

## Rev. Mark Burnham: The rise of Christian environmentalism

### By the Rev. Mark Burnham

Back in 1950, the English astronomer Fred Hoyle predicted that a picture showing the whole Earth, shining in the empty darkness of space, would unleash “a new idea as powerful as any in history will be let loose.”

Just before Christmas 1968, astronauts William “Bill” Anders, Frank Borman and James Lovell circled the moon in the lunar module, travelers on a course as far from Earth as any human has ever been.

During their lunar orbit, Anders took a photograph later known as “Earthrise.” The photo, which nature photographer Galen Rowell declared “the most influential environmental photograph ever taken,” marked for many the beginning of the modern environmental movement. The first “Earth Day” was just 15 months later in April 1970.

In the Christian tradition, the importance of caring for our environment has also taken root. Many churches and denominations now celebrate “Earth Day Sunday” or other Creation Care worship service on or near April 22.

This focus on Creation Care should come as no surprise as the Bible opens with two creation stories set side by side. Genesis 1 is the more familiar – a rhythmic story of creation arranged in a sequence of seven days, six of creation and one day of Sabbath rest. In this story, God the Creator

is a majestic figure whose words speak creation into being.

The creation story in Genesis 2, by comparison, is much more personal and earthy. Instead of majestic, divine pronouncements, we find handson, personal action at work. Here God is likened to a cultivator or a potter, whose hands shape and bring into being the new creation.

Think for a moment of this wonderful image: The divine gardener – perhaps in overalls and work boots – kneeling in a field of rich, deep topsoil (a soil already teeming with life), forming the first human being from the substance of the fertile land.

This is a powerful statement about our core human identity – one that comes before ethnic or racial identity, before religious or national identity. First and foremost, we are members of God’s creation. Humankind and Earth are one and the same, inseparable, and so too are our destinies inextricably interwoven. We are, all of us, quite literally “from the ground, from the topsoil” just as we all shall return to it.

That’s what the stunning photo of Earthrise made so clear: We’re all fellow citizens of the beautiful blue ball spinning in the midst of the stars. The COVID-19 pandemic that we have endured for the past year has only heightened the truth that we live together in a shared earthly abode.

Wendell Berry, the Kentucky

farmer and poet, puts it well: “The soil is the great connector of lives, the source and destination of all. It is the healer and restorer and resurrector, by which disease passes into health, age into youth, death into life. Without proper care for it, we can have no community, because without proper care for it, we can have no life.” So, fellow Earthlings, how are we to be good, faithful habitants of this marvelous creation?

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This photo, known as “Earthrise,” was taken in 1968 by astronaut William Anders during a lunar orbit.

