publication (in 1989) praying that this book would be proved wrong. Those prayers have not been answered."

In 2009 McKibben led the organization of 350.org, a climate change awareness campaign that in October 2009 coordinated what CNN called "the most widespread day of political action in the planet's history."³⁸ 350 parts per million of carbon dioxide has been proposed as a safe limit in the atmosphere. We

³⁷ A version of this story about Gandhi is found in William R. White, *Stories for the Journey*, 96-97.

³⁸ Bill McKibben, *earth*, 211.

are currently at 390 ppm and climbing.³⁹ Eight days ago 350.org was the catalyst for 10/10/10, the largest global work party in history. In over 7,400 sites in 188 countries around the globe people engaged in hands-on projects to address the climate crisis. At my home congregation, St. Andrew Lutheran Church in Beaverton, Oregon, people from the community joined with members of the congregation to work on restoring our wetland.

McKibben published a new book this year entitled *eaarth*. He spells it with two a's because "the earth that we knew—the only earth that we ever knew—is gone."⁴⁰ In a matter of decades we have changed the planet dramatically. It is still recognizable but very different. The jury is out on whether we will be able to carve out a sustainable life on this tough new planet. Reading the first part of his book one could easily give in to despair, hopelessness, and cynicism. McKibben acknowledges "it's true that by some measures we have started too late"⁴¹ to confront the ecological disasters we face, and he shares his fear that the reality described in his book, "and increasingly evident in the world around us, will be an excuse to give up."⁴² In the end McKibben vows to keep on fighting, hoping to limit

³⁹ *Eaarth*, 15.

⁴⁰ *Eaarth*, 27.

⁴¹ *Eaarth*, 211.

⁴² *Eaarth*, xv.

the damage of the destructive forces we have unleashed. We must learn, he asserts, to live “lightly, carefully, gracefully.”⁴³

People of faith, filled with the hope of the resurrection, will not give up on the earth. They will not yield to cynicism. They will not walk by on the other side of the suffering earth.

One of the key themes in Bonhoeffer’s *Letters and Papers from Prison* is sharing in the sufferings of God. In a letter to his dear friend Eberhard Bethge, written on the day after the failure of the July 20, 1944, assassination attempt on Hitler, Bonhoeffer reaffirms the importance of sharing in the sufferings of God in the world.⁴⁴ Bonhoeffer stresses the sufferings of God embrace the whole of human suffering. To share in the sufferings of God is to share in the sufferings of our fellow human beings. Today we need to stress that the sufferings of God also embrace the suffering earth. To share in the sufferings of God includes sharing in the sufferings of the earth. God loves the earth too deeply to give up on it. God does not need cynics. God needs resolute people of faith who care so much for the earth that even when hope is dead, they will not write off the earth; instead, they will hope by faith

⁴³ *Eaarth*, 212.

⁴⁴ *Letters and Papers from Prison*, volume 8 of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, 486.

and continue to invest themselves deeply in the well-being of the earth.⁴⁵ God needs these resolute people of faith now.

⁴⁵ This sentence inspired by Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, volume 2: *Human Destiny*, 285-86.