

Stewardship of the Earth: Air

Psalm 8

January 27, 2008

Mark S. Bollwinkel

The baobab tree is found in the savannas of Africa and India, mostly around the equator. It can grow up to 25 meters tall and can live for several thousand years. The baobab is leafless for nine months of the year. The Arabian legend of the baobab is that "the devil plucked up the baobab, thrust its branches into the earth and left its roots in the air". The baobab looks like this for a reason. In the wet months water is stored in its thick, corky, fire-resistant trunk for the nine dry months ahead. The baobab's bark, leaves, fruit, and trunk are all used. The bark of the baobab is used for cloth and rope, the leaves for condiments and medicines, while the fruit, called "monkey bread", is eaten. Sometimes people live inside of the huge trunks, and bush-babies live in the crown. (Nirvana H. 2000, www.blueplanetbiomes.org)

The baobab tree is one of the national symbols of Angola, a West African country of about 15 million people. It is also home of the West Angola Conference of the United Methodist church. In 2003 four of us from LAUMC traveled with the first United Methodist Volunteer in Mission (UMVIM) team to enter Angola since the end of their 27 year Civil War. We were there to offer medical teams in local areas and then evaluate future mission cooperation between our California-Nevada United Methodist church and theirs.

We saw lots of baobab trees during our seventeen days there. And we made lots of friends. We left with a sister church to LAUMC; the Sao Paulo United Methodist church in Luanda the capital. Sao Paulo is located high on one of the hillsides that make up the city. It is a ghetto district of Luanda with terrible poverty, no running water, open sewage drains, garbage in the streets, children in rags. On Sundays hundreds of worshippers gather to sing and pray at the church. Hundreds of children come to Sao Paulo's Sunday school. Since 2003 LAUMC has sent school supplies, correspondence and about \$ 1,500 a year to support our sister church there in Sao Paulo. That may not seem like a lot of money to us but to a church that pays its pastor \$ 25 a month, it means a lot.

Each year they send us a thank you gift to let us know how much they appreciate the help, and this year we have received a beautiful oil painting. An artist has painted an Angolan scene with a baobab tree; a symbol of determination, strength and longevity in the face of harsh conditions. Like the faith of our Methodist brothers and sisters 10,000 miles away in Angola.

Like the baobab tree a country like Angola seems a distant and foreign thing in our lives. Yet did you know that one-third of the oil imported into California comes from Angola? (Nick Kotch, "African Oil Whose Bonanza?" National Geographic, September 2005) You and I probably go through a year without giving the people and

context of Angola a thought. Yet it doesn't seem so far away when we consider the odds that some of Angola's oil may be sloshing around in our gas tank!

That wonderful gift of an oil painting of a baobab tree from a distant land is a reminder of many things, not the least of which is that we are all in this together.

In both Old and New Testaments the word for "air", "wind" and "breathe" is synonymous with the word for "spirit", "spirit of God". God permeates our lives as intimately as the air we breathe. The atmosphere that binds us together is as pervasive as the spirit of God. The hearts that beat, the prayers that are made in our One God's name are interconnected in the web and weft of life. In spite of our differences and distances, we share this planet and its future. Ultimately we all breathe the same air.

"In May of last year, based on the work of hundreds of scientists from around the world, the United Nations issued a groundbreaking report on Earth's climate. Its findings were sobering." ("Global Warming Skeptics: A Closer Look", Christian Science Monitor, October 4, 2007) The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) concluded that the earth is getting warmer and it is 90% likely that the warming is caused by greenhouse gases produced by human activities. Such findings are not new; scientists have been researching and publishing conclusions about these trends for forty years. In December of last year the IPCC received half of the Nobel Prize for Peace for its work since inception in 1988.

Such a consensus among scientists has spawned a controversy about the political and economic agenda of those behind it. All agree that the earth is warming and most conclude that human activity is a major contributor but skeptical scientists doubt whether such changes are an urgent crisis exceeding the natural cycles of warming and cooling in earth's history. Some remind us that a vast majority of scientists in Galileo's day concluded that the world was flat and they point to the gross commercialization of climate change fears.

For the faithful there is no controversy about care for the earth. We can debate scientific theory and political agendas or the lack thereof; we can differ about how best to respond to the challenges of the future. But for those who love God and neighbor there is no question that we are called to be stewards of God's creation, its air, water, land and creatures.

In our scripture lesson this morning from the book of Psalms we are reminded that the majesty of God's created order is not only found in the mysterious beauty of the heavens and stars...the wonder of soil, sun and water that can feed a multitude with its harvest...but God's glory is also found in the intelligence and intent of the human society. In our "dominion", our stewardship of the earth, the psalmist insists we are little less than God "crowned with honor and glory".

During the 17th century in Japan deforestation was the major factor in an environmental and population crisis that threatened its people with starvation and civil war (Jared Diamond, Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed, Viking Press, NY, 2005, pp. 294-308). Visionary national leaders organized a census of each and every tree left in Japan, strictly regulating their harvest, use and replanting. Within 200 years Japan's forests were thriving as were their people.

Iceland was colonized by Viking settlers in 870 CE who quickly cut down its forests to expand grazing land for sheep and cattle which were not native to the island (Diamond, pp. 200-204). For the next thousand years Iceland would be known as one of the poorest nations in Europe until it gained semi-independence from Denmark (1874) and began to develop industrial scale fishing as the basis of its economy. By “1950 more than 90% of Iceland’s total exports were marine products” (Diamond p. 203) and Iceland was recognized as one of the richest countries in Europe. Visionary scientists, economists and political leaders insisted that Iceland build its economic future on a sustainable relationship with the environment and that has made all the difference.

Human intelligence, imagination and will are still the most important resources we need as we adapt in a time of climate change.

The average American’s carbon emissions into the atmosphere is more than four times the global average [21 tons of carbon waste vs. the world wide average of 4.5 tons]* Although we can take heart that we Californians are not the biggest air polluters; Texas has the largest carbon footprint of all fifty states, greater than California and Pennsylvania, #s 2 and 3 combined even though it has half the population. (Associated Press, 1/16/08)

Although every nation will have to contribute to the solutions, shouldn’t we who consume a disproportionate share of the earth’s resources (The United States and Canada, 5% of the world’s population, consumes 31.5% of its resources)* offer a disproportionate share of the leadership it will take to adapt in a time of climate change?

Claremont, Pomona and Upland are among some of the Southern California communities nestled in the slope of 10,000 ft. Mt. Baldy. It is the highest peak in the San Gabriel Mountains, which acts as the northern boundary of the Los Angeles basin. It was four months after I started seminary at Claremont School of Theology in September 1974 before I could see Mt. Baldy, only ten miles away, due to the smog. At that time Claremont and vicinity experienced 100 first stage smog alert days a year; in a first stage smog alert the public is notified to stay indoors as the air is unhealthy, especially to the elderly and children.

The introduction of the Clean Air Act in 1970, amended a number of times since, introduced the Federal regulation of toxic emissions in our nation’s air. Along the way many new restrictions and technologies were introduced including the banning of leaded gasoline and the requirement that all automobiles be installed with catalytic converters. When introduced such legislation and technology met with a huge public outcry and threats of doom for our cars and way of life. I’d be the last to suggest that such laws and technologies have been perfect; the catalytic converters themselves are made with highly polluting metals. Their proper disposal is difficult and costly.

And.

Today Claremont and vicinity experience ten first stage smog alert days a year instead of 100.

We are the most important solution to the challenges of climate change. We are the ones called to adapt to a new environment and future. Even the Psalmist of the Old Testament reminds that we always have been and we certainly are now.

Whether we think of “global warming” as a hoax created by zealous tree huggers or the portent of doom for our planet, what do we have to lose by investing in new environmentally sustainable technologies, recycling our waste, becoming energy independent from non-renewable fossil fuels and the nations that sell them to us, cleaning up our oceans and our air?

What do we have to lose if the prophets of doom are wrong; severe adjustments to our fossil fuel based economy to be sure. And what do we have to lose if they are right and we choose to do nothing?

We have a lot to learn from the baobab tree as we do from our brothers and sisters of the Methodist church in Angola. Determination, strength and longevity in the face of harsh conditions are the basis of faith.

We are God’s best shot to steward this beautiful world and our children into the future.

We are all in this together.

We all breathe the same air.

Amen.

*“The EcoQuiz”, Lori Pottinger, Sierra Club, Pomegranate Communications, Petaluma, CA, 2007