

Limits, Lament and Grace: A Sustainable Spirituality for Creation Care

Amy Ross, St. Paul's, 7.04.17

In just 40 years, over half of the world's wildlife has been lost.

World Wildlife Fund's 2014 report

As climate change worsens over time, experts predict more droughts, floods and extreme weather. To name just a few of the consequences, we can expect:

- Less crops and more hunger
- Acidification to cause fish stocks and coral reefs to diminish
- People of Africa to lose up to half of their farming yields by 2020.

Facts from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)

Climate change is an issue that affects every single one of us. It's not just environmental: the climate crisis is a humanitarian crisis.

Every single one of us, if we do not act now, will see the tragic effects of climate change.

Advertisement for a recent climate march by Cambridge University's Zero Carbon Society

"I used to think that top global environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate change. I thought that with 30 years of good science we could address these problems, but I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy"

Gus Speth, former Dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, 2013

I've read messages like those almost every day for several years. Since I had a 'lightbulb moment'/epiphany/calling to green ministry six and a half years ago, I've tried to dedicate much time, energy and headspace to raising the profile of creation care among Christians, and of the importance of faith among secular environmentalists. I've volunteered, worked, researched, theologised and given talks on the subject of sustainability and living green, on how and why Christians must engage with or even seek to lead the response to the environmental crisis. Even before that, although I didn't understand creation care as a

priority of mission, I understood it from a secular point of view due to studying Geography and Environmental Science at University.

And before our son Caleb was born, I even felt that I had grown pretty good at 'walking the talk'. I was by no means the best activist you've seen, but I worked for a climate change charity, went to political marches and signed petitions online. I met people suffering from the impacts of climate change first hand in Kenya and Ghana. I bought my clothes either second hand or from independent ethical brands, agonised over the food I bought (even trying veganism for a while), learned to garden, grow veg, repair small things, and chose lengthy means of travel over flying where possible. I spent months deliberating over whether or not to accept a free car offered by my sister-in-law for fear of increasing my carbon emissions. I even did a Masters degree in environmental management, with a global focus. And most of the time, I enjoyed these things!

And then parenthood happened. Breastfeeding every two hours: trying to learn about a newborn's life and health from a position of complete ignorance, stressing about his breathing, having my relationship with my parents and husband turned upside down with a multitude of new pressures ...Dan (my husband) and I both acknowledge that we very quickly moved from what you could reasonably call *thriving* to just barely *surviving* for a while - merely getting through each day.

It's not that I gave up all the things I'd done previously, but I began to more deeply grapple with the enormous challenges of living green in a modern, globalised urban consumer context. The energy and self-control I'd been exerting to live sustainably seemed to disappear overnight. Instead of thinking that everyone who didn't make the necessary changes towards sustainability was either a bit ignorant about the urgency of climate change, or worse, a bit lazy, I began to see that actually they were probably just coping with life's challenges and likely did not have the capacity to change. I now understood this because with new parenthood, all of a sudden I had no energy to carefully select ethical food on a tight budget, get it home without a car and cook it from scratch. After carefully stewarding my energy consumption for many years, sometimes I was so tired I couldn't have cared less whether I left lights on around the house! The hours I used to spend trawling through charity shops to look half-decent without supporting the evil high street brands, and writing academic articles on forest policy...even organising the very worthwhile eco-church project, were ALL GONE! After 8 months of having a house strewn with drying washable nappies I even failed at *that* holy grail of green parenting - in our ignorance we'd been drying them directly on the radiators to avoid using the dryer, not realising that by doing so we'd caused the bamboo fibres to perish and as a result our expensive set of TotsBots nappies were next to useless, leaking so much we generated five wet or poo-ey outfits per day! By the time we realised, we could not afford replacements and nor were we motivated to do so.

After several months of living with the emotional dissonance of knowing all about the problems of climate change and feeling like I was doing nothing to respond to them, worse,

I was daily contributing to them, I began to ask – God, where are you in all this?? I’ve tried to follow you, but why is it so hard?! Maybe I am just a failure.

Does this resonate with you in any area of life? Maybe not climate change, but something else?

Another thing impacted me in those early months of parenthood. Martin Evans asked a penetrating question after a talk by Michael Northcott that St. Paul’s hosted about a year ago (Michael is a climate change theologian, very challenging). Martin asked ‘How can we stop eco-living from becoming the new evangelicalism?’ I thought, he’s right - What are the harmful things about evangelicalism that we want to avoid in the eco-movement? For example, black and white judgements, a spiritual practice that can end up motivated by guilt and fear rather than experience of being loved by God in our weakness.

It became clear that alongside a theology compelling us to care for creation, we need to develop a spirituality that can sustain us in the struggle to do so. This spirituality must sustain us through long years of eco-activism, through changing life circumstances, be motivated by our Christian faith and not result in either burn out or a disengagement with the reality of the world we live in.

In order to counter the de-motivating climate messages of doom and gloom, most of the world teaches that with a little bit more collaboration, a little bit more hard work and self-sacrifice for the greater good, we can solve the global ecological problems. I’m not denying the truth of these ideas, but I’m telling you today that I think this is insufficient. Our faith is not one of compromise. It’s very much a ‘do it wholeheartedly if you are going to do it’, approach. It’s radical. AND YET....There are many resources within the Christian tradition that can help us cope with the emotional dissonance of knowing the problems but not being able to respond in the ways we know we should. These include a theology of rest, rhythms of prayer, the spiritual disciplines and more. But two I’d like to highlight today are: 1) accepting the gift of limits, and 2) drawing on the biblical tradition of lament.

Limits

As much as I’d like to start an eco-commune, sharing resources, keeping chickens and growing food with fellow world-changers (and I actually would!), I can’t do that and stay married to my moving-to-Leeds-for-curacy husband right now. So I must live in a nuclear family buying things from the supermarket and in the town we’re about to move to, driving even more to stay sane with a small child. As with many others, I’ll also be tempted to overconsume the wasteful, unsustainable, disposable products that help isolated nuclear families cope with the burden of running separate households rather than sharing resources and chores together.

How can I do this while knowing that I am constantly failing God and his creation?

Partly it involves accepting the limits that God has given me.

The book, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* by Peter Scazzero describes this as ‘the gift of limits’. We all have them – for example the nature of the family we were born in to, our

cultural, economic and religious situation. Our marital status imposes limits upon us, the number and nature of our children, our geographical location...Even the length of our life is limited. The modern world would like to tell us that we can escape all of these limits to become whoever we want, wherever we want, but that is simply not the reality of life. It is worth being clear that there are some situations where the acceptance of a 'limit' might actually be on par with accepting abuse, and I am of course not endorsing those things. But sometimes recognising limits is helpful.

In the Bible, we see the limits of illness, for example Paul's thorn in the flesh, and even limits on time – I mean, Jesus was 30 when he started his ministry! I'm not even 30 yet, so I think it's legitimate to take my foot off the pedal, right (!?!).

Now, the thing about limits is that it only serves to illustrate the enormity of God's grace. My limitations, your limitations, restrict what we can do to bring about the kingdom of God to about here (*hold out hand*). This means that God's grace in completing the work reaches even further down than it would otherwise, all the way to meet us.

Think for a moment – what are your limits? Would accepting these as a gift help you notice the greatness of God's grace more?

Secondly,

Lament

Why must we lament? Sometimes you must have expression of pain and frustration that is devoid of theological platitudes of hope, in order to properly grieve/process pain. One of my favourite authors, Sarah Bessey, says we must learn to 'obey the sadness'. This can be an important step on the journey towards empowerment, healing and eventually hope leading to action.

There is a strong tradition in Judaism of lament, which exists within Christianity although it is not often included in worship. Walter Bruggemann and some other theologians describe lament in the book of Jeremiah, which was written at the time of Judah suffering rounds of deportation by Babylonian rulers.

They say:

"The lyrical, poetic texts of Jeremiah... do not scold or coerce, or ask Israel to do anything. They are, rather, the utterances of a poet who was acutely sensitive to the pain and failure of his community, who saw in penetrating ways the failed core of Judah's life, which could not be covered over by the façade of royal self-deception. This poetry, with enormously inventive imagery, seeks to help the community of Jerusalem to see what it refuses to see, but what it must see if it is to reposition and revision its life in terms of its commitment to and reliance upon Yahweh."

Long ago in its liturgies Israel practiced what modern psychotherapy has rediscovered, that you cannot have serious hope without first recognising the sometimes painful, truth. Israel moved from accepting death to anticipating restoration, fully aware that in each of its postures of defeat and expectation, it addressed the Lord, who was ultimately in control of

the future. In the end it would be God who would end [exile] and permit homecoming to the land and full restoration. *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament (1999), Birch, Brueggemann, Fretheim, Petersen, (Chp. 10 p. 328, 349)*

A recognised model of lament prayer is found in Psalm 22, which was read earlier. This format includes the following 5 components, which are found in many versions of lament prayers:

- Address - "My God, My God...(22:1a)"
- Complaint - "Why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?" (22:1b)
- Confession of trust – "Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them." (22:3-4)
- Petition – "Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help." (22:11)
- Vow of praise – "From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me. I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you." (22:21a-22) *Rachel's Cry: Prayer of Lament and the Rebirth of Hope, Billman & Migliore (1997) p.27*

Lament contrasts trust and doubt, lament and praise in extreme tension. While it risks accusing God of letting bad things happen, it at least gives him the credit for being in control of everything and trusts him enough to believe he'll listen to one's cry. In fact, it assumes the intimacy of a bold and direct relationship with God.

So I am going to finish with an exercise that allows us to express our frustration and anger, our confusion, to God about the hurts that the earth is enduring. It springs from the feeling of entrapment in the pervading system that perpetuates environmental abuses, and our own inability to exercise the discipline, sacrifice and radical lifestyles that would allow us to truly care for creation.

Be aware that this lament is only one part of the whole story. Sometimes, it is all we can see, and it is definitely legitimate, but it is still only one part. Eco-theologians such as Dave Bookless explain that environmental problems stem from broken relationships. If you imagine a triangle with lines stretching from God at the top, to People on one point and the Land, at the other point, and between People and Land, you can then see that if just one of the relationships is broken, all the others are affected.

But although these are broken, there is the possibility of restoration. Four truths that we have in the Bible are that:

- God loves the earth (John 3:16, Genesis – 'it is good')
- God is committed to his creation on an ongoing basis (In Colossians 1, we see that 'in Christ all things hang together', also John 1 referring to 'the Word' who was Christ, involved in Creation)

- Humans have a role to play (e.g. Leviticus, Deuteronomy – *if you obey me, says God, I will bless the land*)
- There is a promise of renewal (Revelation)

I can testify that change is already happening in the national and global church, with a growing awareness of the importance of these issues and our role in addressing them. In fact, I'm going to speak at a conference in France in September that is a pan-European gathering of Christian environmental scientists, activists, conservationists and theologians, and I will be telling the story of St. Paul's eco-church at the conference.

But as we stand in the time of the now but not yet, let's give voice to the struggle faced by the planet, and therefore by ourselves in compassion and solidarity. I invite you to pray this lament with me. It is a poetic exercise that captures the voice of creation, sustained by Christ on an ongoing basis and in direct relationship with God independent of human beings. It follows the spirit of the Psalm 19 where we read 'the heavens declare the glory of God'. Isaiah 55 where 'the mountains and hills will burst into song', Romans 8 where 'creation is groaning', and Luke 19:40, which says if Jesus disciples remained silent 'even the stones would cry out'.

Read 'A Lament of Creation', adaptation of Psalm 22