

Southern Asia Initiative

Together in Hope



The Tree of Life

A biblical reflection based on Revelations 22:1-2

By Aruna Gnanadason

Revelations 22:1-2

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river, is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the trees are the healing of the nations.

Prayer

Creator God, forgive us for believing that we have the sole right over the earth which you have created in love and wisdom for all – in the past, present and future. Forgive us for believing that you have given us the right to plunder than to safeguard your creation. Forgive our failure to recognize the sacramentality of the earth and all life. Help us to become conscious and celebrate our being a part of the beauty and wonder of your diverse and interdependent creation. Teach us to care and sustain it by being just to one another and towards all that you have created. Amen

Introduction

Even though they are like other living beings with their cycles of birth, growth, decay, and death, there is something distinct about trees. While being sources and sustenance of life for others, trees also teach us something about the purpose and generosity of life. We don't listen to them. Instead, we treat them as commodities and ruthlessly destroy them.

Southern Asia is home to nearly 20% of the world's forests. However, the region is also among the world's major deforestation hotspots. The worst victims of this trend are millions of poor people everywhere, and especially those in Southern Asia who depend on forests and trees, even as they bear the brunt of environmental disasters and displacement.

Commitment to protect the environment is not a mere romantic obsession with the beauty and wonder of creation. It testifies to a deep consciousness of life itself, its interconnectedness, and a moral and spiritual choice to be just and to renounce the culture of abusing and exploiting the earth and its people to satiate one's greed for power, profit and pleasure.

Reflection

Have you ever walked through a forest somewhere near where you live? Or somewhere that you have traveled? Many of us live in concrete urban jungles – forests are not every day experiences – and perhaps that is why when you enter a forest, something awesome happens to you. The forest induces a reverent silence in the midst of the trees that seem to reach into the sky and form steeple-like towers, like those of a cathedral, soaring above your head. Sometimes the sunlight streams through the trees, on drops of dew on the grass below, and on the leaves, sparkling in the sunlight. The soil underfoot is often soft and if you pause for a moment you can see hundreds of insects running around busily, as we would in our daily lives. An occasional wildflower peeps through the grass, smiling perhaps, at your quiet presence.

Yes, you feel as if you have entered a cathedral. You are on holy ground and can find warmth and spiritual strength in the silence, broken only by an occasional twitter of a bird or the gentle sound of a cricket or the guttural croak of a frog or some other living creature. You are indeed in the presence of God the Creator, the great artist who has planned this wondrous earth with all its colors, beauty and life. It is no wonder then, that the Nobel Laureate poet and philosopher from India, Rabindranath Tagore once wrote:

I asked the tree to tell me about God
And it blossomed.....
Silence my soul for these trees are prayers.

But how often do we take the time to enter these natural cathedrals that God has prepared for us? In the midst of our busy lives, do we immerse ourselves in this experience of God's presence with us, of God's immanence in the world reflected in creation? "What is this life if full of care, we have no time to stand and stare? No time to stand beneath the boughs, and stare as long as sheep and cows," wrote the poet W. H. Davies in the early part of the last century. He was referring to our lack of appreciation of the beauty that surrounds us.

Unfortunately, the things of the earth seem to have value only when they can be seen in terms of profit. It can have value only when it can be exploited to fuel human greed. A mountain is beautiful only when it can be exploited for its tourist possibilities, a forest for its pulp, a river for its potential to produce hydroelectricity. In the last 200 years since the start of industrialization, we have used the earth's resources at an unprecedented rate. Nature is now completely "de-sacralized" and the market has become venerated instead. Deforestation, pollution, depletion of fresh water resources, acid rain, and global warming are the new challenges we face. The ideology of industrialization and so-called "development" refuses to acknowledge the "limits of growth," trusting in technical solutions to ecological problems as they arise.

Arundathi Roy, the renowned novelist turned environmental activist writes about the millions of indigenous people and Dalits being driven out of their land by mega-dam projects, among other developments, in India. In her words:

To slow a beast, you break its limbs. To slow a nation, you break its people. You rob them of volition. You demonstrate your absolute command over their destiny. You make it clear that it ultimately falls to you to decide who lives, who dies, who prospers, who doesn't. To exhibit your capability, you show off all you can do, and how easily you can do

it. How easily you could press a button and annihilate the earth. How you can start a war or sue for peace. How you can snatch a river away from one and gift it to another. How you can green a desert or fell a forest and plant one somewhere else. You use caprice to fracture a people's faith in ancient things – earth, forest, water, air.

She is referring to the threats posed on the lives of indigenous people and the poor by policies of governments. The wisdom of indigenous people and other eco-system people who have lived with protective care of the earth thus far is getting submerged. I had the privilege of interacting with an indigenous community (the Gond People) in Orissa, India a few years ago. In my conversations with the women there, I discovered that to them the earth is Mother to be revered, loved, respected. They have a relationship of prudent care with the earth, because they understand just how inextricably their lives are linked with the earth. I do not want to romanticize their lives, because their efforts to honor the earth as they did in the past are being eroded at a rapid pace.

Their land has been taken over by what an Indian environmentalist terms the “omnivore” - industrialists, politicians, businessmen, outsiders - who have stormed on to the indigenous people's lands, displacing them in the thousands. In Orissa, for instance, where once there were hills, forests, and small villages, there now stand sparkling new concrete buildings to produce aluminum for export. Where once there was fresh water from the perennial springs, there now are empty water taps and long queues of women waiting in desperation. Sometimes they even have to buy the water. On the other hand, India's foreign exchange reserves soar over the billion-dollar mark and rate of growth is now claimed to be the second highest in the world (this has been consistently challenged). India is hailed as a success story by the World Bank and IMF and somewhere on the periphery stands a bewildered and broken indigenous woman, with millions of other displaced people behind her, eking out a living in overcrowded new urban squatter settlements, alienated from the land, their lives destroyed. She, too, gets absorbed into the market economy for her survival and that of her family. She quickly learns to exploit both the things of the earth and the Dalits and indigenous people less fortunate even than her.

What do we say, as Christians? For too long we have remained silent and, worse still, have legitimized theological doctrines such as “dominion” and “stewardship.” We have understood these to be the right of humanity to control the resources of the earth. We have believed in a hierarchy of creation – legitimizing unjust power relations between us and the earth and between human beings, too. For too long we have placed God outside somewhere, ironically also in a relationship of dominion over the earth and humanity. We have given up on the relational, interdependent relationship between us and God; between us and the earth; or between us and other human beings. We have failed to recognize the sacramentality of the earth and all life. We have not given to the earth its integrity. We have not recognized our moral responsibility to the earth community, such as the earth and the people of the earth existing as interdependent and integral to the whole. We have failed to emphasize that environmental justice and social justice go hand in hand as an earth ethic.

The Revelations text and yet another text found in the book of the prophet Ezekiel (chapter 46), give alternative and life-giving images. They speak of the promise that the earth and the nations will be healed. The Ezekiel text images the flow of the river from the threshold of the temple. The temple is the place from where life flows out into the world, greening the trees with nourished leaves and fruits, refreshing the waters of the sea, and giving new life to the fish that live in the waters. The leaves of these trees, the writer tells us, will be of medicinal and healing power and will be a source of food.

The Bible promises that the tree of life will yet grow among us from the midst of the ruins that we have caused. God's Grace will transform our lives so that we can transform the violent ways in which we have lived with the earth. And so, we need to discern the forms of action we will take to restore integrity and abundance to the earth. Would we do that? Or stubbornly stay on this destructive path of greed and selfish aggrandization?

Questions for Reflection

1. What specific actions can we think of as individuals and as a community to respond to this mandate of stewardship?
2. What biblical and theological resources can we identify and reflect further to overcome our tendency to objectify and exploit the earth and its people?

About the Author

Dr. Aruna Gnanadason, a member of the Church of South of India, a Global Ministries partner, is a widely known lay theologian, ecumenist, and women's activist. She has served the World Council of Churches, Geneva in various capacities – as Director of the Women's Desk, Director of Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation, and of Programmes. She now lives in Chennai, India.