God’s Good Creation

God creates, and sees it is good. God creates light, and declares it is good (Genesis 1:3). God land from water and sees it as good (v. 10). God creates reproducing plant species and declares this as good (v. 12). Genesis 1 continues with God seeing each major creative act as good—the sun and moon (v. 18); sea and air creatures (v. 21); and land animals (v. 25); and after creating humans and observing the full ecology (v. 31). God sees that creation is pleasant, agreeable, yes, good.

And likewise we humans, made in the representative likeness of God, are to see creation as good.

A theme of this issue of The Mountain Vision is the goodness of God’s creation. God has gifted us humans the privilege to gain our livelihood from creation as well as to appreciate the beauty, wonder, and lessons of nature. God also gives us a corresponding responsibility to nurture and protect creation. Let’s then live in God’s order.

Warped interpretations of the opening chapters of Genesis have excused human exploitation of creation. Lynn Braband, Fred Krueger, and Fr. John Rausch show that God intends for humanity to protect, nurture, and appreciate creation.

For two thousand years many Christians have understood that God reveals truth and insight through two books: The Bible, and the Book of Nature. Robert Gottfried tells how God changed his life through a sunset. Mary Foster reviews Robin Wall Kimmerer’s acclaimed Braiding Sweetgrass, which beckons us to blend our spirituality with nature, family, and cultural traditions. Janet Keating expresses how her avid hobby of birdwatching illuminates her relationship with God and equips her advocacy work.

Our national and state public lands are our treasure we as citizens hold in common. For many, these lands provide settings for us to draw close to God and to get our life priorities straight. Yet there are concerted congressional attempts to hand over OUR lands, something most Americans would not want.

While oceans seem distant from our Appalachian geography, their continued deterioration if unchecked will harm all of us. We all live on this “blue marble” called Earth. Its fate is largely up to us humans to determine. In this issue we also review a spate of books on climate, another pressing matter we must get right.

Although this time we have only short updates on Appalachian coal and gas, nonetheless, these issues continue to be the heart of CFTM’s day to day work. We also commemorate the passing of an old friend, and the greeting of a new one.

We profile our active CFTM Steering Committee member, Fr. John Rausch, and include his insightful review of Elizabeth A. Johnson’s book, Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love, that brings faith and science together.

The Mountain Vision is a free publication supported by donors and prayer.
God’s Epiphanies Through Nature by Allen Johnson, Editor

"If God exists, does that God care about me?" Alison was struggling with her faith. God seemed distant, detached, and abstract to her. She had grown up in the Christian faith, continued to participate in church activities, and could remember times when her faith seemed real. Now, as a middle-aged adult, doubts were gnawing at her.

Alison had accompanied her husband to a southern Ohio state park. Several of us were together on a gorgeous October weekend for an Opening The Book Of Nature (OBN) retreat. The forest was shimmering in reds, oranges, greens, and browns framed by a bright blue sky. After a leisurely Saturday breakfast, morning prayers, and instructions, each participant had gone out into the nearby woods to find a solitary place. The objective was to be attentive to discern a spiritual insight that nature might impart. After about 90 minutes we would gather together to share and refine our experiences, and then go back out again.

After wandering around in the woods, Alison found a comfortable fallen log to nestle on. She had come to the event to accompany her nature-loving husband. She attempted to focus on the task at hand, but her mind kept coming back to her doubts about her faith. Alison had taken her Bible along, and after a time, she started skimming through some pages. Her eyes paused upon Psalm 91.

> Those who go to God Most High for safety will be protected by the Almighty. I will say to the Lord, “You are my place of safety and protection. You are my God and I trust you.”
>
> God will save you from hidden traps and from deadly diseases.
> He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you can hide.
> His truth will be your shield and protection.

Alison paused at verse four, and thought of a mother bird covering her chicks with her feathers. Her eyes glanced up at the sky. Above her was an opening in the forest canopy. Against the blue sky, a sizable white bird circled. And circled. "Why is it not moving on?" Alison asked herself. Yet the bird continued to circle over the small opening. Shaken, Alison looked again at verse four. "He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you can hide. His truth will be your shield and protection."

When our group reassembled, Alison shared her excitement. Her faith in God was rebirthing, vibrantly so!

Sunday, the following morning, each of us went for one final outing in the woods. The OBN event had been meaningful for each one of us. We now gathered together to say our good-byes and to share our final thoughts.

Alison had one more word to share. That morning she had gone out to that same place where the white bird had hovered and circled. To her it was now a sacred place, holy ground where God had spoken to her through a white bird. Once again sitting on the log, Alison looked up through the blue-sky opening in the forest canopy. Colorful leaves sparkled in the soft breeze. She thought of the bird, the promise of the Psalm, and how God had rekindled her faith. And suddenly, the white bird appeared. As Alison watched, her heart-beating fast, the bird circled the opening several times, then flew away, as if to say to her, “God is with you, now go forth with your life in faith.”

I remember Alison’s story well. It was my first solo facilitation of an OBN event. I was nervous at the beginning. However, nature is always a great teacher, God faithfully responds to prayer, and the participants were accommodating. Over the next several years I facilitated and co-facilitated numerous OBN events in a variety of settings, time frames, and with differing types of people. Invariably, participants learned lessons from nature and strengthened their faith in God. On several occasions, I witnessed life-changing spiritual breakthroughs similar to Alison’s experience. Other OBN facilitators and participants have similar stories to share.

The OBN process has also been used to discern policy direction. For example, in the mid-90’s I was with members of the Religious Campaign for Forest Conservation camping in a California redwoods forest to discern what spiritual lessons and directions to take toward a policy involving commercial logging on national forests. A later group used OBN practice to discern wilderness expansion in the Monongahela National Forest in West Virginia.

The OBN can be modified for lengths varying from a single one-hour outing to weeklong events. My wife and I were pleased that our sons quickly and enjoyably discerned spiritual lessons from nature in one-hour OBNs in our backyard. I’ve found that even short OBN exercises with youth groups, that young people eagerly pick up on God speaking through creation into their lives.

So go out into a quiet nature setting. Be prayerfully attentive, and God will teach you.

> Ask the animals, and they will teach you, or ask the birds of the air, and they will tell you. Speak to the earth, and it will teach you or let the fish of the sea tell you. (Job 12:7-8)
We invite you to please send a generous contribution to Christians For the Mountains (CFTM) as we stand with people and communities devastated by extreme energy extraction such as mountaintop removal and fracking.

Rebuilding Appalachia requires concerted focus, creativity, selfless leaders, and lots of time—above all, God’s grace and empowerment. Malaise is often spiritual at root. Exploiters and oppressors are spiritually impoverished, but so are, in another way, those who are exploited and oppressed. This ministry is an opportunity for Christians to open hearts and minds and hands to God’s saving way. A clean, sustainable, respectful, and just future is our vision.

Christians For The Mountains is a leading voice dedicated to addressing spiritual issues that underlie environmental abuses while drawing upon God’s leading to bring hope and restoration. CFTM works alongside numerous religious and secular organizations, leaders, and volunteers regionally and nationally. We maintain our Christian identity while bridge-building with the scientific, political, and organizational strengths of secular groups.

As a CFTM member, your prayers, counsel, and financial support enable CFTM to publish twice-yearly issues of The Mountain Vision, maintain three websites and two Facebook pages, contribute financially to disasters, be on leadership teams that plan and hold conferences, push for just, enforced regulations and policy in state and national government, and challenge Christians to faithfulness. Scholars, researchers, and media frequently request interviews and tours. CFTM continues to support health research in mountaintop removal communities CFTM is a sponsor of the Larry Gibson Biography project.

All this on our volunteer-run, donor-supported 2018 budget of $9000!!!

Our nation is going through challenging political times. Our most important gift to movements yearning for a more just, harmonious world is Christian Hope. We welcome you to join us in confidently stepping out to each new day with the heart-knowledge that God is with us.

Please be generous with a financial gift to help CFTM reach others like you who understand our God-given directive to “act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God.”

We Really Do Need Your Support—Here’s Why

Christians For The Mountains (CFTM) invites you to partner with us for wholesome communities, vigorous clean economies, honest effective governments, rich culture, and healthy populations. CFTM seeks to follow the path Jesus taught of gratitude, service, compassion, truth-telling, and reconciliation.

ONLINE DONATIONS ARE WELCOME THROUGH OUR WEBSITE www.christiansforthemountains.org

Invitation to Join Together With Us

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We welcome any other information you would like to share
(such as your faith; experience; skills; special interests; etc....use separate sheet)

Mail to: Christians For The Mountains  12664 Frost Road, Dunmore, WV 24934
[Note: This form is not necessary. We welcome pertinent info. Our web online form is also available.]

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Your donations are tax deductible. Thank you for prayer support.

Mountain Mourning Collection DVD Is Free for CFTM Members

Twelve years ago CFTM launched this DVD as its first major outreach. Although produced on an exceptionally low budget, this film collection has been widely shown across the world. Larry Gibson and Maria Gunnoe used it for their speaking engagements. And many have acclaimed this collection of films as powerfully heart-reaching.

Three feature films of approximately 20 minutes each are Mountain Mourning, Look What They’ve Done, and Keeper Of The Mountains. You are welcome to request multiple copies.
The Genesis Mandate Revisited: Reconciling Conservation With Western Cultural History
by Lynn Braband

SOME CLAIM THAT ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS—climate change, sprawl, species extinctions, and the like—can be traced to the Judeo-Christian ideas rooted in the Old Testament, where God told Adam and Eve to “subdue” the earth and “have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Genesis 1:28). These assertions have caused many, including myself, to re-examine our traditions and beliefs. While aspects of the critique ring true, I believe the basic charge to be wanting, and a hindrance to progress. As many are coming to realize, science and religion need to work together for the sake of all living things.

Historian Lynn White, Jr., is frequently cited as being one of the first to articulate this critical perspective, often referred to as “the Genesis mandate.” In his influential article, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” White states that “Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen” (White 1967). As such, he writes, it established a “dualism” of humans and nature that “insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.”

Others took a harder line. In his 1969 book Design with Nature, for example, landscape planner Ian McHarg wrote that the Genesis story of man’s dominion over nature “encourages the most exploitative and destructive instincts in man rather than those that are deferential and creative. Indeed, if one seeks license for those who would increase radioactivity, create canals and harbors with atomic bombs, poisons without restraint, or give consent to the bulldozer mentality, there could be no better injunction than this text” (McHarg 1969).

A Place Outside Nature

The public’s responses to these assertive attitudes have varied. Some have agreed that the Genesis mandate gives humans license to exploit nature with few limits. For example, President Reagan’s first Secretary of the Interior, James Watt, when asked by a U.S. House of Representatives committee why his agency was acting contrary to its expressed mandates, responded, “I do not know how many future generations we can count on before the Lord returns.”

Conversely, many people have deliberately distanced themselves from Christianity, and searched for alternative spiritual expressions. These include monistic religions, such as Buddhism and Hinduism, and animism from sources such as Native American and pre-Christian European tribal beliefs.

Still others have been motivated to probe the theological histories of their traditions. The Enlightenment, for example, in placing the human mind at the pinnacle of authority, profoundly influenced modern attitudes toward nature (Berry 2000). Its resonance holds true centuries later.

I vividly recall a conversation I had as an undergraduate with an engineering student. Pollution did not concern him. He felt that if our environment became intolerable, we would bio-engineer ourselves to thrive within the new chemistries.

Going back even further in history, one can find dualistic attitudes—separating humans from nature—in the writings of ancient Greek philosophers, particularly Plato. In the Bible, on the other hand, especially in the Old Testament, the concept of nature as something distinct from humanity does not exist. A shift in religious teachings occurred in the Middle Ages, however, when prominent church theologians sought to align Christianity with ancient Greek thought (Wilkinson 1991).

It’s also important to recognize that environmental degradation has not been limited to Western societies, therefore the charge that the Genesis mandate is at the root of all environmental problems is suspect. Christian history, moreover, is not monolithic but diverse and rich. Some traditions promote much more positive, even sacred, views of nature. St. Francis of Assisi, for instance, advocated a “brotherhood” of humans with the rest of creation (Wilkinson 1982). Celtic monks “had a deep sense of the goodness of creation and the presence of God in it” (Wilkinson 1991). The Eastern Church, from its earliest days, taught that the impact of God’s incarnation mattered for all of creation, not just humans. And more recently, Kuyperian Calvinism’s insistence that God’s redemptive work applies to everything has been the foundation for a theology that promotes care of the environment.

Bridging the Divide

Rich Biblical themes, such as stewardship, justice, and service, can serve as a foundation for building an environmental ethic. In recent years, several faith-based organizations have emerged to promote environmental activism. The Evangelical Environmental Network, for example, includes a climate change initiative and the provision of educational materials for churches. The Au Sable Institute is a Christian organization that focuses on environmental education and advocacy. A Rocha is an international organization with conservation projects throughout the world. And GreenFaith is a New Jersey-based group founded by Jewish and Christian leaders to connect diverse religious traditions to the environment.

Barriers to this movement exist. Certain faith-based groups, for instance, have launched counter-activism movements, which question the priorities of religious environmentalists. Another complication has been the re-emergence of a science-versus-religion paradigm, which champions the view that religion imprisons the human mind and science frees it. This viewpoint was popularized as far back as the late 19th century with books like Andrew White’s A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom and, more recently, with Richard Dawkins’ The God Delusion. Professionally closer to home, Jeffrey Lusk wrote in a book review published in The Journal of Wildlife Management, “spirituality and religiosity are malignancies on human consciousness” (Lusk 2005).

Despite this tension, collaborations between science and religion on behalf of the environment are increasing. Renowned astronomer Carl Sagan, though a frequent critic of religion throughout much of his career, embraced a view toward the end of his life that religious communities need to be recruited to advocate on behalf of the environment. Similarly, in his 2006 book The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth, E. O. Wilson wrote, "Science and religion are two of the most potent forces on Earth and they should come together to save the creation" (Wilson 2006). The Society of Conservation Biology has established a Religion and Conservation Biology Working Group, which seeks to span the “fields of theology and religion and the many aspects of conservation biology.” Currently, the working group is developing curricula for religious institutions to help their communities gain a better understanding of conservation biology and support conservation efforts. The Genesis mandate still resonates in some circles, but times are changing. Religious institutions are calling for repentance and conservation. Conservation groups are reaching out to religious organizations to promote their cause. Though a resurgence of anti-theism within science is an obstacle, scientific and religious communities alike are waking up to a need to collaborate on environmental initiatives.
Traditionally, dominion is the imitation of Christ. The Early church declared the Prophet Elijah as the model of dominion. This is because he masters his inward passionate tendencies and thus is able to sit still and listen to the Word of God within. This demonstrates a dominion or mastery over his inward human nature as the prerequisite for authority over external nature. In the biblical story of Elijah, once he overcomes his passionate tendencies, then creation serves him: a bird brings him his daily bread and a spring of water erupts at his feet to demonstrate living water is there for him.

The word dominion in English is derived from the Latin word “dominus” which translates literally as Lord. For us this means that dominion is just as it was for Elijah, it is first interior. This means we must overcome the egotism, pride, arrogance, ignorance, independence, greed and anger that so easily besiege us and replace those self-centered tendencies with love, service, obedience to God and all of the qualities which we term virtues. A close examination of dominion reveals that these virtues are aspects of Christ in human potential. As we grow in the virtues, we grow in Christ. As we grow in Christ, we are transformed and thus fulfill our nature. We are all born in the image of God and are called to be transformed into the likeness of God. Image is potential, likeness is what we actualize. Thus from the beginning of scripture, we are called to be transformed so that we may fulfill a calling into the likeness of God. As transformed Christian disciples we are thereby empowered to fulfill the calling to dress and keep creation, or as a more literal translation of those Hebrew terms might read, to serve and protect the world.

Alongside the command to dominion there is another equally significant quality, but that is hard to translate into English and equally hard at first to understand. This is a term sometimes glibly translated as “fill,” or in the King James Version as “replenish.” The original word in Hebrew is “mil’,” for which the the English language has no easy equivalent. A Hebrew to English dictionary provides some of the following variant definitions: replenishing, completing, restoring or refilling; these take us a further step into clear meaning. Because we are dealing with a partner concept of dominion, this word shows a meaning that maintains or restores the Garden, or that preserves the original integrity and blessedness of the creation. Eastern Christians capture this idea in their liturgical services by consecrating all of creation back to God.

Once this word is understood as an action restoring the original blessedness and integrity of creation, it becomes a divinely inspired partner with dominion that acts on behalf of God and reconsenctes the world back to God, that restores Eden, that maintains the original purity, blessedness and integrity of the world.

Just as the partner qualities of image and likeness teach us how to strive for godliness in the world, this second set of partner qualities – dominion and restoration – lead us to deal with the world in ways that maintain the goodness and balance of the world. Once these are together we are to live our lives in ways that remember our spiritual striving and live in ways that preserve the original integrity of the creation as a blessed Garden.

Next, a third set of partner qualities appears in Scripture. We are given another set of twin commands which tell us to “dress and keep” the world. In some translations, these agricultural terms are rendered “to serve and protect.” These mandates tell us to nurture the earth and to protect it from evil, or defilement or pollution. In the fourth century, the Saint Basil writes that this action requires us to raise creation up to its full cosmological potential. This means in harmony with God, our neighbors and all creation as a song which reveals the glory and goodness of God made manifest through the uplifted harmony of creation.

It might be observed that these principles all existed while humans still remained in the proverbial Garden of Eden. For them to come alive today, amidst the clamor and noise of modern life, they must be situated within an overarching vision of Christ and the Holy Spirit filling all things. This brings the world alive as a holy temple.

As one adds obedience to Scripture, fidelity to the Gospel and love of neighbor to purify ourselves, the indwelling Word of God can be heard and discerned. As one listens to this Word, we may be transformed and lifted into an experience of the Light which enlivens all people. Even at this point one’s struggles do not end. As Christ tells us, we are to keep our eye single on that Light as that will illuminate our path so that the heavenly realities can be known here and now. This is nothing new. This is as is it has been down through the centuries by those who serve God and become the children of Light. This is the sacred heritage of all who call themselves Christians.

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Krueger also heads up the National Religious Coalition on Creation Care as well as other projects.

Krueger has been an influential pioneer in Christian environmental stewardship since the 1970’s.

Fr. John Rausch on Genesis
Notes from excerpts from his talk on the Biblical and Traditional Basis for Care of Creation
Earth Day Talk at Mars Hill University, April 21, 2015.

God created not just in six but in seven days, because on the last day God appreciated what He had made. We, too, are to appreciate creation.

Genesis does not emphasize an Ex Nihilo (out of nothing) account of creation, but rather, reveals an account of God ordering creation.

The notion of Genesis is God creating a workplace to teach us about life and the stewardship of that life. God created Adam (humanity) with a brain, creativity, and free will, and placed humans into the Garden to learn about, appreciate, nurture, and protect the abundance of life.

Creation is not only useful but is inherently good. All of us are interconnected in a web of life.

Do not only think about going to heaven. Go to earth, for that is where God’s fingerprint is right now.

Creation is a manifestation of God’s infinite love. By its very being, creation praises God. There are billions of wildflowers that are never seen by a human eye, yet each one is an offering of praise to its Creator.

Francis of Asissi modeled in his life, prayer, and praise his joy in the interconnectedness of God’s creation

Here are three suggested practices. (1) Contemplation of creation. (2) Asceticism, in the sense of using nature’s resources with reverent stewardship. (3) Stand with the voiceless poor, and that includes besieged creation.

Summary by Allen Johnson
This link for Fr. John Rausch’s talk https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zmWZQu3Yo8
Worry consumed me driving home across the Minnesota plain. I was a new professor in a new job … one who hadn’t completed his dissertation, which dragged on and on. What if I didn’t finish it? What if my advisors didn’t accept it even if I did finish it? What would I do then? What other sort of career could I, a newly married man, pursue and what would it mean?

Looking up from the road for a moment, the sky jerked me out of my brooding. Alive with bands of purple, orange, yellow and red, I had never seen a sunset like this in my almost thirty years of life. In that moment I realized deep within myself that God was telling me whether or not I succeeded with the dissertation. God was much bigger than dissertation, career, and marriage. God could handle it and would do so. That deep message carried me through the next few years with its ups and downs, and the eventual completion of the Ph.D. God spoke to me through a sunset and in no small way changed my life.

The sunset served as my burning bush. Jews, Christians and Muslims all realize that God can speak to us through nature, the nonhuman part of God’s creation. Reference is often made of Moses’ experience of the burning bush as an encounter with Beauty, with God who got Moses’ attention and sent him on his life-changing mission. Plato, too, talked about Beauty as that which calls out to us from within something else, a reality that lies below the surface appearance of things. It changes us if we but listen. Do stoenevsky, the great Russian novelist, agreed, famously saying in one of his novels that “Beauty will save the world.”

The ancient church fathers teach that, since Jesus is the Word of God (Logos) that spoke creation into being (John1:1-14), then every rock, plant and animal are words of God (logoi) that speak something to us about God. All of creation then constitutes a living Book of Nature that complements the Book of Scripture. Indeed, to really understand scripture one needs to understand the Book of Nature. Similarly, one cannot understand the Book of Nature without immersing oneself in scripture.

Thomas Merton, the great 20th century spiritual figure who lived in the Abbey of Gethsemane in Kentucky, served as both the Abbey’s forester and a novice master charged with forming the spiritual lives of the monastery’s young monks. In the 1950’s Merton wrote that one of the greatest challenges his novices faced was their lack of experience in the contemplation of the nature. We can only imagine that Merton would rate the situation now as even more serious given our addiction to screens and to social media. For many of us our experience of nonhuman creation consists of watching the Nature Channel or of watching funny cat videos on YouTube. If, as Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI says, “The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast,” how might we go about bringing water to a thirsty people and planet?

I have been involved for twenty years with the Opening the Book of Nature program (OBN), which introduces people to the experience of encountering God through all of God’s creation. Lasting anywhere from a few hours to a few days, these events begin by presenting quotes from a variety of sources, such as saints, theologians, and poets (and in an interfaith context well-known persons from other faiths) so that participants realize that this experience is an integral part of Christianity (and of other religions). After receiving some simple instructions, participants spend solitary time in creation and then return to share their experiences in small groups.

I have seen remarkable things happen. During one session held on a foggy day, a clergyman shared that up until now he had hated fog. He recalled during his seminary days his wife had to drive to work in fog and he worried about her every time she left. This time in the fog, he encountered beauty and the loving presence of God. God healed him of his aversion. At another event an agnostic ophthalmologist had such a strong experience that she decided God indeed exists and cares for her. Yet another time God led me and two Hindu/Buddhists to pray together for healing of hurts in our lives, hurts that surfaced in our times outdoors. God heals, overcomes divisions, and brings us together by speaking to us in ways we all understand – our common experiences in God’s good creation.

Weekend events are great, but even better is sustained effort in learning to discern and respond to God’s speaking to us in our surroundings. This takes practice. Streams, flying squirrels and oaks all are part of God’s creation, just as people are. Therefore, we can practice the lessons we learn from natural things by applying them to the way we relate to humans. In this effort, it helps greatly to have the support of others who also are trying to grow. Consequently, we have built on the OBN introduction to create an approximately nine-month program to facilitate spiritual growth in groups or as individuals.

An example might be working for a couple of weeks on one thing, such as appreciating those we encounter. Practicing to appreciate all that we encounter outdoors, including thorny greenbriers, teaches us patience, humility, and acceptance of others. We learn to appreciate the special traits in others when before we often found them irritating. Developing these attitudes open us to God’s life within and around us. Then, when we encounter Joe, our neighbor down the road who always has been a real pain in the neck, we then apprehend that Joe is a human greenbrier—and we start appreciating him. God offers us the opportunity to get to know, and possibly even love, those who in the past we have loved the least. God teaches us through creation how become more Christ-like in love.

Learning to open the Book of Nature enriches our spiritual lives, whatever our religious persuasion or spirituality. So, try it. Go outside with an open heart and mind. Ask for spiritual guidance. And see what happens!
Hold out your hands and let me lay upon them a sheaf of freshly picked sweetgrass, loose and flowing, like newly washed hair.

Robin Wall Kimmerer’s enticing invitation in the opening pages of *Braiding Sweetgrass* beckons us to engage the earth and each other as she weaves together reflections from her spiritual tradition, scientific training, and relationships with family and friends. “Will you hold the end of the bundle while I braid? Hands joined by grass, can we bend our heads together and make a braid to honor the earth? And then I’ll hold it for you, while you braid, too.”

A SUNY Distinguished Teaching Professor of Environmental Biology, and a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, Kimmerer’s bestseller resonates with a culture that seems to have lost its spiritual roots. Although traditional church affiliation has declined in recent decades, we still crave a relationship with the divine, a sense of hope, and a power greater than our own ingenuity. We are beginning to understand that we need a spiritual connection in order to heal both the earth and our own souls.

“Our relationship with the land cannot heal until we hear its stories,” writes Kimmerer, and so she weaves “a braid of stories meant to heal our relationship with the world.” In them we hear the narrative of creative and creating love, generous gifts, deep roots, and relationships that both bind us within and transcend our traditions.

As I read *Braiding Sweetgrass*, however, I couldn’t help but hear echoes of my spiritual tradition in the Native American tales she shares, echoes from the Bible and the mystics who encouraged their students to open the Book of Nature. I soon found myself taking up the bundle she offered and adding these strands to the braid—creation stories that remind us of our need for boundaries, tales affirming the importance of names, an appreciation for the earth’s gifts, and calls to practice humility and gratitude. I began to appreciate the nuances of each tradition and listened as the stories shared their wisdom with each other.

In an age driven by technology and scientific endeavor, Kimmerer reminds us that eternal truth is discovered in the confluence of science, spirit and story. Of course, this notion is not new nor is it absent from Western spiritual traditions, yet we seem to have forgotten that the church mystics and scholars were also quite often poets and scientists as well. Over the past century, our infatuation with scientific discoveries has led many of us to abandon, or at least to devalue, our spiritual traditions. However, interest in books like *Braiding Sweetgrass* suggests that we are beginning to recognize our limits. Although science and technology may give us the tools to address our environmental woes, unless these measures are infused with spiritual authenticity, they will function as nothing more than short-term solutions. Kimmerer, who is a scientist, poet, and spiritual guide, calls us to return to the traditions that open our hearts and minds to the divine presence dwelling with us.

Like St. Francis of Assisi, who befriended a wolf and preached to birds, Kimmerer speaks to the plants and animals she not only lives among but also relies on for sustenance. She understands that they are created with integrity, dignity, and value in their own right.

One story that resonated particularly deeply with me was Kimmerer’s account of gathering wild leeks for a special homecoming dinner with her grown daughters. Although the forest was burgeoning with fat, fragrant bulbs, Kimmerer resisted the temptation to pluck as many as she could carry. Instead, she slowly entered the woods and quietly asked permission to harvest. Using a small trowel rather than a sharp shovel, she worked slowly, purposefully, and with gratitude. As she reminds us, “If I could get all the leeks I needed in five minutes, I’d lose that time on my knees watching the ginger poke up and listening to the oriole that had just returned home…. The difficulty of digging is an important constraint. Not everything should be convenient.”

Our current environmental crisis speaks of our impatience and desire for convenience. We rely on machines that not only ravage the land in the process of taking all, but also distance us from the work that requires us to bend our knees in awe and gratitude. Whether she is harvesting leeks, tapping maples, or cutting an ash tree for a basket, Kimmerer relies on the lessons learned from her ancestors to restrain her desires, to honor the life she is taking, and to use it responsibly with gratitude.

Kimmerer writes, “Traditional harvesters recognize the individuality of each tree as a person, a nonhuman person. Trees are not taken, but requested. Respectfully, the cutter explains his purpose and the tree is asked permission for the harvest. Sometimes the answer is no.”

The sacredness and integrity of all creation is central to Jewish and Christian practice as well. Hebrew Law establishes boundaries on human behavior and consistently reminds us that the land is God’s good work, both a gift and a responsibility which when treasured and fulfilled ensures fruitfulness. Similar to the Potawatomi Honorable Harvest in which no plant or creature is taken for human use without its consent, the Law limits harvesting and provides Sabbath rest for land and animals as well as people.

When we learn to read the Book of Nature—whether from church, synagogue, mosque, or Native guides—we begin to see the Spirit dwelling among us in new and powerful ways. We discover that the leeks and maples not only sustain our bodies but shape our hearts and minds. We learn to appreciate the earth not as a resource but as a neighbor whom we are commanded to love.

As Kimmerer reflects, “Knowing that you love the earth changes you, activates you to defend and protect and celebrate. But when you feel that the earth loves you in return, that feeling transforms the relationship from a one-way street into a sacred bond.”

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As a young person, one of my favorite hymns was “Under His Wings I Am Safely Abiding.” Growing up in a world threatened by nuclear war (the 50’s and 60’s), in grade school we exited classrooms, and then lined the halls in a crouched position to be “safe” in the event of a nuclear attack. Of course, as adults we recognize the futility of that exercise. However, I still remember that my greatest fear was to be separated from my family if the unthinkable occurred. These drills were merely a placebo, but the promise of God’s shelter and protection for a Christian, is sure. Intuitively, as a child, I loved that song because all children need to know, that in the absence of a parent or grandparent, Someone will care, shelter, and protect them when storms rage—real or imagined—that our lives and souls matter. What a lovely image—to be shelter under God’s “wings!”

The writers of the Bible make about 300 references to birds—some very specific like eagle, raven, falcon, and turtledove, though many are general references to bird or fowl. That large number is not surprising because birds are some of the most accessible of all wildlife and have fascinated writers, singers, poets, artists and others throughout the ages. Birds, for me, are beyond fascination—closer to inspiration. They are winged miracles.

I learned how incredibly complex their feathers are in an ornithology class. A single bird feather has more than a million parts—something we can’t see with a naked eye. Tiny structures in each feather, an essential part of a bird’s anatomy and life, keep feathers “zipped” together, enabling flight, aiding warmth, communication and protection. All this complexity and detail in birds and all life underscores a nearly unfathomable Creation, a tribute to the handiwork of God.

For me birds are universal reminders of an Omnirvent God—His Living Spirit dwelling in all life on earth. Within the Bible, birds are sometimes messengers of God. For example: It is easy for me to imagine that during Jesus's baptism, when the Holy Spirit descended upon him like a dove, God was revealing Himself and at the same time, administering a blessing on His Son through a dove alighting on the Christ. “…and behold a voice from Heaven said: This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:17)

As an avid birdwatcher, I’ve been “captured” by these feathered creatures for 40 years now. As I wrote in a previous issue of The Mountain Vision, it was the beauty and allure of the Eastern Towhee that led me to my calling as an environmental activist—a gain, perhaps this bird carried a message to me.

With a strong background in biology along with a love of nature and birds in particular, I realized that most, if not all species of birds can be indicators of the quality of the health of the environment. For many years, immersed in the day-to-day efforts to help preserve and protect the environment, paying attention to impacts of extraction and development on bird populations was one of the lenses through which I viewed my work. While my time to watch birds was limited by long work days, I sometimes received inspiration from them, including a very specific occasion.

One day, near the end of March, 2004, when OVEC was in the thick of efforts to end mountaintop removal, I was relaxing with a cup of coffee on my front steps. Beside me was a holly shrub. Unexpectedly, I heard a buzzy-like call of a tufted titmouse coming from the shrub. The next thing I knew, the bird perched on my shoulder and began pulling strands of hair from my head! I was both stunned and pleased! I sat very still so as not to frighten this little creature as it tugged and loosened strands to use as a lining for its nest. It was a remarkable experience, even humbling to think that some part of me could help nurture new life, especially the life that provided my so much joy in the watching! Little did I know on that very evening, that bird would provide inspiration for a public hearing scheduled for the next evening in Charleston.

The federal Office of Surface Mining (OSM) had scheduled a public hearing for folks to provide comments on the Stream Buffer Zone rule—whether or not to allow coal mining in a stream or within a 100 foot buffer from the stream as the rule was then written. Lawyers for OVEC and others contend that coal companies were violating a surface mining rule as well as the Clean Water Act by dumping the former remains of the mountain into the adjacent valley, smothering valuable headwater streams. The environmental community maintained that this cheap coal waste disposal practice was in violation of the Clean Water Act and that coal companies should be required to adhere to the Stream Buffer Zone rule as it was written.

That evening after the titmouse paid me a visit, I began to think about what I might say at that public hearing. How many times had others and I provided sound, logical and scientific arguments for why filling our streams with coal waste was very short-sighted—bad for nature and in the long run, bad for people? Were regulators even listening during these alleged public hearings? Or were they just going through the legal requirements before they signed off on this water-destroying practice of valley fills?

And then a light went on in my head!

Since regulators were just going through the motions of being receptive, why not do something that might actually capture their attention? What if I spoke for the birds and other creatures that depended on those headwater streams for life? I called a good friend and asked him to record the sounds of frogs and birds that were water-dependent or lived in our forests, that needed these streams and intact forests in order to live and thrive. Spring peepers, Wood Thrush, wood frogs, Louisiana Waterthrush and others. [cont. p. 8]
I grabbed my recorder, a list of the critters, and headed to Charleston, meeting my friend’s wife who passed the tape along to me. Inside the hearing room, the environmental community vastly out-numbered the coal industry spokespersons. The hearing officer from federal Office of Surface Mining began by laying out the hearing rules; given the number of people who wanted to speak, we would each have 5 minutes.

Hearing officer’s response: “Those are our 5 minutes... What relevance does that have to the stream buffer zone rule? We are not here to hear animal calls or bird calls.”

Hmmm...

At that point, a uniformed Charleston police officer came to the front of room where he exchanged whispers with the OSM hearing officer. Next thing I know, the policeman came over to me and said, “Ma’am, please don’t make me take that away from you,” in a very pleading tone. I didn’t budge and kept playing the bird songs. The crowd raised a ruckus—shouts of “let her finish,” “we want to hear this,” etc.

Finally, the police officer took the recorder away from me. The hearing officer told me that I could speak if I had anything else to say. Needless to say, I was not a happy camper and blasted the OSM for not allowing me to play the tape. These sounds were not about science or data, but a measure of truth that the regulators didn’t want to hear—the songs of the life that would be silenced by an ill-conceived and cheap coal waste disposal process.

Who could imagine that a little titmouse just going about its nesting business could inspire such a unique action, garnering media attention! Had the hearing office allowed me to play the entire tape, it’s likely that the hearing would have been a bland retelling—briefly newsworthy. Instead, an article and photo of the police officer confiscating the tape-player made the Charleston Gazette and an article even made it into international news—The Guardian. There were additional outcomes, but that’s a story for another day.

Now that I am mostly “retired,” I am bird watching in one form or another every day. Whether casually watching my feeders from inside my house, heading out to nearby birding hotspots with others, or watching the birds. No matter how the world is turning, the current weather, or the politics of the day, Robins do what Robins do, Blue Jays continue in their Blue Jay ways, and the Carolina Wren is sure to raise a fuss if I dare come too close to its nest. I’ve come to love the truth of birds, their dependability, vulnerability and the honesty of their humble existences. That quality of living their bird-truth is a quality for which I daily strive; that is, to live fully the truth of my own soul, as a reflection of a Higher Self, the one that will please my Creator.

For certain, birds lure me into their habitats where, as poet Wendell Berry expressed, I “come into the peace of wild things.” I could be wrong, but I believe our Creator made sure that his Great Opus included the birds to intrigue, endear, inspire, teach and awaken us the simple joys of living and being human—of being grounded yet letting our spirits soar.

**The Peace of Wild Things, by Wendell Berry**

When despair for the world grows in me and I wake in the night at the least sound in fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be, I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds. I come into the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief. I come into the presence of still water. And I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light. For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.
Appalachian Public Lands: Settings For Spiritual Growth

Creation Teaches Us About God

When we leave the crowds of town and city and enter the quiet and peace of wild places, the deep questions of human life rise to the surface. Away from cell phones, computers, and the commotion of hurried lives, we find solitude and sense intimations of eternity.

In such hallowed spaces we find opportunities for reflection. We more easily focus on values and the basic questions of human purpose that otherwise are easily obscured when our lives are surrounded by an overload of distractions. All around us, creation declares the eternity and the infinity of God. We nourish in deep thought and spiritual awareness.

Cleansing Our Minds And Spirits

The clean air, the cold water, the quiet of trees, the moist earth and everything in between help us to clarify our thinking so that we can open to God and the nature of creation. Our senses slowly awaken. Busy minds quiet and relax. Attitudes change. The rhythm of our days and nights, our work and rest, take a cue from the natural world.

Through the cultivation of quiet, unexpected realizations often emerge. The natural world holds many surprises for the person who seeks God with intentionality. We are renewed by God's presence and a peace that transcends understanding.

The witness of creation is a witness of the Lord. A natural therapy for tired bodies and weary spirits shines forth through natural places. Nature's therapy brings restoration, re-creation, even regeneration. These are among God's many gifts to humanity through wilderness, a gift which needs to be preserved and protected. This is a duty that we all share.

Humility And Awe

The mountains are big and we are small. Surrounded by wildness, we experience God's immense creation as majestic yet intricate in its uncountable details. Under a canopy of stars and clouds, surrounded by an almost endless stretch of trees and hills, we are astounded at the designs, the beauty and the marvels of creation. We learn that we are not in control.

We realize how great the Maker of all these things is and in comparison how puny and passing are our human creations. We develop new respect and awe for what God has created.

Public Lands Nurture A Sense Of Beauty And Traditional Values

A deep and satisfying beauty dwells in wild nature in contrast with the often superficial human effort to put on glamour. Public lands offer places where young people learn to camp, fish, hunt, and absorb the outdoor skills and values that formed Appalachia. Around the campfire young and old can hear stories about bears and maybe the wolves, elk, and mountain panthers of old. They learn respect for the past and sense the wonder of these mountains. They come to appreciate the beauty of the land. When we return to our lives elsewhere, we are fortified in our sense of God and His goodness. Then we know that the beauty of the land is a reflection of the beauty of the Lord.

Wild Places Present Contrasting Choices

Nature hides subtle yet opposing visions. The simple pace of wild places quiets our hearts and minds. We peer more perceptively into the issues of God and creation and human culture. Our priorities are called into focus. We are reminded of the choices anciently presented to Adam and Eve. We may choose to obey God and enter into a sacred vision in which His presence sustains all life. This vision carries a responsibility to respect what God has made, to treat all things with love, care and a nurturing touch. In the vision, God is the center of creation. Nature is a teacher and a healer. If we love God, we obey His commandments; His grace and supply nurture our lives through the bounty of creation.

In contrast there is another vision—a darker, more grasping way to see the world. In this vision, there is no concern or thought for stewardship and caring for the land. This vision neglects long-term care in favor of short term profit and can have disastrous effects on the wilderness and its values. By protecting wild lands, we are being good stewards and ensuring that others will have the same opportunities and resources we have today.

Recommendations For Action

Take time to visit wild places

Take time to visit a wild area. All wild areas can provide rejuvenation and inspiration, especially when approached with reverence for its maker.

Love what God has created

Respect for the land cultivates an attitude that is thankful to God and careful in its use of the good earth. All things can be used, but nothing should be abused. As stewards of God's earth, we are called to protect the integrity of creation.

Encourage others to respect for public lands

Teach others to enter into a caring regard for creation. Tell clergy about the many reasons to care for God's creation. Hold discussions about the many benefits of public lands to the community.

Protect the beauty of the land undeefiled

With pride in the works of the Creator and gratitude for the beauty of these wild and wonderful mountains, people of faith should stand up and protect these remaining wild areas for future generations to enjoy.

Expand public lands in Appalachia

Public lands are popular with the public. Overcrowding in some places diminishes the experience that people need. More public land in the more densely populated eastern United States can be a valuable treasure for people of all socio-economic demographics for generations to follow.

Remember that protection of wild places on our public lands is service to God and country

We honor the Creator and remember our nation's historical journey by preserving wild places. Our ancestors faced the wilderness. The challenge of the mountains shaped Appalachia and gave its people a self-reliant character. This same experience imbued America and all her citizens with vigor, vitality and virtue.

Jesus Himself would often slip away to the wilderness and pray. (Luke 5:16)

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. (Matthew 13:1)

"Consider how the wild flowers grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. Jesus' teaching in Luke 12:27

Material for this article was modified from the brochure, God's Gift of a Wild and Wonderful Land: A Declaration on the Spiritual Values of West Virginia’s Monongahela National Forest. Permission by Christians For The Mountains. These insights derive from the experiences and reflections acquired during Opening The Book Of Nature retreats in the Monongahela National Forest. This brochure as well as the digitized film of the same name is available online at www.christiansforthemountains.org/site/Topics/Issues/Wilderness/Wilderness_Main.html
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Let’s Keep, Protect, and Appreciate OUR Public Lands  by Allen Johnson

over 640 million acres of federal public lands have been set aside in common ownership of all Americans. States own millions of additional acres, typically under less protection. Over 93% of Americans across the U.S. favor protecting historical sites, public lands, and national parks now and for the future, according to a 2016 Harvard study.

Yet every year government entities attempt to open these lands for increased extraction of mineral and timber resources, or to sell or give away some of these lands outright.

So why, then, do some public officials go against the will of the public?

Values of Public Lands

Public lands provide inestimable worth. 1. These reflect our nation's ideal of equality and liberty, as public lands provide a place for all Americans—not just the wealthy few—to enjoy. 2. Our public lands mark milestones in our national heritage. 3. When managed well, public lands provide perpetual economic benefits. 4. Our larger public lands provide invaluable ecological services including clean air and water, species diversification, and carbon sequestration valuable toward stabilizing climate.

Writer and conservationist Wallace Stegner called national parks America’s “best idea.” In 2017, over 330 million visitors traveled to see the memorials and monuments across our great nation. Yet these American treasures are only a part of our public lands. There are several classifications of federal lands, which then are managed with differing priorities, objectives, and levels of environmental protection. These federal lands include the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), National Forests, National Parks, National Recreation Areas, National Wildlife Refuges, National Conservation Areas, National Monuments, National Memorials, National Battlefields, National Lakeshores and Ocean Shores, National Trails, National Historic Sites, Wild and Scenic Rivers, and Wilderness. States have public lands that parallel some of these federal designations.

America’s fourth-largest industry is outdoor recreation, much of it related to public lands, with $887 billion in annual consumer spending and 7.6 million jobs. This compares with 180,000 jobs from oil and gas extraction. Furthermore, local communities that are in proximity to public lands typically experience an economic boost through drawing talented people to live nearby, along with tourism-derived revenue.

Threats to Public Lands

A continuous stream of Congressional proposals seek to transfer federal lands to states. This is especially true in certain western states that have vast holdings of federal lands. For example, 80% of Nevada is BLM land. Other states with bills for transfer have included Alaska, Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming, arguing that these lands and the profits that they generate should belong to their respective states. Some bills even demand national parks and Wilderness areas be turned over to the states. Fossil fuel and extractive industry interests push such legislation, fronted by powerful and well-funded organizations such as the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), American Lands Council, and Federal Land Action Group. These efforts use misleading appeals for “states’ rights” and flawed economic information to remove protections from some of our most special places in order to extract short-term profit.

Since states typically have limited budgets, states would be forced to raise taxes or sell off iconic national properties to developers or other private investors in order to pay for everything the federal government does now—from complicated tasks like enforcing environmental regulations and maintaining cultural and historic resources to simple ones like putting up road and trail signs. Likely, if states were to pay their bills by selling federal land gained from a transfer, the amount of land available to the public for hunting, fishing and recreation could be reduced to a patchwork.

The vast majority of people in western states, along with coalitions of hunters, fishermen, hikers, campers, and nature lovers adamantly oppose these attempts to steal OUR lands. For example, the venerable hunting/fishing magazine, Field & Stream, notes that of 1.56 million acres of federal land that were historically entrusted to states when they entered the union, 110 million (70%) were subsequently sold. This includes half of western federal lands handed over to states. And even though the federal government owns only 4 percent of lands east of the Mississippi River, state legislators in at least four Eastern states—Arkansas, Georgia, Tennessee, and Virginia—have put forth resolutions favoring the public-lands transfer. Field & Stream further notes that states are often more restrictive on their trust lands than on federal lands, and more apt to impose access fees.

Yet since Trump has assumed the presidency, his Secretary of the Interior, Ryan Zinke, has made an all-out assault on OUR public lands. Bear’s Ears and Grand Staircase Escalante national monuments have been massively reduced in size so that coal, oil, and uranium industries can scarf up resources while likely bequeathing pollution and permanent land scarring. Other national monuments are in the bullseye for reduction, including vast ocean acreage to protect vulnerable ecosystems.

Furthermore, the antiquated Mining Act of 1872 is still operant that essentially lets companies get hard rock mining claims on public lands for almost nothing. Royalties gained from grazing, drilling, logging, and mining on federal lands are typically much less than market values on private lands. On the other hand, The Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1964 (LWCF) designates money from federal offshore oil and gas leasing toward grants for local, state, and federal conservation projects. The LWCF is up for another three-year reauthorization, with a current introduced needed bill that would make the fund permanent. Please support permanent LWCF!

“This Land is Your Land, This Land is My Land” (from song by Woody Guthrie)

A citizen in Rhode Island equally co-owns federal land in Alaska. And every taxpayer shares on average only about $4 from his or her income tax to support our federal lands. These lands are our treasure for us to appreciate now and to pass on to future generations in strengthened condition. As a responsible citizen steward, be vigilant and active in keeping and protecting our public lands. And as a Christian, keep in your mind and action that all lands and water belong to God. Psalm 24:1 says, “The earth belongs to God, and all that is upon it.”
A Religious Appeal To Forbid Offshore Oil & Gas Leasing  by Marybeth Lorbiecki, Interfaith Oceans

Dear President Trump and Interior Secretary Zinke,

We, as people of deep faith from many different religious backgrounds, stand together to say that it would be wrong for our nation and our coastal states to open 47 leases for offshore oil and gas exploration and drilling on the continental shelf for the following reasons of morality, faith, and the common good of the nation and the world.

- Our coasts depend upon the industries of fishing, tourism, recreational fishing, scuba diving, marine wildlife watching, and more. All of these would be harmed by these industries, and the most vulnerable people, who are in the service industries and fishing boats, would be particularly hard hit. It is not justice to harm their economies to favor others.

- Our coasts are already suffering from higher tides and storm surges with intensifying and expensive storms tied to the climate chaos being caused by fossil fuel pollution from extraction and emissions. We are raising the financial burden of the coastal communities, states, and nations in mitigation and disasters (2017 being the most expensive on record for disasters). Again, the poorest are harmed the most and have the least access to resources to relocate or rebuild.

- Oil and gas drilling and the safety regulations have been loosened, making it more likely of more deaths, such as those on the Deepwater Horizon. To put profits over human safety is against religious values and morals.

- Oil and gas industries pollute no matter how strong the safety protocols are: each year U.S. drilling operations send an average of 880,000 gallons of oil into the ocean. Then natural disasters do their inevitable damage: in 2005, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita destroyed 11 of the oil platforms in the Gulf of Mexico and damaged 457 pipelines. Hurricane damage caused at least 124 different spills, totaling over 17,700 barrels (743,000 gallons) of petroleum products. We don't yet have the totals from Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria, and who knows what 2018 will bring? Adding 47 more leases would multiply the risk and damage to the habitats that God created and the communities of life that depend upon them. That goes against our faith call to care for creation.

- The profits from the oil and gas industries would go to corporations and executives who are not in need of funds, while the poor and our coastal cities and states would suffer the damage caused, which is why Republican and Democrat governors are united in their opposition.

- Each oil and gas exploration effort with its blasting deafens, gives concussions, and kills marine wildlife because of the enormity of the sound levels and how sound travels underwater. There are already too many deaths, beachings, and harm done to whales, dolphins, and so many more species from undersea explosions. This, too, is immoral and against faith principles to care for our brother and sister species.

- Our actions in opening up these leases sends a message to the rest of the world that as a nation we are selfish, immoral, unjust, and naïve. We are saying that, despite all the ecological data that shows that fossil fuel pollution acidifies the oceans and is raising sea levels around the world, causing the coastal poor to become homeless refugees, we don't care, and we will promote fossil fuel pollution and not care about the future or the poor around the world being harmed now. We will not care about our own children and grandchildren. We will not care about working with the rest of the world. We will not care about being an innovative and economic leader in the world; we will cling to the energy solutions of the past because it will give financial gain to the few and a short term bit of energy, while the expanding field of solar, wind, thermal and other energies is expanding with leaps and bounds all over the world (and our nation).

- There is another better path open to us: many nations and cities are going carbon neutral because “there but for the grace of God” we all go, and we all must treat everyone as our brothers and sisters. Those who have the least also contribute the least to waste and pollution and energy use, yet they are the ones who bear the worst burdens. This is unjust and immoral, and we cannot stand behind policies that are based in increasing the harm for them.

We have many more common faith, religious, and spiritual principles that bind us together to stand up to say no to this backward-looking energy decision and to encourage a forward looking one that fits the needs of the coastal states, the nation, and the world and the call of faith for so many people of different religious traditions in this nation. (The majority of people in the United States are affiliated with a faith tradition or self-identify as spiritual, and the majority of the nation also seems to love the nation's beaches for their holidays. The nation's energy solutions need to be sustainable for the long haul and bring us to a brighter, more hopeful future, not a more damaged one.

In the spirit of the living Creator, we sign this petition as people of faith joining with coastal governors, conservation groups from the land and the seas, sustainable energy groups, climate activists, fisheries protectors, and citizens who love their beaches, oceans, and planet. Together, we are the majority of the coastal populations, and more than likely, the nation as a whole.

We pray that you hear our plea. Remember, we are all voters too. We do not ask this just for ourselves, but to honor the Creator that made us.

Marybeth Lorbiecki is the founder and director of the Interfaith Oceans, a multi-faith campaign encourages religious and spiritual communities to work to protect and restore the oceans in the name of God's Creation.

http://www.interfaithoceans.org
Religious Covenant For Oceans

INTERFAITH OCEANS ACTION PLEDGE

WE HOPE FOR
Beautiful, stable, diverse oceans and coastal communities for generations to come.

ACTION PLEDGE
I/ We __________________ (name of individual or community) care about our Creator, the oceans, the marine species, and vulnerable people suffering from ocean destruction.
(For a menu of joint actions and resources: www.interfaithoceans.org)

I/WE COMMIT
1. To survey energy use and products, and work to conserve and change to alternatives to reduce fossil-fuel pollution in the ocean and atmosphere.

2. To advocate to local, state, and national representatives to ask for action on issues like reducing fossil fuels, supporting alternative energies, saving and replanting forests, establishing fishing limits and marine sanctuaries, and banning plastic bags; particularly in coastal states, to speak out against oil and gas drilling on the continental shelf and in marine protected areas.

3. To buy only sustainably caught seafood (see http://www.seafoodwatch.org/ and the Seafood Watch app).

4. To work to stop using single-use plastic items and bags, and recycle all recyclable plastics.

I/ WE AFFIRM
The oceans are the Creator's, and all the life within them.

We shall not destroy the oceans, nor despoil the life dependent upon them.
We must be humble, grateful, and in awe.

We will work to protect, restore, and renew the face of the earth.

I / WE KNOW
That all of life is interconnected, and all of life matters.
That the oceans give us beauty, joy, recreation, food, moisture, medicines, marine life, and breath. They provide good for all.

As the oceans are being damaged, the poorest coastal residents and communities are suffering intensely as are our brother and sister species.

Our world has the resources, creativity, scientific and technological knowledge to act sustainably and justly, and with love. People of faith and spirituality must work with people of science and conservation to lead the way.

5. To help with the cleanup of an ocean or river beach, with an ocean restoration project, or with a reforestation effort with others as often as is feasible.

6. To visit the ocean, an ocean aquarium, or a river flowing to the sea to consider the gifts in joy, gratitude, and prayer; to ask at least three others to take this action pledge.

I / WE VALUE
All Peoples and All Species
We know all are important and require respect and care.

Respect for Different Faiths
We recognize the highest callings in all faiths and spiritual paths, and our common goals that bring us together. Faith needs to inspire, challenge, guide, and give meaning to our choices.

Respect for Science
We need science to inform us of the physical realities and interrelationships, and of the potential consequences of policies and personal actions.

The Power of Local People
We know that local and indigenous people have solutions and power, and they must be part of all policies and actions that affect them.

Inclusive Decision-Making
We make better decisions when we listen to diverse perspectives and backgrounds.

Prayer
We believe that prayer helps move hearts, minds, and hands to do the needed work.

Freshwater Bodies Also Polluted By Microplastic Waste

The massive ocean gyres of plastic debris are finally gaining public notoriety. And while large chunks of plastic waste are serious to marine ecosystems, the microplastics—debris less than five millimeters in size—are causing the most havoc. Fish and other organisms ingest these small plastic particles alongside food microorganisms to cause endocrine disruptions, digestive system dysfunctions, and respiration impacts.

Yet our freshwater lakes and rivers can be just as contaminated with microplastic debris as the oceans. For example, the Great Lakes contain one fifth the world's freshwater yet are badly compromised by microplastics near population-dense cities.

The most insideous water body pollutants are microfibers—small strands of synthetic acrylic, nylon, and polyester textiles. Every time you wash these synthetic fabrics, millions of microfibers are released into the water. Microfibers are too small to be filtered out by waste treatment plants, so they end up in our waterways and oceans, where they wreak havoc on marine animals and the environment.

Several tips: Buy quality clothing with natural fibers that are biodegradable. Purchase a lint collecting bag or ball for your washing machine. Use gentle washing techniques. Study up on microfibers and tell others.

And of course, minimize use of disposable large plastics such as beverage containers, straws, and shopping bags. Let's protect life-giving water.
Don’t Let Up Against Mountaintop Removal

Readers, here ye, hear ye. Mountaintop Removal (MTR) continues its destructive swath here in 2018. It seems that many of the environmental groups and individuals that once vigorously opposed MTR have moved on to other issues, dragging a fickle media along. Why? Giving up because victory in ending this odious practice has not come fast or easy? Moving on to new scourges such as fracking and their intrusive pipeline? Not enough funding appeal? Please pray, inform others, and pressure policymakers to end mountaintop removal!!!

Mountains Tumble, Opponents Resist

Coal River Mountain Watch, headquartered in Naoma, West Virginia, continues to battle new MTR permits and the state politics that grease them. Alpha Natural Resources, the largest metallurgical coal supplier in the country, has recently started on their over two-thousand acre, three-square-mile Eagle 2 permit on the ridgeline of high-elevation Coal River Mountain. Although federal law revokes permits from companies who do not operate on a given site within three years, the toadyng West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection (WVDEP) has, with federal Office of Surface Mining, Reclamation, and Enforcement's (OSMRE) blessing, retroactively extended the permit first granted in 2008. www.crmw.net

Tennessee Setback

Pat Hudson, CFTM Steering Committee member, is saddened to report that The “Primacy and Reclamation Act of Tennessee” was heavily saddled by an industry-backed 75-page amendment and then fast-tracked into passage. The bill turns over federal regulatory control of surface coal mining in Tennessee to the state at substantial cost to taxpayers with less regulatory oversight. Behind this bill is an attempt to prop up the state’s coal industry.

MTR Sites as Dumping Grounds for Refuse

Most so-called reclaimed mountaintop removal sites are often referred to as moonscapes in contrast with nearby scenic, lush, mixed mesophytic forest terrain. Some perversely have a mindset that if something is already desecrated, go ahead and trash it even the more. Alpha Natural Resources, a subsidiary Republic Energy, has appealed to the WV Dept. of Environmental Protection to revise its Collins Fork MTR permit to bury used tires on the 292 acre site, and store fuel, equipment and stockpile fuel for other sites. The proposal would also allow the company to delay reclamation.

Political Shenanigans Scuttle Science Review on MTR

The National Academy of Science (NAS) began a $1 million review of existing research linking mountaintop removal to health disparities including increased deaths from cancer and heart and respiratory diseases. This review began in response to citizen pressure and a request from the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection. The NAS began holding public hearings as well as delving into numerous published studies. Then abruptly in summer 2017, the U.S. Department of Interior halted the project purportedly as part of an internal assessment of grants and cooperative agreements with a cost of more than $100,000. This NAS review on mountaintop removal and another review on offshore drilling safety were the only projects ordered to stop. Before long, the Dept. of Interior cancelled the projects. Efforts to raise private funds to continue the reviews have not yet been successful. Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke has not yet responded to requests on the fate of the unspent $400,000 funding appropriated to NAS by the 2016 federal budget for the mountaintop removal research review.

Behind the thick smokescreen of budgetary excuses lies the coal industry. This is obvious to any of us who have had to deal with the mafia-like coal industry and the politicians who dangle from their puppet strings. The polluting, scofflaw coal industry ordered the “hit” on the NAS, carried out by its hit-men politicians. We will not give up this struggle for justice!!!
Christian Activist Roland Micklem Dies At 88

“Do something!” Talk was never enough for Roland Micklem, who died peacefully in his sleep Sunday night May 6, 2018. Even at an advanced age, Roland organized, led, and acted on his passionate conviction for justice for people and earth.

I came to know Roland when he lived at Rock Creek, West Virginia, with a group of activists who resolutely opposed mountaintop removal (MTR). In 2011 Roland led what he described as a “geezer march” of senior citizens in opposition to MTR. In 2014, at the age of 84, Roland fasted for several weeks at the WV State Capitol Building in protest of mountaintop removal. Returning to his home state of New York, Roland was a major presence during many months of constant protest of a planned underground gas storage facility in the Seneca Lake area, which culminated in victory. Roland was arrested and jailed on several occasions for his nonviolent protests.

Roland’s advocacy was always conditioned by his Christian values that included respect and courtesy to those who held opposing views. These traits enabled Roland to engage in fruitful discussions with all types of people. Roland was a writer throughout his long life. His latest Scrap Paper Internet blog came out just a few days before he died.

As his body became increasingly frail, Roland moved to Staunton, Virginia, to be near his daughter, Sue Micklem. I live less than two hours away from Staunton, and so was able to visit Roland on a number of occasions, and even to take him to some anti-pipeline meetings in the area. My last visit was five days before he died. Somehow, I had a premonition that this would be the last time I would see Roland. Our time together was delightful. We reminisced, discussed action for justice, and prayed together. His mind was keen, his passion for justice strong, but his body very frail. Yet even though he was on an oxygen concentrator, Roland took out his harmonica and played three tunes for me—“Amazing Grace,” “What A Friend We Have In Jesus,” and “Tis the Gift To Be Simple.” As we said our good-byes, I was freshly inspired “to do something.” ----Allen Johnson

Take the “Last Straw” Pledge

12 billion tons of plastic trash end up in God’s oceans. From a biblical perspective, “trash” is an affront to the glory of God; it mars the beauty of God’s creation; it diminishes the witness of creation. But God is not mocked; there is no “away” from God’s sight; there is no “away” in God’s creation. Trash always ends up somewhere, and that somewhere belongs to God. It’s as if we sneak into God’s backyard and pile all our trash there and then pretend it never happened.

The journey of repentance begins with a single step. The first step is for all of us to stop using plastic drinking straws and to politely decline them when out at restaurants. The momentum for action is building. Many businesses such as Walt Disney’s Animal Kingdom, have banned plastic straws. Cities like Fort Myers, FL, have too. Decline use of plastic straws and disposable plastics, urge food/beverage establishments to not offer them, and encourage elected officials to phase out these plastics. Take “The Last Straw Campaign Pledge!”

Go To https://www.creationcare.org/the_last_straw

Haiku in Defense of Nature

Vic Hummert writes Haiku poetry to express his heart-cry of love for God’s creation.

Vic Hummert and his wife, Roselyn, make their home in Lafayette, Louisiana, in the hub of that state’s polluting oil industry. Vic was a Maryknoll missioner for thirty years serving in China and later Latin America.

Since 1990 Vic has been an environmental and peace activist, educator, prison chaplain, and haiku poet.

Vic blogs at vichummert.org with powerful, probing articles.

Inhale gratitude
Exhale trust in our loving
God who embraces all.

Citizens Defeat WV State Park Logging Plan

Chalk one up for citizen conservationists! We won!

In January 2018 a bipartisan bill, supported by the governor and legislature heads, was introduced in the West Virginia Legislature to commercially log state parks to raise funds to deal with park maintenance backlog. This bill would lift a ban on state park timbering that has been in effect since 1931. Odds-makers would have bet heavily on passage.

Yet the citizenry, once awakened and aroused, did not cotton to logged parks. Working fast and furiously within a 60-day legislative session, organizers brought together citizens along with park and forestry experts into a Save Our State Parks (SOSP) movement to show the folly of degrading a park to save it. Alternative funding measures were proposed. Facing mounting citizen pressure, the legislature crawled by proposing to log fewer parks, next backed down to one park, and then finally folded.

The SOSP will continue to be a subset of a recently organized West Virginia Public Lands organization that exerts state and national advocacy. http://wvrivers.org/sosparks/
**Brief Reviews of Books I’ve Read on Global Warming**

by Allen Johnson

The other day I was looking at my bookshelves at my books on global warming. I offer these impressions on the following books that directly or substantially address global warming. More extensive reviews of these books are available online. Furthermore, there are many other excellent books and other materials on climate than those I am listing. New materials are coming out every year. Excellent films, too. I urge everyone to read enough to lock in the basic concepts of climate and the approaches that are attempting to address this momentous concern.

**Storms Of My Grandchildren: The Truth About The Coming Climate Catastrophe And Our Last Chance To Save Humanity,** by James Hansen (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2009.) 304 pp. My most vivid memory of James Hansen was together in a jail cell. Along with several dozen others, we had been arrested in front of the White House gate for protesting Mountaintop Removal during the 2010 Appalachia Rising event that drew thousands to Washington, DC. I sometimes joke that my $120 fine was a bargain price “tuition” to spend several hours talking with Hansen, Larry Gibson, and others.

Between God & Green: How Evangelicals Are Cultivating A Middle Ground On Climate Change, by Katharine K. Wilkinson (New York: Oxford, 2012.) 234 pp. Evangelical Christians have become the bogeymen for many climate activists. After all, over 80% of white evangelicals voted for the climate deniast Donald Trump, and polls show well under 30% of them believe in human-caused global warming. Evangelicals continue exercising their political muscle as I write. So what did author Katharine Wilkinson have to say in her book published six years ago?

This book does not discuss the science of climate change—but rather, the climate movement within subsets of environmentally aware evangelicals, “Led vastly by white men,” Wilkinson points out. Those who want to track the trajectory of evangelical involvement (pro and con) on climate will find this treatise insightful. Many of the evangelical heavyweights spar and tussle over climate, recognizing the political potency of their respective constituencies. Since I was at the beginning of the climate movement as an intern with the 1993 startup of the Evangelical Environmental Movement, this book is personally fascinating for me. Twenty-five years later, the preponderant majority of evangelical Christians continue to be an obstruction to meaningful climate policy and practice. Why?


A biblical, Christ-centered pathway to that question (see above paragraph) is Jim Ball. I have known and admired Jim Ball for two decades in his positions with the Union of Concerned Scientists, Evangelical Environmental Network, and Evangelical Climate Initiative. The logic of this book is that Jesus is Lord and that His followers proclaim His way in faithful discipleship, and that discipleship includes addressing human-caused climate change. This book is ideal for any reader looking for a comprehensive apologetics for climate action from a Christian perspective. Topics include the basics of climate science, responsibility for the poor who often withstand the worst of climate disruption, and solutions forward, all within the matrix of living a Christ-centered life. The book includes numerous anecdotes, reads easily, is theologically rich and sound, and offers steps that anyone can take.

Many years ago, Jim Ball caught a media wave with a question about automobile energy efficiency, “What would Jesus drive?” This book equips a reader with knowledge and motivation to respond to that question and many others.

A Climate For Change: Global Warming Facts For Faith-Based Decisions, by Katharine Hayhoe and Andrew Farley (New York: Faith Works, 2009.) 206 pp. Anybody who has been around Katharine Hayhoe is awe-struck by her personal charisma, exuberance, deep Christian faith, expertise on climate science, and her communication skills. In 2014 Time Magazine listed her as one of its top 100 most influential people in the world. Hayhoe has been called the best climate communicator of our generation, and few would argue. After all, she is a respected atmospheric scientist who served as an Expert Reviewer on the Nobel Prize-winning Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Moreover, Hayhoe is a committed and unabashed evangelical Christian, daughter of missionaries, and married to co-author Andrew Farley, who pastors an evangelical church.

This is the book to offer a conservative Christian friend or relative who is skeptical of climate change science. The book has a positive tone, is non-politicized and non-polemic, covers the bases of climate science well to an average, non-technical reader, and is couched in God-affirming language and theology. The writers know the seriousness of climate change, yet do not let a dark cloud hover over their work.

Katharine Hayhoe has a natural sunny disposition and effervescence which comes out persuasively in her frequent media interviews, such as a recorded panel that also included President Obama and actor, environmentalist and philanthropist Leonardo DiCaprio. Global Weirding With Katharine Hayhoe is a 7 minute length video series on climate themes produced every two weeks by KTTZ Texas Tech Public Media and distributed by PBS Digital Studios and widely available on YouTube and other outlets.

**The Hockey Stick And The Climate Wars** by Michael E. Mann (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 395 pp. The hockey stick referred to in the book’s title is the shape of a line graph of global temperatures over a long period. For centuries, global temperatures stayed relatively flat, like the blade of a hockey stick, only to shoot up high like a hockey stick handle as human-induced greenhouse gasses have increased during recent times. The hockey stick metaphor gained massive publicity when Michael Mann and others published their research in 1998—and notoriety, too, as fossil fuel interests fired back ferociously using propaganda, think tanks, and politicians to try to discredit the science. Mann, whose temperament and scientific acumen is not docile, became the designated lightning rod for the attack.

In June 2005, climate deniast Congressman Joe Barton, chairman of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, demanded full records on climate research from top climate scientists including Dr. Mann. Barton ordered the scientists to provide not just data and methods, but also personal information
about their finances and careers, information about grants provided to the institutions they had worked for, and the exact computer codes used to generate their results. This was obviously a witch-hunt to intimidate climate scientists. The media latched onto the story since controversy sells, which then perpetuates the opportunity for climate deniasts to get their fallacious arguments to the public, and that then delays public support for climate action. Michael Mann’s book renews the story of those bruising battles.

**Climate Cover-up: The Crusade To Deny Global Warming**, by James Hoggan and Richard Littlemore (Vancouver, Canada: Greystone, 2009). 250 pp. Authored by leaders of the DeSmog Blog Project, this is another book on climate cover-up through industry obfuscation, political obstruction, and media muddling. The book details the cover-ups, sleight-of-hand, dishonesty, and nastiness of the well-funded climate denial propaganda in the United States and Canada up until its printing in 2009. I might mention that climate deniasts keep recycling their stale, faulty, disproven claims, so little has changed from then since the book’s printing. I heartily recommend signing up for the free email updates on research of them. I may mention that The Mountain Vision newspaper works closely with this organization. The strength of the book is that it shows congruent support for meaningful climate policy among major religious entities in its many short, understandable, and compelling articles. This is not a book to read cover to cover, but rather one to profitably graze through the pages.

Don’t Even Think About It: Why Our Brains Are Wired To Ignore Climate Change, by George Marshall (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014). Pp. 260. My personal copy of this book is profusely marked up with underlining and notes on every page, it is that meaty. Marshall has written an outstanding analysis on why the scientific reality of approaching catastrophic climate change is not sufficiently moving people and their governments to respond. The problem, Marshall explains, is that our brains are hardwired to resist inconvenient truths.

I am frequently in conversations on how to convince people that climate change is real and serious. A frequently offered silver bullet is more education. “People need to know the facts of climate change, and then they will become advocates for climate policy.” Or, “Christian people need to have their hearts moved through biblical teaching on the implications of climate on the Poor.” Marshall suggests that the trusted messenger who bears the message is more important than factual information. “People will willingly shoulder a burden—even one that requires short-term sacrifice against uncertain long-term threats—provided they share a common purpose and are rewarded with a greater sense of social belonging” (p. 70). This entails disentangling political partisanship, egotistical rivalries, and iron-clad ideological baggage. We all live on planet Earth, and together we must commit to survive.

Those who are familiar with group psychology theory such as that of Jonathan Haidt and Dan Kahan will find common cause with George Marshall. Haidt argues that the emotional brain controls the rational brain. Kahan focuses on group pressure. Indeed, studies show that the more intelligent and knowledgeable people are, the more entrenched they become in the confirmation bias of their position. Marshall hits also hits hard against those climate activists who disparage religion. He has a chapter titled, “Climate Conviction: What the Green Team Can Learn from the God Squad.”

Human-caused climate change is the gravest of threats. Humanity is not responding fast enough avert worsening global life quality. All of us need to be messengers and change agents. The author convincingly points out what strategy will work and what tactics are dead ends. I highly recommend this book.
The Creation Museum situated in northern Kentucky receives 88,400 visitors per month. Forty miles away, the Ark Encounter displays a 510 foot-long replica of Noah’s Ark built from the specifications in the Bible. Both attractions encourage a literal interpretation of the seven-day creation account in the Book of Genesis, and teach as historical fact, the Great Flood.

In the play, Inherit the Wind, based on the 1925 Scopes trial about teaching evolution, actors confront one another with contrary signs saying: “Read Your Bible,” and “Read Your Darwin!” Seemingly, for a person of faith the choice can only favor one or the other.

Bridging the Gap

Elizabeth A. Johnson in her book, Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love, offers a bridge for those who use the eyes of faith, while accepting the steady hand of science. Her approach is not as apologist straining to prove the existence of God, but as theologian integrating Darwin’s theory into mainstream Christian theology.

With the publication of On the Origins of Species in 1859, Charles Darwin faced a firestorm of protests from advocates of special creation who accepted a designing intelligence apparent to them from the order and beauty of the world. Common wisdom held special acts of creation were ongoing.

Yet, for Darwin special creation offered no satisfying explanation when he meticulously noticed variations like unexpected stripes on the same species, or some locations absent species constrained only by a natural barrier. Darwin observed slight differences, when special creationists thought species were stable immutable entities that the Creator could place widely.

Darwin’s great insight: natural selection. Living organisms produce variations, known as mutations, and nature seemingly preserves the favorable variations and rejects the less adaptable ones. His observations showed the dynamic principles of divergence and extinction. A species might split into new varieties and species, rather than one species simply morphing straight into another. After splitting, the varied species will spread to find unexploited places in nature encouraging increased specialization. Those that fail to adapt go extinct. Special creationists expected that the Creator could replace the same species again and wherever, even if it were extinct. Yet, from his research, Darwin realized that species once extinct remain lost. Only those that adapt successfully, go on.

Curiously, Darwin wrote six editions of On the Origin of Species. In his fifth edition he introduced the phrase “survival of the fittest,” and in his sixth edition the word, “evolution,” appears. Both notions have become shorthand for Darwin’s theory, but each pales in comparison to the steady, reliable gradual pace of natural selection.

The Eyes of Faith

Johnson’s thesis is that the eyes of faith can observe the approach of Darwin without losing confidence in a loving God. Scripture itself supplies the clues.

“Ask the beasts and they will teach you...In his hand is the life of every living thing” (Job 12:7, 10.) God, who “created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1), holds all life in hand, i.e. in existence. Christians believe there is a divine indwelling in each person, i.e. God is alive in each one of us, and that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. In the Nicene Creed, we pray, “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life...” which means the Spirit enlivens and animates the life within us. The image easily gets extended to all creation. Because the divine presence holds all life in existence, the world is blessed and stands in relationship with God, and indeed has become a divine dwelling place. God is not nature (i.e. pantheism), but God lives in nature while also transcending it (i.e. panentheism).

The image is not of a sculptor who creates a statue and leaves it alone, but of a singer who continues singing the creation song toward some unpredictable future that holds a cosmic finale: “Behold, I make all things new” (Rev. 21:5.)

Darwin observed that natural selection occurs randomly with some adaptations being successful and some not. None are predictable but happen only by chance. Given that the Spirit empowers and accompanies all life, Christian belief can easily place the Holy Spirit in the midst of creation even as it evolves.

Evolution has moved from inanimate to animate to intentional states, with each level adding more complexity. Again, Scripture gives the natural world a role to play in creation when in Genesis God says “let the waters bring forth” (Gen. 1:20) and “let the earth bring forth” (Gen. 1:24). Johnson remarks, “The theory of evolution today ratchets up what the sea and the earth can do” (p. 178).

With humanity came fuller consciousness within creation. God has given humanity free will, and free will can also be extended to all creation. As it organizes itself by natural selection, creation emerges into ever newer and more complex arrangements. Because the Holy Spirit sustains all creation seemingly inviting it toward its fuller destiny of more complexity and consciousness, nature actually participates as a free partner in its own destiny. It shouts, “I’ll do it my way!”

The Challenge Ahead

By interpreting the Scriptures in a literal way, the message of God’s love focuses narrowly on humanity. With the sin of Adam and Eve being paramount, nature becomes merely the backdrop for the drama of redemption. Diminished is the power of God’s love to create, enliven, empower, embrace and celebrate the rest of creation.

In an iconic photograph by the Hubble telescope, a Deep Field image displays hundreds of galaxies, each having a billion stars never before seen by anyone prior to the Twentieth Century. Yet, millions and billions of years ago the power of God’s love inspired their formation, presumably only to the delight of God at first, till humanity evolved scientifically enough to view them. The challenge remains for us to catch the enormous reach of God’s love and mercy, not just for humans, but for galaxies, planets and even earthworms!

A Curious Daydream

Let’s entertain a daydream. Suppose Charles Darwin and Elizabeth Johnson met by a pond in a lush garden teeming with critters large and small, and their discussion highlighted natural selection and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the great mystery of life. Perhaps they could realistically pray together:

“Oh, God,
You inspired creation and hold it dear.
We revere your holy name.
Let evolution continue,
And let our development unfold on earth as for eternity.
Give us the strength today to help one another and all creation,
And share what little we have and know.
Forgive us our doubt,
As we forgive those who believe no more,
And let us not quit our journey,
But lead us to full consciousness with You. Amen.”

Fr. John Rausch has served Appalachian communities as a Glenmary priest for almost 40 years. He serves on CFTM’s Steering Committee.

See page 19 for a profile on the ministry and life of Fr. John Rausch.
"I fully believe that God is alive to people and I fully believe that God hears the cry of the poor. I think we in the Church have to look around to the sufferings and struggles of people and nature and take action. God has empowered us. We can't let God take the bum rap for why things aren't done."

Fr. John Rausch describes the thrust of his lifework, as highlighted in his biographical sketch on the Glenmary website. http://www.glenmary.org/rausch/ Throughout more than forty years of unflagging service in eastern Kentucky, southwestern Virginia, and eastern Tennessee, Fr. John exhorts Church people to reflect God's love through action in behalf of downtrodden people, their struggling communities, and God's besieged creation.

Christians For the Mountains is privileged to have the wise counsel, friendly encouragement, and consistent service of Fr. John Rausch on our Steering Committee.

Hospitality

My first clear remembrance of Fr. John was a dinner at a friend of a friend's house in Berea, Kentucky. Only fitting, since Fr. John is an acclaimed connoisseur of culinary arts. He no doubt cooked up something scrumptious for that meal, one of many services of hospitality he graciously gives. As I got more involved in anti-mountaintop removal advocacy, our paths began to converge. Fr. John was as engaged an activist against that insidious coal extraction process as anybody in Kentucky. He had much to teach me.

Retreats and Tours

Fr. John is known for the life-changing retreats and tours he organizes and leads. These include annual spring wildflower walks, a yearly "Pilgrimage to the Holy Land of Appalachia," and retreats on the Spirituality of the Cherokee People. About 12 years or so ago Fr. John invited me to a tour of mountaintop removal in eastern Kentucky he was organizing for religious leaders. Shortly after, I received a phone call from Marty Ostrow, who was making a film involving religion engaged in environmental activity. This seemed like a perfect opportunity to meld Fr. John's mountaintop tour with the film. And so it happened. Fr. John organized a superb tour for Christian leaders that included an airplane flyover of ruined landscapes, a town hall meeting with community members impacted by mountaintop removal, an onsite visit to the edge of an active mountaintop removal site where participants were invited to sign a statement (a visible explosion occurred while we were singing Amazing Grace), and a conclusion at Berea College assembly. The resulting film, The Renewal Documentary (http://renewalproject.net/) has been shown in countless classrooms, houses of worship, organizational meetings, and home gatherings.

Another gathering I vividly remember was Fr. John spearheading the "Cross In The Mountains" held on Pine Mountain, Kentucky with a view of mountaintop removal. This event was an ecumenical prayer service for the renewal of Appalachian communities. The purpose was to educate and inspire inner conversion and discussion about care of creation as an ethical and moral issue. Based upon the Via Crucis (Stations of the Cross), participants walked to each station holding small crosses that denoted injustices to water, air, land, community, health, while two others carried a large cross. Examples included: "Jesus Takes Up His Cross: Corporate greed abuses the people and the land;" "Jesus Falls for the First Time: Water pollutes the streams and rivers;" "Jesus Meets His Sorrowful Mother: Earth mourns her destruction;" "Simon of Cyrene Helps Jesus Carry the Cross: Religious leaders and friends of creation speak out;" Worshippers sang hymns and prayed. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WKhC-CdQOw

Profile On Fr. John Rausch

Fr. John signing pledge against mountaintop removal during a tour for religious leaders.

Priest

Having finished high school in 1963, John Rausch was looking for adventure. As he looked into religious orders, he was impressed that Glenmary portrayed a man on a horse and people pushing a jeep out of a ditch. "That looked adventurous," laughs Fr. John, thinking back. "I went for the ditch." Fr. John remembers as a youth that he wanted to serve God and go to heaven. As he matured through his study, Fr. John came to realize that the gospels speak more about how we live our life now. "Jesus said, 'The Kingdom of God is at hand.'" Fr. John sees ministry as walking with people who are in a difficult situation, helping someone see a better path for his or her life, or to encourage people to recognize their dignity.

Fr. John describes his five continuing decades of ministry. "As a priest, you can do a lot just by being present to people, and listening to the needs of the area. I don't have all the answers, I have directions, but I know that I'm traveling with people who are just seeking to love God, and to have a decent family, and a decent community. I'm part of that whole mix. My ministry has been very fulfilling to me. I'm a very happy priest."

Glenmary Home Missioners is a Catholic society of priests and brothers who, along with coworkers, are dedicated to serving the spiritual and material needs of people living in mission counties throughout Appalachia and the South. They minister to Catholic minority populations, to the unchurched, and to the poor. Glenmary works ecumenically with the universal Church.

Since he is not a parish priest, Fr. John has freedom to travel and serve. He jokingly describes himself as a "rent-a-priest" as he frequently travels from his home in Stanton, Kentucky to congregations in nearby counties to preach to congregations where he reflects, "I can say things that the church's regular priest might find uncomfortable to express." Fr. John is bold and uncompromising in his preaching, yet his self-deprecating humor and humility can disarm the opposition.

Ambassador

Fr. John Rausch has held a number of positions over the decades. For many years he served as Executive Director of the Catholic Committee of Appalachia, an organization founded in 1970 to serve Appalachia, her poor and the entire web of creation. Pax Christi USA named Rausch "Teacher of Peace" for 2007. In 2017 broadcaster Anderson Cooper hosted former Vice President Al Gore and Fr. John Rausch on a CNN dialogue on climate change, in which Fr. John said, "Unless people realize that we're all connected, and that's why I talked about spirituality, we will never be able to heal the planet. God has given the common good to everyone..." In 2015 Fr. John Rausch was the sole U.S. representative to a pontifical council meeting in Rome to discuss mining practices along with 44 representatives of communities affected by mining activities around the world. During that gathering, Fr. John co-celebrated Mass with Cardinal Turkson.

Mentor, Teacher, Friend

The next best thing to actually being with Fr. John Rausch is to access his numerous online writings and talks discoverable through an Internet search engine. His warmth, humor, and passion for living out the Gospel is instructional and inspiring. Rausch refreshes his own spiritual strength by consistently setting aside times for contemplation, prayer, and Sabbath rest, which then energizes him to love others.

Fr. John Rausch invites people to his talks and retreats. He may be contacted through this publication or through Glenmary Home Missioners at www.glenmary.org/rausch/
Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of Hosts
The whole earth is full of His Glory

---Isaiah 6:3

Morning has broken, like the first morning,
Blackbird has spoken, like the first bird.
Praise for the singing, praise for the morning.
Praise for them springing fresh from the word.

Sweet the rain's new fall, sunlit from heaven,
Like the first dew fall on the first grass.
Praise for the sweetness of the wet garden,
Sprung in completeness where His feet pass.

Mine is the sunlight, mine is the morning,
Born of the one light Eden saw play.
Praise with elation, praise every morning,
God's re-creation of the new day.

It's 3:23 in the morning and I'm awake
because my great, great, grand children won't let me sleep.
My great, great, grandchildren ask me in dreams
what did you do while the planet was plundered?
surely you did something
what did you do once you knew?

-----David Dellinger, Poet

Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind
upon the remembered earth.
He ought to give himself up
to a particular landscape in his experience;
to look at it from as many angles as he can,
to wonder upon it, to dwell upon it.
He ought to imagine that he touches it with his hands at every season
and listens to the sounds that are made upon it.
He ought to imagine the creatures there
and all the faintest motions of the wind.
He ought to recollect the glare of the moon
and the colors of the dawn and dusk.

---N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa Tribe)

Upcoming for The Mountain Vision
CFTM is planning its twelfth edition for fall/winter, as our schedule
permits. Please let us know if your friends would like a sample copy.

We invite you to send your own personal stories of your conversions
to "Kingdom of God" life with emphasis on
environmental justice.

Mountain Vision is an outreach ministry of Christians For The Mountains. Copies are sent free of charge to
advocates for God's "will to be done, on earth as it is
in heaven" (Mt. 6:10).