

THOU SHALT HONOR AND PROTECT YOUR MOTHER EARTH
Sermon VII in the Yearlong Series, “Ten Commandments for the 21st Century”
Rev. Scott W. Alexander
Earth Day Sunday, April 17, 2011

[During the Rev. Alexander’s Reflections, beautiful nature scenes of Planet Earth were shown in several places, as indicated.]

Our Mother Earth...our planet home...is a natural creation of almost indescribable beauty, holiness, and grace...

[12 SLIDES SHOWN IN SILENCE]

By what must be considered an incredibly impossible configuration of cosmic luck, we have had bequeathed to us a stunning and hospitable world that no citizen of earth should ever take for granted...

[MORE SILENCE...12 MORE SLIDES]

Our natural world graciously offers us an astounding array of pleasing shapes, sights, sounds, smells, and sensations...and the human being who does not open him or herself to the natural glories that sing and dance out of this creation for us is lost to much of life’s holy gift...

[MORE SILENCE...12 MORE SLIDES]

This morning, I continue my year-long sermon series on *Ten Commandments for the 21st Century* with a sermon reminding you of perhaps the most pressing ethical injunction of our time: “*Thou Shalt Honor and Protect Your Mother Earth.*”

Look...we all know the troubling truth. Despite those absolutely stunning photographs of our Mother Earth that we all just enjoyed, and despite the fact that much of our planet remains wild, healthy and beautiful...there is terrible trouble in paradise. Over recent centuries, our planet has experienced steady human population growth and a corresponding explosion of human activity and intervention...and, as a consequence, the very face of earth has been profoundly and dangerously altered. Massive Industrialization, urbanization, factory farming, deforestation, pollution of air and water, global warming and the destruction of countless natural habitats – not to mention the extinction and endangerment to countless animal and plant species – has increasingly occurred.

Now, in these early years of the 21st century, the steady and inevitable expansion of human activity and consumption on our earth’s surface has reached the point where it now unmistakably endangers the balance and health of our planet’s many interrelated ecosystems and habitats. Indeed, the future sustainability of earth’s entire ecosystem is now in genuine question. Every day in the newspapers, there is some new and urgent warning from earth scientists about the deleterious effects increased human activity is having upon our planet, and it goes without saying that humanity ignores these dire warnings at their extreme peril.

I am keenly aware that not everyone in this room this morning is equally persuaded about the urgency and extent of the ecological crisis humanity faces...but I am going to leave those nuanced conversations about the precise condition of our earth for some other fact-orientated, scientific venue. What I want to focus on this morning – in this religious setting – is the absolute ethical imperative I am passionately persuaded exists for each and every one of us, as responsible members of the human family, to do our part in immediately facing the clear and present dangers that have emerged...and, as a consequence, begin significantly altering the way we live upon our planet home. Whether the last glacier on this earth disappears forever in three years or ten or twenty or forty does not matter...what does matter is that we all understand now that the time for human inaction, for burying our heads in the sand, has passed.

As I observed last fall from this pulpit, I am absolutely persuaded that the foremost ethical imperative – and challenge – facing humanity as a whole, and every human being in particular, today is the urgent requirement that we immediately and systematically face the global climate and environmental crisis...and find a whole new, more restrained and responsible way of living on this shrinking, crowded, and endangered planet earth. It is clear to me – and every reputable earth scientist I read – that humanity (and that means all of us) must very quickly find the ways to reduce “our footprints,” carbon and otherwise, on this earth. As the dominant and burgeoning(!) animal species on earth – with the obvious power and predilection to radically manipulate the ecology of the planet to our needs, desires and purposes – the responsibility, the capacity to begin changing the way we live on earth lies entirely with us.

And this – given the obvious folly, weaknesses, and shortsightedness of human nature – is not going to be a quick or easy matter.

It is clear to me – and I assume to most of you – that many of the leaders and cultures of our world are not yet ready to truly face the impending crisis, and the very real lifestyle changes it will require. There is a lot of denial and obfuscation and outright lying occurring on the world stage when it comes to the escalating climatological and ecological crisis we are now in. Because much of humanity is scared to face what is happening, many world leaders are finding international agreements and coordinated global actions elusive. Here in America, for painful example, many of our elected representatives in Washington and various state capitals are still telling themselves and their constituents that we need not make significant sacrifices and changes to protect our Mother Earth and our human future.

I suppose this should not be unexpected, for after all it is only natural for human beings to want to maintain or even expand their level of material wealth, comfort, and choice...even as the planet shutters beneath our human demands. Here in America in particular, our personal lifestyles have, for most, become so abundant and comfortable and routine that to ask people to consider living more carefully and with less is an extremely hard sell. But the ethical and scientific truth is that we must change the way we are living, and change it significantly and immediately ...for our earth is groaning and cracking beneath our heavy and indiscriminately greedy human footprint.

As I said in the autumn, I believe we must embrace a new theology of relinquishment...and a new ethic of restraint and realignment...before it is too late.

Now...I fully realize that it is downright un-American to suggest we must live smaller and with less...to choose relinquishment and restraint in everything we do....but that is precisely what the times and the pressing reality of our global environmental situation demand of us. "*The salad days of earth*" – when we can indiscriminately take or consume as much as our animal hearts desire – are over. Like it or not, if the earth and we are going to survive for the long haul, we must begin to live far more restrained and responsible lives on this earth...and this means choosing – willfully and ethically choosing! – to live with smaller homes...and smaller cars...and smaller and smarter diets...and smaller lifestyles and luxuries...so that this finite and fragile planet can sustain the nearly seven billion human beings who already populate it.

This is not, I assure you, some sort of global abstraction, or (as some American political and social conservatives believe) the excessive agenda of tree-hugging liberals. This is the pressing ethical imperative of our time. Each of us will be required, by individual choice and by collective conviction, to live more modestly and responsibly on the earth...and this is going to be the most demanding challenge any of us have ever faced.

Let me speak personally just for a moment. Even though I passionately understand and take deep to my heart the dire global environmental crisis we now face, it will be hard for me personally to give up the abundance, excess and privilege I have known for my entire life (and grown so accustomed to. The ethical duty of real physical relinquishment and radical lifestyle realignment that this unfolding crisis places before me flies right in the face of my natural possessiveness as an animal of creation devoted to my own comfort and well-being...and I assume the same is true for every last *homo sapiens* sitting in this room before me right now.

This is going to be hard, folks...hard for you and hard for me. I wish there were some other way for the seven billion of us to make it together on earth...but by God there is not. We have no choice if we want a collective future for humanity...there is no way around the ethical imperative of our each having to live smarter, more responsibly and with less...and doing so now...right now...all of us together.

Look...I like Sundays to be an upbeat and positive experience whenever possible...but this Sunday, I hope we all leave significantly disquieted by what is to be required of us in the days ahead. This is the only news of the heart I can in good conscience bring to you this Earth Day Sunday, my dear Vero friends. Together, we must transcend whom we have become, and how we have grown accustomed to live. Together we must find the courage and wisdom to live on this crust of earth profoundly differently than we have been...and shift our ways of humanly being now...now.

AMEN.