

**Genesis 1:1-5**

1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 2 Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

3 And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. 4 God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night." And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

## **Dorset Church Sermon 3/20/22**

My wife Marcy and I love the mountains! This is one of the factors that attracted us to Manchester, along with the wonderful interfaith community here.

What is it about mountains which makes them so powerful in the human psyche? Their beauty and grandeur call out to us. Perhaps they help us to put our own lives in perspective. When we climb to the summit we feel the joy of our accomplishment and experience the exhilaration of the expansive view, making us feel like we are on top of the world. The higher the mountain and the more difficult it is to climb, the greater is our sense of accomplishment and the more awe inspiring are the views.

We were in Colorado one summer several years ago when Marcy and I decided to attempt to summit a 14er. To those unfamiliar with hiking in Colorado, a 14er is the locals name for any mountain whose summit is higher than 14,000 feet. A bit more more altitude than anything in the Greens! With the encouragement of my sister Lisa, who lives in Colorado and would accompany us, we set our sights toward the summit of Quandary Peak, a 14er near Breckenridge.

Fortunately for us, it was a beautiful morning and after 4 1/2 hours of strenuous climbing and one delay, due to mountain goats blocking the trail, the three of us made it to Quandary's 14,265 foot peak. To be honest I don't think Marcy and I would have made it all the way to the summit if it weren't for my sister, Lisa.

She just kept going, and we had no choice but to follow her all the way up. Boy, were we glad we did, because the view from the summit was awe inspiring. We literally and spiritually had a mountaintop experience. For me, the spirituality of being on that summit was an experience of being one with the natural world. With mountains, clouds and sky for as far as the eye can see it reminded me that I am part of something much greater than myself.

This feeling of oneness with nature, was profound on a high mountain top in Colorado, but can happen just as well on Mount Equinox, or beside Equinox Pond or even sitting in our own backyards here in Vermont. It's a recognition of the sacredness of all life and the sacred, intrinsic value of every animal, tree, lake, stream, or rock. Awareness of the sacredness of our planet can lead us to a healthy and sustainable relationship with all of creation.

That awareness is the polar opposite of the way humanity generally relates to the world and its resources. We experienced this contrast first hand when we left the beautiful mountains of Colorado for Oakland, California on a fascinating visit to our son Ethan, who works for a nonprofit, called Earthworks, as an organizer for environmental justice. When we arrived in the Bay Area, we witnessed firsthand Ethan's work on behalf of a community affected by environmental hazards due to corporate greed and disregard for the safety and health of nearby residents. What many fail to realize, is that humanity's environmental sins are most often connected to the injustice of racism & economic inequality.

The San Francisco Bay Area is a region that has a reputation for composting, farmers markets, and progressive politics. Yet just a few miles north of Berkeley, a wealthy city, lush with beautiful parks, quaint neighborhoods, a major university, and gourmet farm-to-table restaurants, residents of Richmond, California live in the shadow of chemical plants, industrial facilities, and California's second largest oil refinery. This Chevron refinery has been spewing toxic chemicals and dangerous particulate matter into the lungs of the city's mostly black residents for over 100 years. Black residents originally settled in Richmond because they had nowhere else to go; historical housing discrimination practices kept them out of much of the Bay Area's wealthier and whiter areas.

We arrived in the Bay Area several weeks after a massive explosion rocked the Chevron refinery, nearly killing 19 workers and sending 15,000 area residents to the hospital seeking treatment for respiratory issues. Ethan remembers coughing his way through Richmond's smoky streets a few days after the explosion, eyes stinging, to an emergency public hearing where refinery management and city officials offered little comfort or reassurance to the thousands of ailing and angry residents.

In the aftermath of that disaster, Chevron did nothing to become a better neighbor to the community and continued their disregard for the health of the residents of Richmond.

There was a stark contrast between the clean air, peace and tranquility of the mountains we had just left and the foul, unhealthy air forced upon the residents of Richmond. This is just one example of the human effects of our neglect abuse of the earth and how this disproportionately affects the most vulnerable members of society.

The great theologian, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, recognized the danger of the way humankind relates to the natural world and wrote about it in the early 1950s.

In his theological masterpiece, "God in Search of Man", Heschel wrote:

"Our age is one in which usefulness is thought to be the chief merit of nature; in which the attainment of power, the utilization of its resources is taken to be the chief purpose of man in God's creation. Man has indeed become primarily a tool-making animal, and the world is now a gigantic tool box for the satisfaction of his needs."

This quote of Heschel's identifies one of the biggest obstacles in our path to creating a better world. Viewing ourselves as the center of the universe. Specifically, here, he is calling out humanity for our exploitation of the earth for our never ending wants and desires. It's remarkable that in the early 1950s Heschel was already envisioning the possibility that our human overconsumption could lead to a great environmental crisis. Were he alive today, I believe he would be greatly saddened, but not surprised by the myriad of environmental crises that we face, and by our inability to make the kind of progress that is really needed, with protective laws and actions which could move us toward real solutions.

In his writings, Heschel identifies what he believes to be the root cause of this existential crisis. The underlying problem, from which the environmental crisis arises, is something that philosophers call anthropocentrism.

Anthropocentrism is a worldview that regards humans to be the most important thing in the Universe, or at least on our planet. This suggests that we humans have greater intrinsic value than other species. The results of this attitude, is that any species that are of potential use to humans are a “resource” to be exploited. This has resulted in an unsustainable relationship with the rest of creation, a degradation of natural systems and the extinction of species.

One group of environmentalists believe we need to abandon our anthropocentric lens and adopt a biocentric world view, one in which our importance as a species is reduced to a place equal to all others. They point out that the richness and diversity of life on earth was here before us and would continue without us, but we could not survive a moment without the sustaining force of all other life on earth. Biocentrism considers all life to have equal moral standing, with intrinsic value that is worthy of protection.

What does scripture have to say about this issue? A moment ago we heard the reading of the very beginning of the five books of Moses. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”

But did you know that there are two creation stories? A different version appears in each of the first two chapters of Genesis. In the first account, humans are created last, suggesting that God was preparing the entire earth for humans.

In that scenario, humans are the crown of creation - everything else being created for our benefit. Genesis 1 instructs us to “Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and master it; rule the fish, the birds, and all living things that creep on earth.”

There are those who will cite these verses from Genesis to validate the view that the earth’s resources are primarily for us to exploit as a gigantic tool box for the satisfaction of our needs. But wait, in Genesis chapter 2 there is a distinctly different message.

In the second creation story the plants and the animals are created in between the creation of a man and woman, suggesting that all of creation is interwoven. In Genesis 1, God tells humans to master and rule the earth. In Genesis 2 God placed humans in the Garden of Eden and asked us to serve and to guard it.



Humans are still looked upon as central to creation but are tasked with the responsibility to care for all life on earth rather than to simply exploit it.

In this view we are caretakers of the earth. We may make use of its resources - cultivating, tilling and planting, but we must do so in a way that respects all of creation. We may in fact, according to this view, build machines and powerplants and enjoy our comforts, but we had better do so with the knowledge of how it affects the earth, which ultimately sustains us and all of the other creatures. Laws for environmental protection and the development of clean energy sources, fall into this model of humans as caretakers of the earth.

If we want to save our planet and begin to alleviate the suffering that we have caused, to our own species and all others, we must make a fundamental change to how we view ourselves and our relationship to the natural world.

A clue to a possible transformed relationship with the earth, which might begin the healing process needed to find our way through our current dark night of environmental destruction, might be found in my mountaintop experience in Colorado. It's not anthropocentric nor is it biocentric but it's what Rabbi Heschel calls God centric.

I would like everyone to take a moment and recall an awe inspiring experience you had in your life. It could be on a mountaintop or on the edge of a lake or stream, holding a newborn baby, or celebrating a loved one at a graduation or other milestone in life. It could be any moment when you experienced the mystery and grandeur of life. That is what we call the sacred, the special and the holy moments. It's where a god-centric view of the world is prevalent; where we sense the sacred in relationships with nature and with other human beings.

When our paradigm is God centric our egos and self centered needs take a back seat. The greater truth is that our anthropocentric worldview isn't just a cause of our environmental problems, it's the root of all of our problems. The solution is to put God at the center. With God at the center we strive to do what is right for all life on earth. Our current ethic is a utilitarian one, where everything and everyone is there to fulfill our needs. A god centered view puts us in a mindset of appreciation, reverence and wonder. We perceive the sacred in everything. This could be the beginning of healing and wholeness for humankind and all life. With God at the center we do what is morally right and not just what is convenient, expedient or profitable. We witnessed this first hand on our visit to Richmond, California as we saw people do what is right for themselves and their neighbors.

Citizen leaders began to organize a strong community response. They brought together people of many different backgrounds to work for change. They did not want their communities to be treated as sacrifice zones to corporate greed. They held forums and marches, canvassed neighborhoods and packed public hearings. They proved that people acting together with love for their communities can make a difference. These grassroots leaders have since been elected to local office and represent their cities, working for a cleaner and more equitable society.

All of us can have an impact on our world like the people of Richmond and their friends, by organizing and speaking out on the issues that matter to us and our neighbors. We can support organizations doing the important work of environmental protection and justice. The earth needs our support more than ever.

We must start by putting God at the center and perceiving the sacred in everything. May we be inspired by this world view to be part of a process of healing, for the benefit all who share this one planet.

Amen

