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# What's the Right Rite?

## Treating Environmental Degradation as Sickness or Sin

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When Americans discuss environmental issues, the way the questions are framed often corresponds to theological loci, and even to liturgical practices. This essay considers four theological frameworks by which environmental issues are framed in public discourse: sin, stewardship, spirituality, and sickness. I'm going to try to convince you that the motif of healing, for ecotheological reasons, deserves increased attention these days. In that sense this essay is biased toward making a case for healing as a model. The other modes, I believe, already get more airtime.<sup>1</sup>

### Environmental problems as evidence of sin

Sometimes sin is portrayed as taking more than your personal fair share (e.g., “Your biggest carbon sin may be air travel”). The motif of sin is especially evident in the image of contamination: it is common to hear about coastlines or forests being “desecrated” something beautiful, good, and even holy has been defiled. Sometimes we hear someone suggest that environmental sin approaches blasphemy: genetic engineering and planetary-scale geoengineering are sometimes described as “playing God.” These frankly religious motifs are often deployed in otherwise apparently secular discourse.

Liturgical confessions of sin sometimes include environmental sin, with the paradigmatic Ash Wednesday confession now including a specific confession for “waste and pollution of the creation.”<sup>2</sup> Sermons and official church pronouncements sometimes urge us to label a specific anti-environmental activity as sin. Recently Union Seminary in New York divested from fossil fuels and made the announcement in the liturgical form of a confession. They described the action as a penitential act: “We have sinned, and we see this divestment as an act of repentance for Union,” President Serene Jones wrote in an op-ed for *Time* magazine. “Climate change poses a catastrophic threat. As stewards of God’s creation, we simply must act to stop this sin.”<sup>3</sup>

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1. This essay is an adaptation (without the projected visual images) of a plenary address given at the Pacific Lutheran University Conference on Pastoral Theology, “God’s life within our wounded cosmos: Christian theology and earth’s future,” June 16–18, 2014.

2. “Our waste and pollution of your creation, and our lack of concern for those who come after us, we confess to you,” reads a Good Friday prayer in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Pew edition. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006).

3. Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “Union Seminary Pulls Investments from

The public discourse around environmental sin often breaks with the liturgical logic of sin-and-forgiveness. Instead, the normally appropriate response to environmental sin (in the cultural discourse) is not mercy toward the guilty, but rather acts of penance and restitution by the identified “sinner.” In most circumstances, the logic is strictly legal—even legalistic: if you break a rule, then you pay the consequence and make amends. Did you fill the Gulf with oil? Then pay to take it away. Do you consume too much or the wrong things? Then feel guilty until you can find a way to consume less or consume the right things.

One implication of this legalistic way of thinking is that it correlates with a zero-sum approach to environmental questions. In order for environmental sin to be “made right” someone has to do penance. Someone has to pay the penalty. So the basic conceptual architecture means that for the environment to flourish, it will cost “us” humans. Thus, when we invoke sin to describe environmental problems, at least in the wider cultural logic, it can imply that environmental *healing* will actually *harm* us. Of course, that is a deeply misleading model for understanding environmental health. In fact, much more often, the opposite is true. We earth-creatures as a species become more healthy, wealthy, and happy when we cooperate with earth’s ecological systems rather than degrade them.

Another implication. When this sin-as-zero-sum-legal-trade-off gets blended with the concept of original sin, it can inscribe this zero-sum mutual hostility with the environment into our human nature, asserting that we are ontologically destined to do battle with the earth, and the earth with us. To be clear: I think there is enormous help in being confronted with the truth about our captivity to sin. I’m pointing out here how it can get used unhelpfully.

One exception to this strictly legal pattern among the sin motifs is the accusation of blasphemy, of “playing God.” This accusation of environmental sin has the most distinctly religious architecture to it. Even among the secular and atheist, this accusation functions as a call for a sort of repentance, *metanoia*: a challenge to reconsider, rethink, and restrain what it means to be human on the earth. It’s not about whether or not individuals are

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the ‘Sin’ of Fossil Fuels,” *The Christian Century*, July 12, 2014, <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2014-06/union-seminary-pulls-investments-sin-fossil-fuels>.

simply harming others environmentally, and therefore violating a moral law. It about the question of whether humans should alter the fundamental natural laws that were written by God (or “by God”) into the earth’s ecosystem or even the fabric of the cosmos. (Consider the questions around geo-engineering. Or remember the questions about the Large Hadron Collider, and the scientists discussing the remote possibility that it could cause a black hole to open when they fired it up? A headline not from *The Onion* but from *LiveScience* reads: “Mini-Black Holes Easier to Make than Thought.”<sup>4</sup> There is one place original sin is helpful as a concept. Those of us who have been given an appreciation for a kind of ontological Murphy’s Law are very cautious about big projects that by accident or intent may impact the entire earth and leave little room for error.

## Stewardship

In some congregations, when the gifts are presented at the table, an offering prayer makes reference to these gifts coming first from God: we offer “what you have first given us, our selves, our time, and our possessions.” Recently these prayers have more regularly emphasized that these gifts come from God through the fruitful creation. So even though it looks liturgically like opening our hands in generosity as we present money, bread, and wine, one of the prayers in the resource *Sundays and Seasons* begins with a psalmic image of God’s open hand providing for all creatures (“...the eyes of all wait upon you, and you open your hand in blessing”). God gives us gifts through creation, and then we move them around and use them for our daily lives as stewards, managers, of these things.

In a well-intentioned trend, prayers of intercession for the creation start out sounding like an intercession for the non-human creation but then frequently end up becoming one more prayer for us humans to be better stewards. *O God, we pray for your land, waters, and seas. Help us to be better stewards... help us to conserve resources, or to take shorter showers, or help us remember those generations who come after us...*, etc. The change of direction in this prayer—from lifting up the entire creation to making it all a matter of human stewardship—is a liturgical illustration of how public discourse about ecology often gets subsumed by the anthropocentric logic of human management and stewardship of “natural resources.” At the far end of that logic, it’s as if the entire planet is a workforce we have been given to supervise, and we just need to improve the job we’re doing. When the motif of environmental stewardship is preeminent, it tends to be a logic of dominion or even domination. The question becomes whether we’re practicing good or bad management of the planetary property and workforce. The question to *what extent should we actually aspire to this job* largely gets effaced. So while the logic of sin could call it “blasphemous”

to “play God” with the planet, the stewardship frame can be quite theologically consistent with things like geoengineering schemes. (For a different and more promising account of the dominion motif, see Paul Santmire’s description of a “contemplative dominion” over creation, inspired by St. Francis.<sup>5</sup>)

So we might look especially at our language and ritual around prayers for creation, offering, volunteering, and financial giving, as well as all our earth-care ministries, and see how significant the image of stewardship is—whether it is the main one we use, and how it interacts with other models. Farming, for example, is a stewardship activity that can be governed either by a mechanistic or healing metaphor. Notice if we add the motif of healing to the stewardship practices of farming as in the practices of sustainable and organic farming, we get a very different approach to agricultural stewardship than the kind of industrial agriculture deployed by, say, Monsanto.

## Spirituality

George Lakoff’s work *Moral Politics* describes a polarized logic to environmental politics in North America. While Lakoff himself doesn’t make a big deal about this, it is fascinating that the interpretive key to Lakoff’s schema is his analysis of the spiritual and even theological dimensions of American environmental logic.

The polarized approach to environment depends upon two different spiritual-theological approaches.<sup>6</sup> In the first, God is like a good-but-strict father who gives “nature” to humans to steward wisely. In order for it to be managed effectively, anything “wild” in the system of course needs to be contained, controlled and brought into some form of submissive order. Notice that this is a stewardship model: God is a good-but-strict father who gives “nature” to humans to manage wisely.

But there is something more specific about “nature” in this model. Notice that “nature” in this system is understood as a great machine, made by something like the Deist watchmaker God, so the parts that don’t look ordered are rightly—even by divine will—brought under control and brought to order. And if nature is a mechanism, a machine, and humans are pretty good at machines (making better ones all the time!), it becomes easy, especially in our secular models, to make technology the solution to environmental problems. Pure science is less valuable, because it theorizes about mechanisms, natural and human-made. The real authorities are the ones who make the powerful machinery run. Since we’re get-

5. H. Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 69–70.

6. “Nature is God’s Dominion (given to humans to steward wisely); Nature is Resource (for immediate human use); Nature is Property (for use of the owner, for sale, and purchase); Nature is a Mechanical System (to be figured out and put to use); Nature is a Work of Art (for human appreciation); Nature is an Adversary / Wild Animal (to be conquered, tamed, and made to serve us).” George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*. Second edition (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2002), 212–221.

4. Charles Choi, *LiveScience* Contributor, “Mini Black Holes Easier to Make than Thought,” *LiveScience.com*, accessed June 14, 2014, <http://www.livescience.com/27811-creating-mini-black-holes.html>.

ting better at making machines all the time, it's increasingly easy to dismiss God from management and oversight over us and just let our engineers take care of the planet.

In the second spiritual-theological approach, the natural world is the dwelling place of the divine so the whole thing is first of all holy ground to be treated with reverence—which is to say not manipulated casually.<sup>7</sup> In this system God is not the father handing over the car keys, but more like a nurturing mother who continues to feed and provide for her children. So rather than an emphasis on a once-and-done hand-over of the machinery of creation over which to exercise dominion (in the relative absence of a now distant father), the emphasis here is on the ongoing gifts that flow—first of all—freely, apart from our efforts, from God, continuously, with every harvest, every rain shower, every morning and evening, every breath. All of these signs are evidence of God with us, flowing and pouring through creation now. Nature in this schema is not first of all a machine to be controlled, but a sacred fellow creature, who is, like us, mortal, living, wounded and in need of healing. And we are embodied parts of this living creature, the earth.

Thus, this model contains built-in theological, moral, ethical, and biological imperatives to care for the creation as a living creature—especially in its wounded state. It makes sense that in this system the authorities on environmental questions are not first of all technologists but those who attend to the world as a living creature: ecologists, ethicists, and all those involved in earth's healing—including health care professionals, environmental activists, many types of scientists,<sup>8</sup> and people from earth-honoring religious traditions.<sup>9</sup>

What's most interesting to me in Lakoff's schema is that he argues that the key to decoding the most paralyzing American fights about the environment is a spiritual-theological one. However, that spiritual-theological conceptual frame usually stays hidden, below the surface of conscious argument. So rather than thinking of our faith communities as now-and-then joining more pressing environmental conversations happening elsewhere, we might see our congregations as places where the underlying spiritual and theological dynamics of that conversation are being actively explored and forged.

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7. "Nature is a Mother (who provides for us); Nature is a Whole (of which we are inseparable parts); Nature is a Divine Being (to be revered and respected); Nature is a Living Organism (whose needs must be met if it is to survive); Nature is a Home (to be maintained and kept clean); Nature is a Victim of Injury (who has been harmed and needs to be healed)." George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*. Second edition (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2002), 215–221.

8. It's interesting to talk to scientists and hear them debate among themselves about whether or not it's helpful to think of the living things as machines.

9. In this spirituality, dominion over creation may still be expressed, though it is, as Paul Santmire names it, a "contemplative dominion over creation." The human role is probing the mysteries of the created universe, primarily for the purpose of honoring the mystery of our fellow creatures and turning such knowledge of diversity into praise of God.

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## Sickness

The Greek word *sozo*, when it is used abstractly in the New Testament is often translated as "salvation." My colleague in New Testament Barbara Rossing likes to experiment with those abstract passages and translate *sozo* with its more basic and everyday meaning, "healing," and then see how the passages read.<sup>10</sup> Her work and the work of others suggests that we consider the image of "healing" as a primary frame for understanding "salvation" in all its dimensions, and that such an approach is especially relevant now, when the earth is running a fever higher than in any time of all human existence.

So let's use prayer-for-healing as a lens to take another look at the earth and our images of salvation.

### *Praying for healing*

The stereotyped image of Christian prayer in popular cultures is the image of praying hands but you already know that the two classic postures of prayer in early Christianity are the *orans* and the *laying on of hands*. Let's use those two images—the open uplifted hands of the *orans* posture and the laying on of hands—as icons for two dimensions of healing prayer.

It is a hard thing to teach my students in Chicago to pray with empty hands. I'm talking about the physical gesture: that empty-handed posture is unfamiliar to many of their bodies. It's a little more like ballet than most of them are used to. But harder still for many of them is praying without a kind-of rolled-up-sleeve, muscular, can-do spiritual posture of prayer. I alluded earlier to the tendency to lift up the needs of, say, the creation, in the first half of an intercessory prayer, but then, in the second half of that petition, to swoop in and to suggest that "we" the pray-ers of this prayer are the answer to the prayer. Oil spill in the Gulf? "Help us as a church to assist all those impacted, and make us better stewards of our resources." Lorraine Brugh and Gordon Lathrop write that such well-intentioned prayer can be more like "praying to ourselves," assertions of the problem-solving power of the pray-er rather than—first—an admission of empty-handed need. So we work in seminary on how to pray with empty hands: *For migrating sea birds, and all creatures in the water and along the shore, for those working to contain the spill, and those who will work to heal the damage*. Expressing needs this simply and plainly, naming weakness, is

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10. "Healing Affluenza: Mark 10:17–27" in *Currents in Theology and Mission* 33/4 (August 2006), 303.

hard for many of our students there in the city of broad shoulders.

This classic uplifted-open-handed way of praying for the world has a deep modesty about the sufficiency of human problem-solving-as-a-solution-for-everything embedded within the practice. So this practice of prayer for healing/salvation has us regularly and honestly revisit the limits of our own power.

But those hands also reach out in prayer to be laid on another for healing. What could be viewed as a purely mental or spiritual act becomes obviously physical. These bodies matter to God. The gesture of hand-laying is recognized in many cultures as a gesture of compassion and mercy, especially for those facing vulnerable or fragile circumstances. The fragile creation is loved, honored, treated with dignity and care.

Rather than hands reaching out to manipulate and fix everything, hands laid-on in healing prayer say “here—under these hands—in this fragile place, we look for the mysterious, healing, and re-creating power of God to well up from within.” These hands call our prayerful attention to the power of God, which courses through creation, rising up mysteriously from within us living creatures.

So while the open empty hands of the orans posture may critique delusions that we can fix everything, the laying on of hands in healing prayer directs our attention to the agency and healing power that lives within all living creatures—and it understands that power to flow from God since the beginning of creation. Our bodies are not simply machines to be managed.<sup>11</sup> They are mysteries that possess a healing power that comes from beyond our inventing or control. (See Stephanie Paulsell, *Honoring the Body*, for an invitation to this mystery as a set of Christian bodily practices orienting the whole of the Christian life.<sup>12</sup>)

Interestingly, congregations seem to have a nearly universal practice of praying for the healing of bodies with open, empty hands, honest about the limits of our own power, and they hold together this kind of prayer with action: visiting in the hospital, carrying food to family members, helping people change eating habits and or break patterns of addiction.

When we pray for the health of human bodies, we seem often to be honest about our own limits and yet unhesitating in our action and care. But when we as congregations pray for “the environment,” we often seem wildly to overstate our abilities—and then we often are hesitant and even stubborn about springing into action to offer care for the suffering non-human creation.

I want to argue that reframing our environmental piety and ministries toward a motif of healing offers us a model that we already know and practice that can help us pray honestly and yet connect such prayer with meaningful action.

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11. “When an animal gets sick here, they plug it into the wall,” says the character Hushpuppy in the film *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.

12. Stephanie Paulsell, *Honoring the Body: Meditations on a Christian Practice* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002).

### *Bearing witness to wounds*

Some of you may be familiar with Holden Village, the remote Lutheran retreat center in the Glacier Peak Wilderness—to which Pacific Lutheran University sometimes sends a J-term course. The village became a retreat center after a copper mining company left the mine and the village abandoned for a number of years back in the 1950s. It is quite an experience to encounter—deep in nearly roadless wilderness—a bowling alley, cute little chalets, dorms, a library, the ice cream shop, the little public school, all powered by a micro-hydro system fed by a mountain stream. But the village, nestled in a spectacular mountain valley, is dwarfed in size by a set of massive tailings piles immediately adjacent to the village. This is the waste product of the processed ore. The piles have high levels of arsenic and have been leeching toxins and acids into the streams that run beside the piles. The worst case scenario is that an earthquake could destabilize the piles, form a dam that would back up the river, and then burst, bringing the tailings into pristine Lake Chelan ten miles downstream which would apparently kill much of the life in the lake. As we speak, the tailings piles are the focus of a multi-million dollar environmental remediation project that is a result of a settlement with the EPA. Hundreds of workers are working solidly during the non-snowy seasons for years to try to reduce the runoff from the piles, preserve the stream, and prevent that worst-case scenario. (See Gretel Van Wieren’s book, *Restored to Earth*, for the beginnings of a project that is considering ecological restoration as a Christian religious practice.<sup>13</sup>)

In my years of involvement with the village, I’ve been struck by how often I have heard the tailings piles described as scars and wounds on the valley. Theologian Dorothy Bass once shared a reflection with the Holden Board of Directors in which she described a night when a group of villagers made their way up to the tailings piles after sunset. They were a bricolage. A couple of slightly extended families had been woven together across generations through joys and significant pain. There was a group of women from Chicago who were part of a program helping them emerge from lives that had been caught up in sex work in dangerous and traumatic circumstances. Others were there at the village on their own pilgrimage, seeking healing or renewal of one kind or another. Bass wrote:

As we trudged up the road [toward the tailings], the stars began to appear. “I haven’t seen this many stars since I was a little girl in Mississippi,” my companion murmured in amazement.

[Once up on top of the great pile of tailings], we spread out our blankets and lay down on our backs. The night was crystal clear. The annual Perseid meteor shower was beginning, and every now and then a meteor streaked across the sky. Several times we gasped in unison, but

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13. Gretel Van Wieren, *Restored to Earth: Christianity, Environmental Ethics, and Ecological Restoration* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2013).

mostly we were silent. Then the voices of two young women—one black, one white—arose from the silence. They were reading psalms in praise of the starry heavens, the beauty of Creation, the glory of God.

I'm not sure how long we lay there, side by side on those yard blankets. But lying there I was aware of an amazing, healing paradox: we were lying on top of a huge, ugly scar on the face of the earth, and we were surrounded by a beauty beyond human imagining.

Looking up from her blanket—both because she wanted to share this moment of awe with another human being and because one of those jagged pieces of rock was digging into her back—Bass saw the little communities on each blanket: two not-quite-related family members from different parts of the country who had reason to be estranged from one another were now “serenely sharing” a yard blanket together with another woman “who was struggling to overcome immense hardships” experienced on some of the toughest streets of Chicago. Bass wrote: “that night has stayed with me... as an image of the healing of the world—the healing of creation, the healing of divisions of race and class, the healing of personal brokenness.”<sup>14</sup>

People in the village describe the visible and tangible presence of those tailings-pile-wounds (and the telling and retelling of their story) as part of what kept the village firmly anchored in justice-seeking, keeping the place from becoming too easily a little Lutheran resort.

As we heard in Dorothy Bass' essay, villagers made conceptual blends out of the tailings piles. They were real toxic waste, and they were scars and wounds on a living valley, and, of course (maybe without saying it you assumed it) those wounds on the valley also blended with Christ's wounds and so called up both the suffering of Christ and the scars by which he was recognized in the resurrection. Thus, the valley is seen as being caught up in the sufferings of Christ even as those scars became icons pointing toward the promise of resurrection and a new creation.

To those layers of meaning, people bring the narratives of their own wounds: families broken apart, bodies and spirits abused, emergency surgeries, the loved one's death that came too soon. Villagers say that they see on this wounded wilderness landscape their own story and the world's story: deep wounds and scars, being healed by human effort, and also—much more powerfully—by the mysterious power that continues to pour life into that entire wilderness valley.

Is this a genre of an earth-healing story we will need to be able to tell more often into the future? Where mighty-looking human power failed, showed itself to be ultimately weak, and in our suffering, and in solidarity with the suffering of other creatures, we

bear witness to the scars that tell the truth about environmental violence?

In many religions and cultures, wounds are taboo, unclean, and are to be avoided, perhaps not even seen. But from its origins Christianity made it a practice to seek out the wounded as the embodied presence of Christ, to serve all in their own times of woundedness, to lay hands on the very ones often shunned and regarded as polluted—not as an exception to an otherwise pure religious practice, but as a paradigmatic practice of the faith in Jesus Christ.

So it seems to me that Christian wisdom about wounds extends naturally and faithfully to the wounded ecological world beyond humans:

- such wounds bear witness to difficult truths and can be part of a call for justice and communal response.
- they blend with the wounds of Christ and so point to God's solidarity with earth's suffering and to a resurrection, a new creation, that will be scarred and yet will live with flourishing life.
- they become icons of all our suffering, and allow us to join our stories of dying and rising, woundedness and healing, to the story of the earth and its wounding, healing, and promised new creation.
- a long heritage of Christian theology and practice, rather than teaching us to shun these wounds as “polluted” and “taboo,” instead draws us to them, seeing them as signs of the suffering Christ among us to whom we owe homage and service.

### ***Restoring community***

Victor Turner used the term *communitas* to describe the experience that ritual participants sometimes have of a mystical unity with other ritual participants, with others outside the gathering, and with all reality, including the non-human creation and divinity: an experience of all things being one, held together in a single reality. I've been convinced by Dorothy Soelle that 1) this mystical experience is not restricted to a small class of spiritual savants, but is something we all may experience.<sup>15</sup> And 2) that this experience is more ecologically true than much of what is taught in school about “the environment.” Our schools often teach that “the environment” is an external thing that we sometimes need to take care of—but not too much because an invisible but apparently sentient power called “the economy” won't like that and will punish us all. That is bad science and bad metaphysics.

Or how can we describe our simple act of inhalation and its physical mechanisms in human anatomy class without also naming the unbroken connection to the exhalation of trees and other green plants—like mouth-to-mouth resuscitation with every breath.

Theologian Charles Arand has written about how Martin Luther relished this sense of creaturely connection. In much the same way that he could joyfully assert “I am baptized!” Luther also

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14. Bass offers an extended theological account of this experience in Dorothy C. Bass, Kathleen A. Cahalan, Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, James R. Nieman, and Christian B. Scharen, *Christian Practical Wisdom: What It Is, Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 64–87.

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15. Dorothee Söelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

asserted “I am a creature!” In other words, there is joy in not being God, but a fellow creature with all others, finding a theologically and spiritually significant unity in the one who made us all.<sup>16</sup>

If the healing ministry of Jesus was in large part also about restoring communities by honoring and reincorporating those who were wounded and ostracized, might our healing prayer and its flashes of epiphanic insight about oneness also be part of the restoration of our whole biotic and creaturely community?

Perhaps we might find spaces to talk in our congregations about our mystical experiences of oneness that arise during healing prayer, during eucharist, and elsewhere. We might ponder together what those experiences teach us about the hope for reconciliation between—as scripture describes it—“all things.” Even now, we might after Holy Communion wonder and reflect on what one current post-communion prayer describes as “the healing power of this gift of life.”

### Gathering under the tree of life

In Seoul, South Korea, the noise and the fumes from so much automobile traffic had grown nearly unbearable for people who lived along a multilevel highway. The layers of this structure had covered up and built over the ancient stream that had once anchored this area. In a project that reminds me of that easter earthquake in Matthew, the people of Seoul opened up a fissure in those layers of concrete, dismantled most of the highway, and raised back to life that ancient stream to run again through the center of the city. Now, where the cars and trucks used to roar and belch smoke, there is today a stunning five-mile-long park anchored by the Cheonggyecheon stream.<sup>17</sup>

Of course, to us these images look like something more than just a cool city park. It's hard not to hear the words of Revelation 22, and see this scene like a present-day vision of the holy city in Revelation, on either side of the river are trees full of life, and the people and birds and other creatures stream to this reconfigured earth to find healing and renewal.

I want to suggest that preachers take new boldness and courage in using scriptural imagery of a new, healed creation to describe acts of ecological restoration. We may celebrate them not only as signs of some promised future, but as part of that future healed creation already now stretching out to meet us in real trees, actual rivers, and in the streets of our own holy cities.

Not to tell these stories as healing stories is to withhold important truths. Studies from the University of Illinois and elsewhere demonstrate that in urban areas where trees return, domestic violence goes down, there are fewer asthma attacks, school performance improves, and rates of depression decline. One

16. See his *Together with All Creatures: Caring for God's Living Earth: A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod* (Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2010).

17. See photos of the park at <http://landscapeperformance.org/case-study-briefs/cheonggyecheon-stream-restoration>

## Take new boldness and courage in using scriptural imagery of a new, healed creation to describe acts of ecological restoration.

recent study in Edinburgh, Scotland, noticed that brain electrical patterns changed from distressed and distracted while study participants walked through high auto-traffic areas, to something the researchers described as “soft fascination” as they walked into wooded city parks—showing brain patterns that looked more like meditation or prayer.<sup>18</sup>

Studies like this may encourage us—even goad us!—into being more bold in our homiletical re-descriptions of our actual towns and regions and world. The scriptural language of cosmic healing and renewal can help us dare to give theological answers to the question of “What force is it that inspires us to renew our cities and to heal the wounds of creation?” “What power is it that we sense in our bones that draws us to gather at the river, and to find healing in the leaves of the tree on either side of the river?” Our tradition doesn't silo and sequester these questions into “environmental health” or “urban planning” or “theories of aesthetics.” No. We claim that we are seeing the world's promised future, part of the trajectory that runs through Jesus' healing of wounded and “polluted” bodies, that runs back to the unfolding of life on this planet and back beyond that to the astonishing and mysterious birth of the universe itself.

This vision of a healed, restored, and flourishing creation on this earth, may be perceived by some as fantastic, like a “u-topia” (“no place”). However, to the contrary, this Christian vision of cosmic healing organically orients us and puts our feet down on the actual ecology of this planet, something that our fossil-fueled and screen-distracted cultures will rarely do.

### Concluding thoughts

I hope I have shown that we have varied theological constructs and patterns of prayer that address environmental problems. All of them, like lenses, bring different aspects of ecological and theological reality into focus. I hope I have convinced you that the motif of healing holds enormous promise especially in this era, and that it can function as a sort of core metaphor for the whole of God's great project of salvation. In many ways, your communities of faith are leading the way into God's promised future: the space you open for spiritual growth, for prayer for healing, for an encounter with a vision of a healed earth—these are places where the seeds of that new world are being sown. I hope you can taste and see that new creation often in your work and ministry.

18. Peter Aspinall, Panagiotis Mavros, Richard Coyne, and Jenny Roe, “The Urban Brain: Analyzing Outdoor Physical Activity with Mobile EEG” *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, March 6, 2013. doi:10.1136/bjsports-2012-091877.