

I was fascinated by the Jan. 9th story in the Washington Post of Maine's hunting guide L.S. Quackenbush, who lived in a cabin in remote Oxbow, Maine. Back in the 1940s & 1950s Quackenbush rented cabins to hunters, cut, stacked and split wood and used his daily walks to keep detailed notes on the spring arrivals of songbirds and the first appearances of flowers and tree leaves. About a decade ago, College of the Atlantic lecturer Scott Swann was sorting through papers left by the late ornithologist Bill Drury. Then, "Hidden in the eaves of the attic, I came across these three boxes of folders of Quackenbush"... more than 5,000 pages worth of journals meticulously documenting the changing seasons in Maine.

Swann had heard that Abe Miller-Rushing, the science director for Acadia National Park, was looking for historical ecological information, so he passed the boxes along. Miller-Rushing did the typical professorial thing of passing along the grunt work to a college student. University of Maine graduate student Adam Derkacz was given the task to digitize the Quackenbush papers. Meanwhile, Caitlin McDonough MacKenzie, at the time a PhD candidate at Boston University, was spending the summer at Acadia, studying an 1894 account of flora on Mt Desert Island. She and Derkacz were running partners and compared their work. Soon, Science Director Miller-Rushing encouraged MacKenzie to look at the Quackenbush journals herself – he and MacKenzie's Boston University lead professor had jointly published a 2008 paper based on Thoreau's observations of the flora around Walden Pond in the 1850s. By the 21st c., first flowering around Concord MA was happening a week earlier than during Thoreau's time.

Caitlin McDonough MacKenzie, now at the University of Maine, recently published a paper comparing Quackenbush's journals to recent observations. Migratory bird arrivals are lagging behind the earlier leaf-out and flowering induced by a warming climate. Here in Maine, the average date of leaf-out advances 2.3 days for each degree Celsius increase in April temperature, which is not as exaggerated a difference as southern New England, where leaf-out advances 6.1 days per degree Celsius. In both cases, northern and southern New England, flora appears to be more directly responsive to warming climate, while migratory bird schedules are not adapting as quickly. What does that mean for birds and their babies?

Climate Change is usually approached from the point of view of human interests – what economic impact is there from more frequent and stronger hurricanes, what happens to cities and towns built beside the ocean when sea level keeps rising, what happens to farmers and their crops when patterns of rainfall change from what they have historically been. But who

speaks for the birds? And, in the words of the Lorax, who speaks for the trees? According to the very first command given by God the Creator to humankind, we are supposed to serve and protect creation. We are the ones who should be speaking, not just on our own behalf, but for the birds and for the trees.

Psalm 104 is nicknamed the "Ecological Psalm" because it goes through the natural world, listing all kinds of species and ecological niches that God the Creator is said to have set in place. The streams gushing forth in the valleys give drink to every wild animal; vegetation grows for both cattle and people to use. Birds have their habitation in the trees, the high mountains may not be suitable for human houses, but in them the mountain goats have a home. God the Creator provides a home for all kinds of creatures, and sees that they have the food and water they need – when lions roar for their prey they are seeking food from God.

The ancient Hebrews and Jews had a much closer relationship to the natural world than Western Christians today. This is not just because of the change from agrarian rural to an urban environment, but because of our worldview and theology. In the Hebrew scriptures, there is not a sharp division between the natural world and the human one. In fact, the natural world reflects the human condition... When God's people are in right relationship, there are streams flowing in the desert; when God's people are led astray by sin, the landscape also suffers, with lack of rainfall, producing thorns instead of fruit, etc. What happened in Western Christianity in the first few centuries was what I think of as a hostile takeover of Neo-Platonic philosophy, which divides heaven from earth, soul from body, spirit from matter. Even before the Western world got to the industrial age and started having a mechanistic view of the world, including of nature, nature had already been objectified and thought lower than humankind, only valued for its usefulness.

But the Jewish scriptures clearly show the intimate connections between God the Creator and the whole Creation. In the book of Job, when Job loses everything precious to him, and his earnest friends insist that he must have sinned and somehow deserved to have such bad things happen, at the end of the book Job finally is answered by God out of the whirlwind, "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" Job chapters 38-39 are a veritable theophany of God's intimacy with all kinds of landscapes and all kinds of creatures. God is described as bringing rain even to the desert, the land where no one lives, empty of human life but still held in God's notice.

Deeply embedded in the Hebrew understanding of worship is that God is worshipped not just by people, but by all creation. Psalm 148 has the sun,

moon and stars, the oceans and waters, the mountains and hills, animals and birds all joining people from every social class in praising God. Chronicles and several psalms reference that the heavens are glad and the earth rejoices that the Lord God reigns. Psalms 96 & 98 describe singing trees and clapping flood waters, the whole earth praising the Lord.

And people claimed by the Lord had a heavy responsibility for the well-being of the rest of God's Creation. The very first commitment given by God to the newly minted earthling formed from the dust of the earth, the command given before there was a split into gender, so it applies to all humankind, was given in the Garden as told in Gen. 2:15. God says to the *adam* who has been formed out of the *adamah* and breathed into life, you are to *avadah* and to *shamarah* the beautiful earth, the Garden of Eden. By the time we got biased, patriarchal translators in King James era and succeeding generations, the faithful person studying scripture reads to "till the earth and keep it." That's from an assumption that instead of just wandering tribes, the Hebrew tribes were supposed to settle down and farm the land. That's the kind of colonial thinking imposed by white settlers on the Native Americans on this continent – if you're just wandering around, living off the land, that doesn't really count. You are supposed to work the land, to farm it, to make it produce for human consumption. The white male is at the top of the hierarchical chain of being, and everything else is subservient. Well, that is outdated thinking that was never right to begin with!

"Till and keep" the land? !!! (buzzer) Wrong answer, you flunk basic Hebrew. The Hebrew word *avadah* used in Gen. 2:15 is a verb form that means to serve. In noun form it indicates a servant, or sometimes a slave. The Hebrew sentence doesn't say that the land is supposed to work for the 1st human, but the first human is supposed to serve the garden. And *shamarah* doesn't mean keep, like preserve. In noun form it means a guardian, a protector. To *shamarah* the Garden means to be its guardian, to protect it from enemies, from danger, from loss. Therefore, the original life purpose and work of humankind is to serve and to protect God's natural creation. Let me repeat, the original life purpose and work of humankind is to serve and to protect God's natural creation.

The biblical viewpoint for both Jews and Christians does not justify ripping resources out of the earth and despoiling it. Biblical theology does not endorse commercial profit over the well-being of the planet or it's poorest people. Unfortunately, besides this early contamination of Neo-Platonic philosophy in the first few centuries of Christian theology, the 2nd thing that

impacted the world view of American Christianity, was an invented apocalyptic end times scenario that came into being in the mid-1800s.

This “end of the world is coming soon!” viewpoint claims there are 7 epochs or dispensations, and that we are now in the last one, and that the best people get raptured out of trouble while the rest of the people and planet endure tremendous suffering before their final destruction. This **#!%** (I can’t even find a word bad enough to describe it) it got incorporated into the Scofield Reference Bible of 1909, complete with charts and indexes showing how the dispensations or ages play out. That Bible got used by conservative Christians in America, and eventually Southern Baptists. All the apocalyptic authors like Hal Lindsey, who made millions with his “Late, Great Planet Earth” book and its multiple revisions, those guys all buy into that **#!%** recorded in the Scofield Bible... and now enshrined in other study Bibles and reference works in fundamentalist circles. That worldview, that we’re in the End Times, now dominates evangelical, conservative American Christianity. James Watts, a former Secretary of the Interior in the early 1980s, exemplified that kind of thinking – not caring about the destruction of the environment because the whole thing was going away anyhow, and God would provide a literal new heaven and earth, so not to worry.

Wrong! Good Christians should indeed worry about environmental degradation and Climate Change. Good Christians should realize that their care for God’s creation is a form of worship of God the Creator, and that lack of caring for creation is an insult to God the Creator. One of the cartoons I posted on Facebook last fall had an Evangelical saying to God, “We don’t need to do anything to fix Climate Change. You will save us.” God replies, “I gave you scientists, dummy.”

The science of Climate Change has been around a long time. It infuriates me to have reporters ask the question of politicians, “Do you believe in Climate Change?” It’s a scientific fact, not a belief system. Reporters should ask, “Do you understand Climate Change?” I was a voting delegate at the 1990 Presbyterian national meeting that adopted the denominational policy on the environment, and Climate Change was addressed back then, 30 years ago. We have learned that Exxon knew about the scientific consensus on Climate Change starting in 1977, and 40 years ago warned its managers of “potentially catastrophic events.” But to the public, and to investors, Exxon and the rest of Big Oil lied and dissembled. Instead of taking action or any responsibility, the fossil fuel industry poured millions into dis-information campaigns so they wouldn’t have to begin to address the real issue of Climate Change. International corporations are perfectly happy to have

ordinary citizens feel guilty for not re-cycling more, for not walking or riding bicycles more, for not doing our share. But the truth is, that only about 100 companies around the world create 71% of pollution. Yeah, we can and should each do our part, but nearly $\frac{3}{4}$ of the problem goes back to less than 100 companies around the planet.

Meanwhile damages precipitated by Climate Change have worsened, storms have intensified, and droughts and heatwaves have become more frequent and severe, forests have been damaged and wildfires have burned through the country. There are signs all over the Natural World that we are on the brink of catastrophe. Climate Change is not something we have the time to take slow, measured steps to address anymore. In fact, it's gone beyond Crisis. We are now at Climate Emergency. On Feb. 6th, the recorded temperature in Antarctica, the planet's coldest continent, reached a record 65° F., but just 3 days later, on Feb. 9th, another research station recorded nearly 70°. Is it already too late to finally pay attention to all the **signs** that Nature has been giving us?

The 16th chapter of Matthew begins with a short little confrontation that Jesus had with the Pharisees and Sadducees. Now, the Scriptures are multi-layered and multi-valent. That's one reason why you can read the Bible over the years and decades, and have something about what you thought was a familiar passage leap out at you. In this short story, Jesus talks about learning to read signs in the sky, foretelling the weather. We of course read scripture from our own perspective, with our own set of blinders on. But let's look at this story. This incident takes place when Jesus has been teaching and healing around the Sea of Galilee for a couple years, before he heads south down to Jerusalem and Judea. Jesus has called fishermen as his first formal disciples. Jesus has been around folks who live by the Sea, who make their living from the water.

We live here on Mt. Desert Island, where generations have gone out in boats to bring back fish and lobsters and other sea creatures. They haven't just heard a saying about "Red sky at night, sailors delight, red sky at morning, sailors take warning," they use that wisdom without thinking about it. Anyone who makes a living on the sea really knows how to read the sky, and see what weather is coming in. But the tourists who come here? Let me explain to you that the Pharisees were the religious legalists of Jesus' time. Think of them as, say, **lawyers**. The Sadducees were the rich guys who ran the Temple and other businesses. So think of them as say, **bankers and businessmen**.

So, let's picture Jesus here at Bass Harbor. It's summer and there's a bunch of lawyers, bankers and businessmen from out of town, here questioning Jesus about signs. And all around Jesus are the guys who own boats and work on them, who know everything there is to know about the **water and the wind and the weather**. And Jesus says, *"When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.' ³ And in the morning, 'It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky"* but here's the kick. The bankers and businessmen and lawyers **don't** know how to interpret the appearance of the sky. The listening fishermen are covering their faces and snorting into their hands, because they know that the legalistic Pharisees and the businessmen Sadducees don't have a clue about reading signs in the sky. But they know that they have this knowledge, the common, everyday folk of the earth, who are still very much connected to God's creation. And Jesus knows that the locals know exactly how to read nature. Look around you. Nature is telling you. There are signs all around, you just have to pay attention. You have to know what it is you're seeing.

And then Jesus says to the Pharisees and Sadducees, that the only sign he will give is the sign of Jonah. And of course, looking back on that proclamation, the early Christians could see that Jonah's 3 days in the belly of the whale was analogous to Jesus' 3 days in the tomb before his resurrection. But, remember, scripture has multiple layers and multiple meanings. When Jesus is talking with the lawyers and bankers by the Sea of Galilee next to all those fishermen, the story had to have some punch to it to be remembered for years to come.

What is the story of Jonah about? The prophet is told to go to Nineveh, Jonah objects and thinks his own rational ideas make more sense than listening to God, so he runs away on a sailing ship. But a storm comes up, and the sailors are afraid their ship will go down. They try to figure out how to appease the gods causing the storm, and Jonah decides to be pre-emptive and volunteer to be thrown overboard before they do it for him. But a large fish, colloquially a whale, swallows Jonah up for 3 days, before spitting him out. This story is just as real as Goldilocks and the 3 Bears. And it also teaches lessons. Remember how connected the Lord God was to his creation? How God's power and might are expressed in the natural world? When the massive storm arises out of nowhere, and a big fish swallows up Jonah as soon as he is tossed overboard, that's like getting whomped on the back of the head. God is saying to Jonah "Don't be an idiot!" through the agency of the natural world. The huge storm and the huge fish are huge signs from God, using Creation.

Jesus is joking that the Pharisees and Sadducees, the lawyers and bankers, know how to read the night or morning sky, and he says plainly they don't know how to read the signs of the times either. The only sign he gives is the sign of Jonah – God sending huge signs through the world of nature, God's natural creation, saying, "don't be an idiot!" Follow my directions!

And what directions does God give us, what does God say we're supposed to do for the purpose of our lives? It's way back in Genesis 2:15. Humanity was created to serve and protect the Garden, the rest of Creation. How many more signs do we need? Let's do what we're told and serve and protect God's Creation. Let us do everything we can to save the planet from Climate Change.