



All Regions ▾

Sermons > Sermons 2015

Home

Marriage, Ordination,
Hope

Christmas Pageant
2015

Sermons

Sermons 2015

Sermon 20 December
2015

Sermon 13 December
2015

Sermon 29 November
2015

Sermon 22 November
2015

Sermon 15 November
2015

Sermon 8 November
2015

Sermon 1 November
2015 - All Saints Day

Sermon 25 October
2015

**Sermon 11 October
2015**

Sermon 4 October
2015

Sermon 13 September
2015

Sermon 16 August
2015

Sermon 26 July 2015

Sermon 19 July 2015

Sermon 12 July 2015

Sermon 5 July 2015

Sermon 28 June 2015

Sermon 21 June 2015

Sermon 14 June 2015

Sermon 7 June 2015

Sermon 11 October 2015

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In 1967, an historian by the name of Lynn White Jr. published an article entitled 'The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis'.^[1] In this paper White suggested that Western Christianity bears responsibility for the contemporary ecological crisis. Christianity, he argued, 'is the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen'.^[2]

White points to the first creation story in Genesis to support his argument. According to Genesis 1, humans are created in the image of God and are commissioned to 'be fruitful and multiply... to fill the earth and subdue it... [and] to have dominion over every living thing that moves upon the earth' (Gen 1:27-28). White argued that this well-known text places humanity at the pinnacle of the created order and diminishes the value of all other aspects of creation. In Gen 1, human beings are instructed to dominate – to harness nature, to tame creation, and to rule in God's place on Earth.

Genesis 1 is used by White as an obvious and very well-known example, but there are numerous other examples from the Old Testament and the New that seem to reinforce the idea that creation exists to serve human interests. White suggested that it is this kind of thinking that underlies the science and technology of the present day that has had such a devastating impact on our environment. In essence, White argued that the Bible shapes our attitude to the world around us and affects our interaction with creation. The ecological crisis is a religious crisis.

White's argument did not stop here. More science and more technology, he argued, are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis. Rather, since the roots of our ecological crisis are largely religious, the 'remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not'.^[3] We need to find a new religion, or rethink our old one. And although White's article was published almost fifty years ago, there seems to be some truth to what he is saying here. Because for more than three decades now, scientific leaders have warned that climate change is real and it is already causing damage to the planet. Yet despite these warnings, questions remain as to whether the will exists to address the problem of climate change quickly and effectively. Scientific fact alone does not seem to be enough to counter the kind of thinking that enables humanity to cause such damage without thought of long-term consequence. Scientific fact must be paired with the religious and philosophical foundations that underlie the way that we think about ourselves, and our relationship to the surrounding environment.

So if, as White suggested, the Bible can be read to support humanity's domination of creation, can it also provide the motivation for the transformation of human attitudes towards our planet? To explore this question, I want to focus on the readings that we have heard this morning.

In the reading from the OT, Job has been crying out to God for an explanation for his suffering. He has demanded that God appear and provide an explanation for his predicament. God does appear, but God does not address matters of human suffering or justice. Instead, God directs Job's attention to the wonders of creation, first to the magnificence of the universe and then to some of the animals that are part of Earth itself. God questions Job about these animals, but Job is unable to explain aspects of their behaviour.

Mountain goats live amid high, inaccessible cliffs. Far from human habitation, their normal behaviour is unknown to Job, to say nothing of the manner in which the female gives birth! Job is both ignorant of the habits of the mountain goat and

Sermon 31 May 2015 -
Trinity Sunday

Sermon - Sunday 24
May 2014 - Pentecost

Sermon 10 May 2015

Sermon 26 April 2015

Sermon 19 April 2015

Sermon 5 April -
Easter Day

Vicar's Annual Report
2015

Sermon 8 March 2015

Sermon 1 March 2015

Sermon 15 February
2015

Sermon 8 February
2015

Sermon 18 January
2015

Sermons 2014

Sermons 2013

Sermons 2012

Sermons 2011

Sermons 2010

Sermons 2009

The Resistance

Special Services

The St Andrew's
Soapbox Lectures

Services

Saint Andrew's Choir

Parish Groups and
Events

Contact

cannot provide the resources to care for and protect it. But there is no need for human care, because these new offspring fend for themselves almost immediately. Job neither understands nor controls this elusive creature.

Next we hear of the wild ass, which is characterized by its freedom. It cannot be confined and domesticated by human beings. It thrives in the wilderness, far from human habitation, where it can roam freely, without danger of being ensnared by human hunters. Like, the mountain goat, this animal is also outside the realm of human control.

The same is true for the hawk and the eagle that soar into the upper regions of the sky. They have no need of human guidance, and Job has no control over them. Job can only gaze in amazement at these beautiful creatures.

Job's experience of human existence is precisely the opposite of that depicted in Gen 1. God shows Job that creation follows patterns that he cannot even begin to comprehend, over which he exercises absolutely no authority. Interestingly, this alternative way of thinking that we find in Job – a way of thinking characterized by humility, wonder, and awe – has generally been ignored in Christian worship. But it's not the only place in the Bible that we find this kind of thought.

In the Gospel reading this morning, we hear of the raven, the wild flowers, and the grass of the field, all of which are provided for by God and by the Earth. Creation is not under human control. It does not need human beings in order to survive or thrive. Creation is not dependent on us, rather, we are dependent on creation for every aspect of our being, and such teaching should give us pause for thought. Earth's fruits nourish our bodies; its waters keep us alive; its beauty inspires our imaginations. We have known this from a scientific perspective for many years. What we find in texts such as Job, and indeed Luke, is a way of thinking that is congruent with what science is continually affirming as our place in the world. Within these biblical text we find an ecologically sensitive narrative tradition that stands in contrast to those texts that have historically been understood as upholding human superiority and domination. It is a narrative tradition that can be comfortably paired with scientific discourse and can be used to reconfigure the way we think about ourselves, and our relationship to our world. It is our job to reclaim and retell these narratives in that hope that in rediscovering ways of *thinking* ecologically, we might begin to *behave* in a more ecologically sensitive manner also.

- Dr Emily Colgan

[1] L. White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967): 1203-1207.

[2] White Jr., "The Historical Roots," 1205.

[3] White Jr., "The Historical Roots," 1207.

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