

## Whose Power Is It?

“The earth is the LORD’s, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein.” That’s how I learned the first verse of Psalm 24 in the old King James Version as opposed to our more modern New Revised Standard Version, which I read a moment ago. But whatever turn of phrase we use to describe it, God’s awesome creation of the planet on which we live and God’s continuing interest in and love for our planet and all its life and for the cosmos around us, these concepts have been central to my understanding for as long as I can remember. I suspect I was inculcated with these ideas early in my days in Sunday School at Skycrest Baptist Church. I definitely remember that the weekday Kindergarten I attended at that same church was divided into three groups – suns, moons and stars. I was probably not the only student whose dad worked in the space program and that, too, would have been cause for reflection on God as Creator. I am fairly certain that I learned all three of the creation hymns we’ve sung so far this morning while attending Church of England schools for the three years after kindergarten – and once again I thank for indulging me in my preferred tune for “All Things Bright and Beautiful,” which I definitely learned as an English schoolboy. I never have been able to reconcile myself to the tune most used in the U.S.

All this is to say that I was delighted when I was called by you all to be your pastor to find that this was a church with a long history of involvement in creation care issues. The celebration of Earth Day is important to Good Shepherd Baptist, as indeed it has been to me since that first Earth Day in 1970. When that secularly-based holiday rolls around each spring, I don’t feel that I have to begin at square one with a defense of why such a day should matter to Christians. The connections are deep within us all: the Earth is the Lord’s; God set humankind in the Garden to tend and to keep it; just as with all of us, the whole Creation awaits the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God and with it release from bondage to death and decay.

So without the need for those preliminaries, I want to turn our attention this morning to some specifics of a holy ecological awareness, specifics with which we may not all be aware. I am indebted for my theme and many of the detailed facts I will share to the Eco-Justice Program of the National Council of Churches but I also want to share with you some very personal connections to the issues raised by the latest Earth Day study released by that fine ecumenical group.

As the worldwide recession has begun to lift, one of the changes we have seen in the past year is a steady or occasionally abrupt rise in the price of power: our utility bills are up, gas prices are up, and these increases have triggered a host of others as the cost of consumer goods is tied to the cost of the energy needed to manufacture, to refrigerate or to transport. As these costs go up without a concomitant rise in stagnated wages, many folks look for cuts to make – eating out less, buying store brands, taking the bus or walking, and so forth. But the truth of the matter is we can’t do without ready sources of power in our modern lives. We need electricity for the machines that we work with and play with, for food refrigeration and cooking, to pump the fresh water we use in abundance to our homes. We need natural gas to heat that water or our homes. We need various forms of oil to run our vehicles on the roads, on the water and in the skies.

All of these forms of energy come with costs, direct and indirect. There’s a lot of consternation just now over gasoline prices. I know I felt pretty badly used when I filled my tank at Costco before Connie and I drove to Vancouver on Friday and shelled out about \$4.05/gallon. Of

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course, I got some perspective in just a few hours when I noticed that gasoline in that Canadian city was over \$1.40 per litre. For those of you, like me, who can't do the exchange in your head, that's over \$5.30 per gallon. We're still blessed with relatively cheap gas in the U.S. But we pay other costs, too, for our extravagant use of fossil fuels, like air pollution and climate change.

Of course, as Deuteronomy tells us, it is God who has given us these power sources which we have so abused. We do not create power, as any good scientist will tell you, we merely release it from the matter in which it is stored. But the Creator of All, including all Power, has given us choices about which power we release and how we do it. There are a couple of sources of utility power which involve fairly new techniques to release and, because they are relatively new, their ultimate costs are only now becoming widely known.

One of these new techniques to extract the power from the earth involves coal. Coal, of course, is well known as perhaps the dirtiest of the fossil fuels. The burning of coal to power generators is inefficient and spews tons of particulate matter in to the air every year along with the carbon monoxide released in combustion. Coal's negative effect on clean air is particularly worrisome as about half our country's population lives in areas with high air pollution. In 2002, the National Institutes of Health estimated that 30 percent of childhood asthma is caused by dirty air. A new study indicates that "coal-fired power plants are the single largest source of mercury in our air and water. Mercury also ends up in our food chain—most states have issued mercury advisories for fish caught in their lakes, rivers, and streams—and in our bodies, posing a serious developmental risk to children and pregnant women." And yet, "according to the Energy Information Administration, in 2010 45 percent of U.S. electricity was generated from burning coal—the largest single source for power generation."

For centuries, coal has been a hard-won resource. It required deep-shaft mining, expensive and dangerous to bring coal in the quantities demanded to the surface. Tales of the price paid by miners – death by cave-in or flood, slow death by black lung, abuse of carefully negotiated union contracts by corporations and by the unions themselves – these stories have become a well-known part of modern lore. But the miners have taken pride in their risky work, often because it was seen as a way out of poverty for new immigrants and for the inhabitants of chronically impoverished regions like the hills of Appalachia. Some of my own forebears were miners – in the iron mines of the Ozark Mountains of Missouri rather than in the coal mines of the Appalachians. But I have heard stories of their hard work and pride from my Great-Aunt Mamie, now in her 90s, as she told of how her father, my great-grandfather, and his brothers triumphed over the hardness of their lives to bring better times to their children.

And, as many of you know, Connie and the kids and I spent many years in Kentucky, one of the states in the Appalachian coal region. We were not close to the mountains in our riverside city of Louisville but I travelled to that part of the state frequently on business and occasionally for pleasure and I was always struck by the beauty of those old, time-worn mountains, smaller than their newer cousins out west, with gentler slopes and more abundant flora and fauna thanks to the age-long action of wind and water which had made rich soil of the hard rock that was the mountains' bones. These, too, I connected with my family, for the Scots & Irish immigrants among them had settled in these mountains before pushing further west to the Ozarks and the

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southern stretches of the range had at one time belonged to the Cherokee Nation which had contributed ancestors to both sides of my family.

Perhaps that is why the new approach to coal mining has filled me with such horror. It is called “mountain top removal,” which sounds innocuous enough. After all, what harm can it be to make a remote and obscure old mountain a few feet shorter? The trees can be sold as lumber, the animals can find new homes and the coal and debris are trucked away, right? Unfortunately, this is not the case. In actuality, according to the National Council of Churches, “mountaintop removal coal mining is a practice that removes 500 or more feet from the tops of mountains in order to reach buried seams of coal. Earth from the mountaintop is then dumped as “fill” in the neighboring valleys. Fill from mountaintop removal mines has buried more than 1,000 miles of streams in the Appalachian region and the mines have leveled at least 500 mountains... Once clear mountain streams are contaminated with mine waste or buried under rubble and mountain vistas are reduced to grey-brown gravel pits. Families are either forced to leave the land that has sustained their families for generations or to suffer health consequences that can be life-threatening. Communities that experience mountaintop removal mining are twice as likely to suffer birth defects. In addition, mountaintop mines employ far fewer people than traditional underground mines, so unemployment rises and people who were already struggling to make ends meet are forced to leave the land they love to find work.” Mountain top removal does not honor the dignity of the miners, it does not honor the safety of their families, it does not honor the beauty of creation and it does not, therefore, honor the Creator.

I am particularly mindful that in the Biblical record, it was the mountains that were specially connected with God’s presence. We lift up our eyes to the hills, from whence cometh our help. God’s holy place, reserved for those with clean hands and pure hearts, as we heard a moment ago, is the mountain. It was on the mountain that Moses received Torah; it was on the mountain that Elijah heard the still, small voice; it was on the mountain that Jesus was revealed in his glory. Can we really allow the mountain tops to be “removed?”

One of the great American writers of our time is Wendell Berry, a farmer, poet, essayist and novelist from Henry County, Kentucky; farmland between my old home of Louisville and the coal country of Eastern Kentucky. Berry has been honored for his work with Guggenheim and Rockefeller Fellowships, with the T.S. Eliot Award and the Thomas Merton Award, among many others. He is also a well-known trouble-maker or activist, if you prefer the more polite term. Last February, he and 14 companions spent a weekend locked in the office of the Governor of Kentucky to call attention to the blight of mountain top removal. Listen to some of what he had to say on the subject in two of his poems:

(from “A Timbered Choir”)

Even while I dreamed I prayed that what I saw was only fear and no foretelling,  
for I saw the last known landscape destroyed for the sake  
of the objective, the soil bludgeoned, the rock blasted.  
Those who had wanted to go home would never get there now.  
... I saw the forest reduced to stumps and gullies; I saw  
the poisoned river, the mountain cast into the valley;  
I came to the city that nobody recognized because it looked like every other city.

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I saw the passages worn by the unnumbered  
footfalls of those whose eyes were fixed upon the objective.

(and from “Sabbath II. 2008”)

In the name of more we destroy  
for coal the mountain and its forest  
and so choose the insatiable flame  
over the green leaf that within our care  
would return to us unendingly  
until the end of time.

Both of these poems are reproduced in their entirety on your bulletin insert. To the last image, of the green leaf returning to us unendingly, I shall return in a moment.

Another new technique of energy extraction, fracking, also touches me personally. For those of you who’d not heard of it, “fracking” is a sort of shorthand for hydraulic fracturing. “Fracking” has entered our vocabulary because natural gas is considered to be a cleaner source of fuel for generating electricity than coal or oil. The problem is that “easily available sources of natural gas are dwindling, and many of the largest remaining untapped natural gas reserves are in hard-to-reach underground rock formations. To reach these reserves, miners must use ... “fracking.” Fracking involves injecting water mixed with sand and chemical fluids into deep wells in order to break open the rock and force natural gas out. Many claim, however, that fracking may be contaminating local drinking water. Recent studies have linked drilling and fracking for natural gas to groundwater pollution from methane and other chemicals. In addition, the fracking process uses large amounts of water (between one and nine million gallons per well) and the storage, disposal, and recycling of the waste water, which can contain hazardous chemicals, may also threaten surface water supplies... Some recent studies have also linked fracking and the underground injection of fracking wastewater to an increased risk of earthquakes, prompting some communities to ban these activities near seismic faultlines.”

How is it that I became personally involved in “fracking?” Well, through a rather byzantine set of circumstances, I am part-owner of the mineral rights in a narrow strip of land along U.S. Hwy. 167 in Velvet Ridge, Arkansas. Recently, a representative of a gas company approached my Uncle Denny, who lives on the adjacent land, regarding the mineral rights to the strip. Since my uncle is not the sole owner of those rights and, I think, because he does not care for such official representatives in any capacity, he turned the man away with his mission unfulfilled. Why was the “land man,” as my uncle called him interested in the mineral rights in that tiny strip? Why to secure a missing piece of a long chain of land for fracking, of course. To the unwary land owner in that area, trying to be a good steward of the land he or she controls, it sounds like easy money. But Velvet Ridge and environs are hard up against the New Madrid Fault. It is one of the most dangerous earthquake zones in the country, all the more so because there has not been a significant quake since 1812. But, “in a report filed in November 2008, The U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency warned that a serious earthquake in the New Madrid Seismic Zone could result in “the highest economic losses due to a natural disaster in the United States”.” Given the earthquake danger presented by fracking, I hope that landowners in White County,

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Arkansas, and other vulnerable places will not be tempted by the bounties promised by the gas companies.

The most infuriating thing about these dangerous new techniques as well as the dangerous, dirty old ones is that they are so unnecessary. As noted by the NCC's Eco-Justice Program, "God has given us energy sources in abundance. We may have a finite supply of some sources of energy like coal and gas, but sun, wind, and water are examples of gifts from our Creator with the potential to generate power in perpetuity." If we turn from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources, not only will we find the fulfillment of Wendell Berry's vision of "the green leaf that within our care would return to us unendingly until the end of time" but also of sources of God-given power that are inexhaustible. Here in the Pacific Northwest, we are the beneficiaries of easily tapped power for hydroelectricity. In France last summer, I saw huge "wind farms" that generate a growing proportion of electricity in Europe. When Connie and I were in Phoenix a few weeks ago, Steve and Carol Calkins excitedly shared with us their plans to install solar panels on their roof which will dramatically cut their energy bills. Renewable sources of energy are part of God's gift to us and their implementation is within our reach. The warnings of fossil-fuel companies concerning higher financial cost of renewable energy sources are deceptive. "In the U.S., the lower price of fossil-based fuels reflects decades of support from federal and state governments through tax breaks and other government incentives for exploration, research, and other production costs. Although renewables also receive support through government-funded research and the tax code, fossil fuels still receive the lion's share of federal support even though the industry is mature and established as compared to the far younger and less-developed renewable energy industry." And this is before we take into consideration the dreadful environmental cost of fossil fuels.

So what is our calling from God in the face of all of this information, all of this bad news and all of the danger to our planet? First, we must know what is to be known. On the back of your bulletin is the web address for the NCC's Eco-Justice Program. Some of what is there you will have heard from me this morning but there is much more and it is easily read and thought-provoking. Second, we must count the cost of current policies and practices, not just for ourselves but for our neighbors, for the poorest who are often most negatively affected and for our children and our children's children. Third, we must examine our own actions, what we buy, how we drive, how we create waste, for even small actions can make a difference when they are taken by a growing community of those concerned. Finally, we must make our voices heard in defense of God's beautiful creation, through our legislators and with the choices we make in the marketplace and with our lifestyles.

My sisters and brothers, it is Earth Day, the day we celebrate the beauty of God's good creation and our role in preserving it as God's faithful stewards. God has provided us with the power we need to live full and abundant lives. Let us use that power in honor of the Creator. Let us pledge together to once again become the peaceful gardeners God intended us to be, hallowing God's name as revealed in God's good Creation in all that we do. Amen.