

Good Friday and Earth Day: A Providential Convergence

A Theological Op-Ed for Lent

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By a rare coincidence Earth Day, April 22, falls on Good Friday this year, the first time ever. (The next time is in 2095.) “Good Friday” is the day Christians commemorate Christ’s crucifixion. Earth Day calls attention to the continuing crucifixion of our planet. While some may consider this chronological convergence a rude distraction from the Holy Week of Christ’s Passion, we believe the coincidence is providential. Both Good Friday and Earth Day draw our attention to suffering, death, and the hope of redemption.

How strange it seems to call “good” a day that commemorates crucifixion. The historical reason is that “good” meant “holy” back in the time of Shakespeare and the King James Bible. But now that meaning is lost. The Swedes offer an alternative: “Long Friday” (*Långfredagen*). Crucifixion was not quick and easy. It was meant to assert Rome’s control over subject peoples by means of a prolonged, public display of suffering.

Earth Day was founded by Gaylord Nelson, a United States Senator from Wisconsin and a Methodist, who called for an environmental teach-in on April 22, 1970. It was his response to the Santa Barbara oil spill of the previous year—a spill that involved a relatively miniscule amount of oil compared to the recent one off the Gulf coast. Earth Day invites us to remember not just particular crises, however, but the prolonged public suffering the earth is experiencing at human hands.

James Howard Kunstler refers to “the long emergency” that is now upon us, a time of converging economic and ecological crises. The evidence is chilling. On the economic front, today’s global markets seem ever vulnerable to collapse as they continue to operate under the grand but deadly illusion of growth at any cost, both human and environmental.

Alarmed at the rapid rate of disappearing species, biologists in a recent issue of *Nature* warn that the earth is on the brink of a sixth massive extinction, comparable to the one that wiped out the dinosaurs

65 million years ago. But what makes this one unique is its cause, namely, human activity: habitat destruction, pollution, climate change, and competition for resources.

Extinction and crucifixion share much in common. In our hands, the earth continues to suffer its own *via dolorosa*. Call it “The Passion of the Creation.” The apostle Paul described creation as “groaning” and “subjected to futility” (Romans 8:18-23). He was also clear that the fate of humankind is bound up with the fate of creation. We live in a good and groaning world, a world created good, according to Genesis, and now groaning under the crushing weight of our carbon footprint.

With Earth Day converging on Good Friday this year, a lesson is to be learned. It begins with the dawning awareness of a connection that has long been forgotten, namely, the indissoluble bond between Christ and creation. Christ, the Word made flesh, dwelt in a world made of flesh. Christians call this the incarnation: when God saw fit to become a part of creation. Faith in the incarnation takes seriously God’s creation.

While it is tempting on Good Friday to look away from the cross toward Easter’s empty tomb, we must remember that Christ’s resurrected body still bears the scars of his crucifixion (John 20:27). Our planet, too, bears lasting scars. During this time of Lent, may we reflect on the magnitude of our sin against God and God’s creation. As we tremble at the foot of the cross on Good Friday, may we tremble also at the cross the earth now bears on account of our greed, consumptive habits, and toxic policies. May we hear the groans of our bruised and battered world echoed in the cries of Jesus on the cross.

To tremble at the cross and repent is what makes this day “good.”

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