

Three Layers of Environmental Preaching

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A local church pastor who wants to "preach on the environment" faces many problems. Lack of training can make it hard to address the technical issues. Dealing with such topics can stir up controversy in the church. A broader notion of what "environmental preaching" can encompass, however, gives more options.

I have found it helpful to think in terms of three different layers in which preaching can address eco-justice themes. These layers address very different purposes, and have distinctive styles. In a well-rounded ministry, there will be a mix of these layers.

1. What most of us think of as "preaching on the environment" qualifies as "issue preaching." This places an emphasis on public policy issues, and tries to bring a moral and theological perspective to the debate. Sermons on global warming, toxic waste, urban sprawl and wilderness preservation fit into this category. In issue preaching, the pastor usually has to rely on experts in the policy field to spell out the options; the pastor can then evaluate those options from an ethical perspective. While issue preaching has the capability of getting people involved in the world, it also has a high probability of making someone mad!
2. Another layer of environmental preaching deals with more generalized themes, rather than with public policy issues. Sermons on the integrity of creation, the relationship between humans and nature, and celebrations of nature and life fit into this layer. In dealing with these subjects, the preacher as Biblical scholar and theologian is the expert. Preaching on this level undergirds and supports issue preaching, and has a lower probability of seriously offending members of the congregation.
3. On an even deeper layer, there is important preaching where the direct focus is not on "nature" or "the environment," but which is essential for sustaining the environmental struggle in the church. This preaching addresses the profound pastoral issues that trouble, and can even paralyze, those who are in touch with the earth's distress. The church needs to speak to sin, guilt, repentance, forgiveness and grace as we individually and collectively participate in the destruction of the earth. New words need to be spoken about both anger and hope in the face of the enormous powers that are shaping our world. In the face of the rapid extinction of species, the loss of habitat and wild lands, and profound changes to the global environment, pastoral sermons must speak to grief and loss in ways that bring us to active resistance, not to quiet acceptance. Here, again, the pastor is an expert on the topics which need to be addressed. The church can be strengthened, rather than divided, by such a message.

The faithful and pastoral message speaks not only to those who will work on environmental issues; it applies to a broad range of personal and social issues. For example, a sermon dealing with profound grief which motivates change can be illustrated by a variety of issues: the founding of Mothers Against Drunk Driving as a response to teenage traffic deaths; the international effort to ban land mines which has been motivated by the loss of civilian lives. In all of these, grief in the face of enormous and ongoing losses has stimulated effective actions for change.

There is a time and a place for preaching from each of these layers. Issue preaching is the most visible way to preach on the topic of the environment. But preaching from the other two layers may be far more important in providing a grounding in promise and hope that allows Christians to keep working for the sake of God's creation.

When the deeper layers are used frequently in preaching, the congregation develops an emotional and theological base where direct issue preaching makes sense. A "frame" is established in which preaching on specific issues is well grounded, and where tackling such issues is welcomed and expected.

This article was originally written, in the late 1990s, for a newsletter of the Colorado Council of Churches. It is available on-line at <https://www.RevSawtell.org/3Layers.pdf> – or go to www.RevSawtell.org, and look at the list for Congregations Alive! resources.