

## ***To Save The Planet We Must Save Democracy***

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Ancient Witness: Genesis 2:7-9,15

Last Friday was Earth Day. I'm old enough to remember the first Earth Day in 1970, and how it originally focused on air and water pollution. But in the last 20 years, there has developed an increasing urgency with greenhouse gases caused by our use of fossil fuels. Greta Thunberg has been a powerful voice, frustrated with inadequate action to address the existential threat of climate change, and she recently said, "This is not a 'happy earth day.' It never was. Earth Day has been turned into an opportunity for people in power to post their 'love' for the planet, while at the same time destroying it at maximum speed."

In the ancient creation stories in Genesis chapters one and two we get a picture of the kind of relationship intended for human beings to have with the Creator and the rest of the Creation. God put human beings, created in God's own image, in the garden "to till it and keep it." Let's take a minute to see what this phrase means.

"Tilling" represents everything that we humans do to draw sustenance from nature. It includes not only agriculture but also mining, manufacturing, and extracting. All of this depends upon taking and using what is of God's creation. Now humanity hasn't had a problem with this. In fact, one could say that we have tilled the heck out of the earth, tilled it to death!

"Keeping," on the other hand, means tilling with care. It means to maintain the capacity of the creation to provide sustenance for which the tilling is done. This means making sure that the world of nature may flourish, with all of its intricate, interacting, life-sustaining systems. Humankind has failed to till with care! The crisis in which we now find ourselves is the consequence of *tilling without keeping*.

"Keeping" the creation means that we follow the principle of sustainability so that the living things that belong to this natural system may thrive. So God wants us to relate to the natural world so that its stability, integrity and beauty may be maintained.

There are two reasons for human beings to care about the world. First, we are unavoidably dependent upon it. We care for the natural earth, for our survival as a species, for the love of our brothers and sisters, present and future, for the concern of coming generations. Because we are to love our neighbors as ourselves, we must keep the earth. Pope Francis refers to this as "inter-generational justice."

The second reason to care for the natural world is nature's own *intrinsic value*. God's creation is good and should be cherished for its *own sake*, not just for human utility. There is integrity of creation, which affirms that *all* which has been created by God is good and is to be held dear. Whenever we participate in the sacrament of communion, we acknowledge that every creature is

bound to every other creature in a great community and in a *communion of being*. So this is what keeping the earth means. No one “owns” a species. Anyone who would destroy species in the name of development takes a monstrous and arrogant prerogative.

Several years ago, Bill McKibben, a noted author and environmentalist, started a website called 350.org, and he said that when it comes to the issue of global warming, there are really three numbers that you need to understand it: 275, 390 and 350. And in the end, the most important number on the planet is 350.

For all of human history until about 200 years ago, our atmosphere has contained 275 parts per million of carbon dioxide. Now, it turns out that we need at least some CO<sub>2</sub> to trap some heat in the atmosphere or the planet would be too cold for human life.

Beginning in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, human began to burn coal, gas and oil, and at first, the amount of carbon dioxide began to rise only slowly. Recently, however, it has been rising much more quickly—exponentially—at a current rate of about 2 parts per million every year. And 13 years ago we were at about 390 (that second number) ppm of CO<sub>2</sub>. Scientists say that this is too much, and we’re beginning to see a disastrous, catastrophic impact:

- Glaciers are melting.
- Drought is becoming more common.
- Sea levels are rising.
- The oceans are becoming more acidic.

In the arctic by 2007 the sea ice was 39% below the summer average. Some now say that it soon will be completely ice-free in the summer, some 80 years ahead of what was predicted only a few years ago.

So the world’s leading climate scientists say that to turn this ship around, we need to bring the CO<sub>2</sub> level down at least to 350 parts per million. Hence the important 350 number.

They predict that because the polar ice will melt much quicker than they thought, and it will cause a *ten foot sea level rise* within 50 years. This would render coastal cities such as New York, London and Shanghai uninhabitable.

In the American Meteorological Society report entitled, *State of the Climate in 2014*, over 400 scientists from 60 nations concluded that no matter what we do to reduce the emission of greenhouse gases ocean temperatures are going to keep rising. And now, carbon dioxide levels have reached 400 parts per million (PPM). Greg Johnson, an oceanographer, said, “Even if we were to freeze greenhouse gas at current levels, the sea would actually continue to warm for centuries and millennia.” The CO<sub>2</sub> levels are now up to 420 ppm.

Pope Francis in 2015 issued a paper on environmental justice called, *Laudato Si*. In it he says, “Doomsday predictions can no longer be met with irony or disdain.”

This is why we need *more than voluntary actions of individuals* to solve this problem. Human beings need to act as a whole—collectively, politically, socially. It needs to be a concerted, organized effort. This means that we need laws and policies or it's not going to happen.

We need to step up the transition from fossil fuels to renewable, clean energy. The true cost of fossil fuels is actually very expensive, too high, and we need to stop subsidizing the oil companies, to stop assuming the hidden costs and to stop building pipelines and infrastructure that would commit us to decades of use that we cannot have.

Starting today, this nation has the technology and ability to move to 100% non-fossil fuels. Mark Jacobson of Stanford and Mark Delucchi of U.C. Berkeley wrote a paper back in 2009 in *Scientific American* outlining how we could wean ourselves off from fossil fuels in by 2030 to 2050. And in 2017, they had another article in the journal, *Energy and Environmental Science*, saying that we can get to 80-85% renewables—wind, solar, geothermal and hydroelectric—by 2030 and 100% by 2050.

But we have to begin now! This nation has the ability to lead the world to a new, sustainable economy. But, as Jacobson says, “The main barriers to getting to 100% clean energy are social and political, not technical or economic.” And with a new administration that denies climate change and climate science, we really have our work cut out for us.

In the past, this nation has met incredible challenges, and we can do so again. But, as people like Naomi Klein and Bill McKibben have said, we need to approach this like it's World War II, when citizens endured rationing, massive conversion of industry, mobilization of people and resources, commitment and sacrifice. It would require investments of trillions and trillions of dollars. As McKibben wrote recently, “We're under attack from climate change—and our only hope is to mobilize like we did in World War II.”

And yet instead of leading the way, the United States has been unable to make any meaningful progress to make any legislative progress at all. Why?

About 5 years ago, I read an article that the United States was downgraded from a “full democracy” to a “flawed democracy,” according to the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index. While this is shocking, I can't say that I was surprised. In just about all of the indexes I looked at, the U.S. ranked lower than most other advanced industrial democracies.

There was a recent study conducted at Princeton University by Professors Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page. Using 20 years of data, they asked the question, does the government represent the will of the people or not? This seems like a reasonable question, because the central idea of democracy is to represent the will of the people.

But what they found was that the opinions of the bottom 90% of income earners in America has essential no impact on the likelihood at all! The study concludes:

*The preferences of the average American appear to have only a minuscule, near zero, statistically non-significant impact upon public policy.*

And so, if you've ever felt like your opinion doesn't matter, if you've ever thought, "What's the point?" well, you're right.

According to this study, economic elites, business interests, and people who can afford lobbyists carry a major influence. Giles and Page found that the elite have the power to block or to pass things no matter what the 90% thinks. So if there is a zero level of support among the elite, there would be a zero chance of something passing, even if the 90% wanted it!

And so much can be explained and traced back to this study. A majority of Americans, in poll after poll, are for universal healthcare, for taxes on super rich, for free college education, for less military spending, and for reasonable gun control, and for clean energy and climate change laws, but powerful interests are overruling the will of the American people. In fact, oil subsidies continue!

The will of the majority of American people is being thwarted by the small economic elite that has a chokehold on American media and politics. This prompted the great thinker, Noam Chomsky, to say, "I don't know what word in the language—I can't find one—that applies to people of that kind, who are willing to sacrifice the existence of organized human life, not in the distant future, so they can put a few more dollars in highly overstuffed pockets. The word 'evil' doesn't begin to approach it."

Last week, Jamie Ruskin, a congressperson from Maryland put it like this: "We've got to save the democracy in order to save the climate and save our species... the struggle to defend our democracy is a precondition for taking the effective action that needs to be taken in order to meet the climate crisis in a serious way and turn it around."

Speaking a few years ago in an interview, former President Jimmy Carter talked about the Citizens United decision of the Supreme Court. He said the United States was now "an oligarchy with unlimited political bribery," adding "we've just seen a complete subversion of our political system as a payoff to major contributors."

Before 2006, no state required photo identification to vote on Election Day. Today, 10 states have this requirement and 33 states have some form of voter I.D. But research shows that these laws disproportionately affect minorities, the poor and the elderly, who are less apt to have valid I.D. And there is no evidence of the kind of voter fraud that these laws are supposed to prevent. There have been laws passed in some states, such as Florida, that make it more difficult to register to vote. Some states, such as Ohio, purge the voting rolls if someone did not vote in a previous election, silencing voices. Some states, like North Carolina, have cut back on early voting, which is important for those who cannot take time off on a weekday to vote. In many states, elections are severely underfunded, leading to inequality in areas of poor and minority citizens. Voters who cannot wait for hours and hours are effectively disenfranchised, while well-funded areas have minimal or no waiting time.

And it's getting worse. After the last election, many states are increasing their efforts to disenfranchise voters, making it harder and harder to vote and less accessible. This is inherently

undemocratic. And of course, the great symbol of this was the attempt to actually invalidate the last presidential election among elected representatives on the inside and thugs who stormed the capitol building on the outside in a blatant attempt to stop the democratic process in our nation. The Big Lie is a threat not just to our democratic system but to the planet itself. And of course, there is gerrymandering where districts are manipulated to distort representation. And so all of these laws are pushed by the elite, for the elite, to further skew our democracy in their favor. And voices of average citizens, the poor, minorities, and the vulnerable are silenced.

Meanwhile, the gap between the super wealthy and everyone else is growing exponentially. According to Oxfam America, the country's 735 billionaires have seen their collective wealth soar by 62% over the past two years while most workers earnings fail to keep pace with inflation. U.S. billionaires now own \$4.7 trillion, much of which goes completely untaxed. This money, in turn, translates to political power, making it impossible to access resources to address the climate crisis.

As the former Supreme Court Justice, Louis Brandeis, famously said, "We can have democracy, or we can have wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we can't have both."

Friends, the hour is getting late. Our faith impels us to stop the stranglehold that money has upon our government and to stop this corruption. We must fight to save democracy and to save our planet.