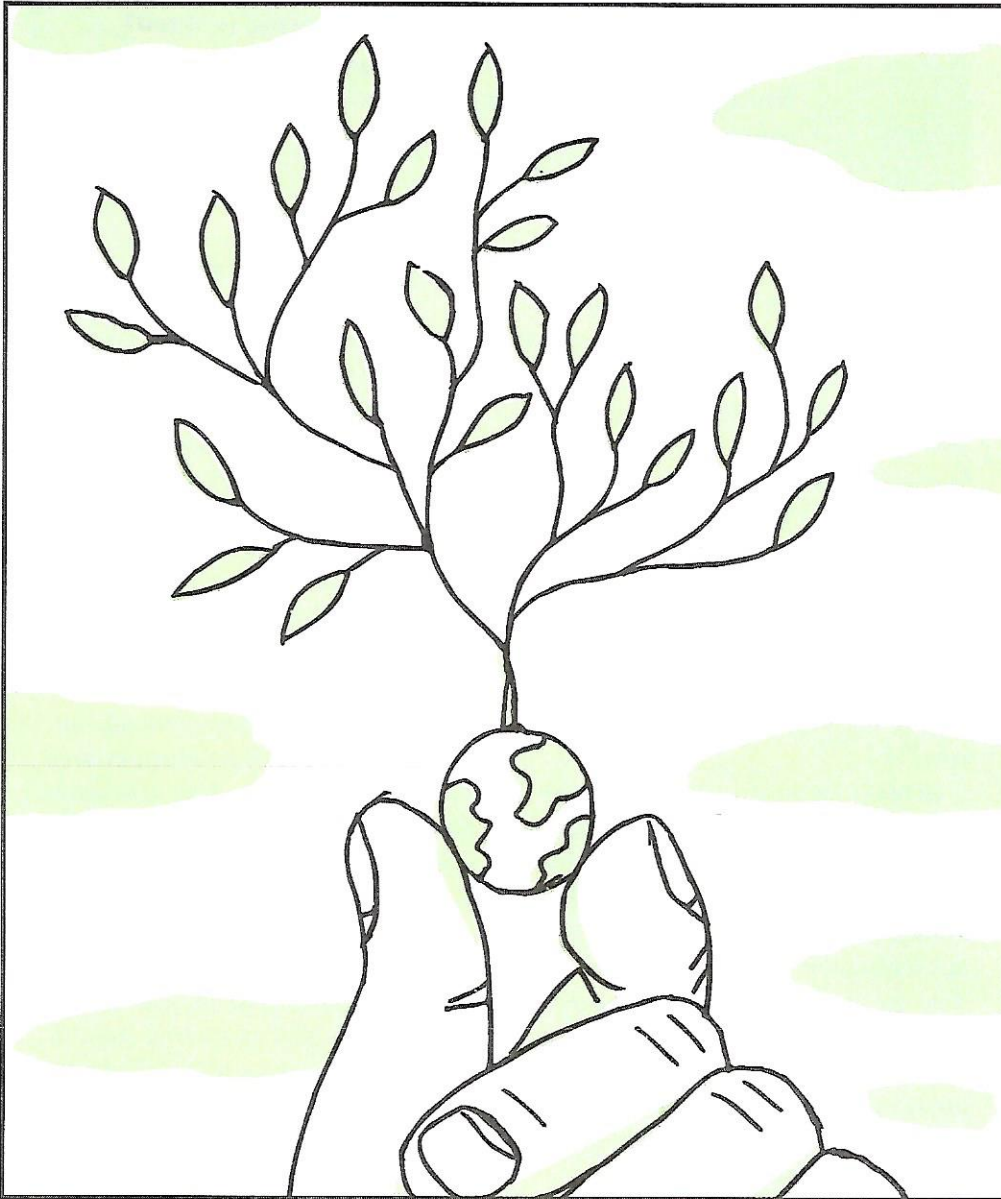


Scripture **from** Scratch

A popular guide to understanding the Bible



Illustrations by Carolina Arentsen

What an age in which to live! Although war and disaster, tragedy and sorrow continue to plague the planet, we may be living in one of history's most exhilarating eras. Godly people are nothing short of mesmerized as they learn more and more about the amazing cosmic dance that is the universe.

In recent years, satellites, space probes, and the Hubble Telescope in particular have expanded our vision to a degree no one could have envisioned a decade or two ago. What God has made and continues to make unfolds before our astonished eyes, and these stories are vastly different from those in the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis. Should this make us nervous and uneasy? Not in the slightest. Our ancestors in the faith spoke from a

Passion for God, Passion for the Earth

Elizabeth A. Johnson, C.S.J.

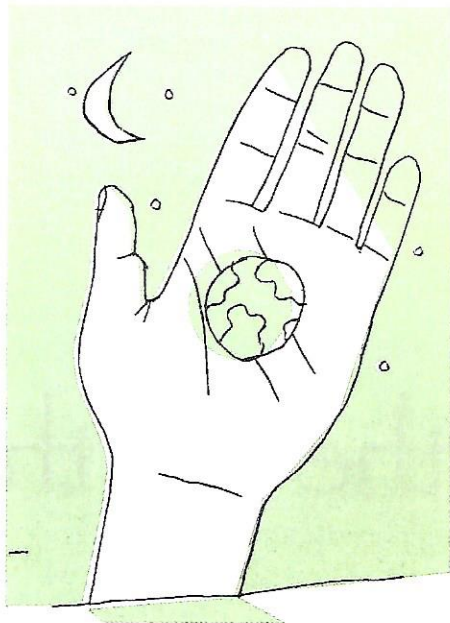
worldview the polar opposite of our own. Their notion of earth as a flat plate, supported by pillars, and capped by an overarching dome or firmament seems quaint and fanciful to us, and so it is. God, the one constant, has not changed, but our frame of reference has, expanding our grasp of what has been there all along. With greater comprehension comes the need to process new ramifications and responsibilities. This old earth, its solar system and galaxy, and the far reaches of space are suddenly seen in utterly new lights, both literally and metaphorically.

A New Awareness of Planet Earth

The image of our planet Earth from space, a blue marble swirling with white clouds, has become familiar to this generation. Astronauts whose own eyes have seen this view speak of its power to change their deepest feelings and attitudes toward the world.

Saudi Arabian astronaut Sultan bin Salman al-Saud, part of an international crew, recollected, "The first day we all pointed to our own countries. The third day we were pointing to our continents. By the fifth day, we were all aware of only one Earth."

Another astronaut, American Rusty Schweigert, who walked on the moon,



Praying With Scripture

■ Humanity in its role as steward of creation has so often abused the privilege. Only recently do we seem to be awakening to our responsibilities as primary caretakers and to our interconnectedness with everything God has made. As you look around your own corner of creation, what concerns spring to mind? How can those concerns be on your lips in prayer? What part can you play in bringing those prayers to fruition?

had this to say, "From the moon, earth is so small and so fragile and such a precious little spot in the universe that you can block it out with your thumb. Then you realize that on that spot, that beautiful warm blue and white circle, is everything that means anything to you...all of nature and history, music, poetry and art, birth and love and death, tears, joy, prayer, dancing...all of it right there in that little spot that you can cover with your thumb. And then you are changed forever. Your relationship to the world is no longer what it was."

In truth, these are religious experiences. On the brink of the third millennium, a new awareness of planet Earth as one community of life is growing among peoples everywhere. But this appreciation is marked by strong paradox: the more we discern how precious all life on Earth is, the more we also realize alarmingly how human actions are ravaging and exhausting the natural world. The spiritual/ethical question of our right relation with Earth emerges as a new, vitally important issue, one that encompasses all others, including relationship with God and peaceful justice among humans.

Like the Psalmist, we need to realize that God has made all creation glorious: "When I see your heavens, the work of your fingers / the moon and stars that you set in place— / What are humans that you are mindful of them, / mere mortals that you care for them?" (Ps 8:4-5).

One With the Earth

The new creation story, which is the tale told by contemporary science of how the world came into being, teaches us that the world is unimaginably old, large, dynamic, and organic. When filtered through the eyes of faith, it reveals a Creator Spirit initiating, upholding, moving, vivifying, and playing in the world that grows increasingly bright and complex, truly the Giver of Life.

Roughly five billion years ago an aging star died in a great supernova explosion that spewed its debris into the cosmos. Some of this cloud of dust and gas re-ignited to become our sun, a second-generation star. Some of it coalesced in chunks too small to catch fire, forming the planets of our solar system, including Earth. Thomas Berry calls this ancient, exploding star our Mother Star, our sacrificial Christ Star, because in its death it gave itself up so that we might live.

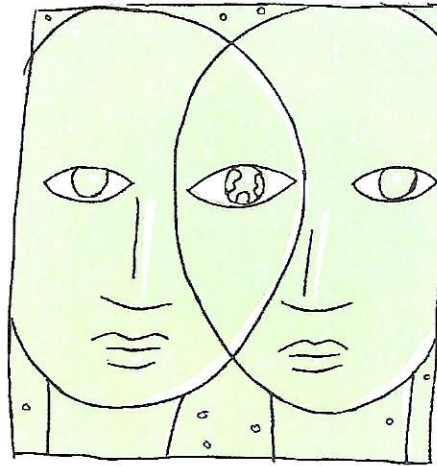
Out of the Big Bang came the stars, out of the stardust the Earth. Then, out of the molecules of the Earth emerged single-celled living creatures, setting off a new kind of explosion, life. From the evolutionary life and death of these creatures flowed an advancing tide of life, fragile but unstoppable; single-celled plankton, jellyfish, creatures that live in shells, amphibians, insects, flowers, birds, reptiles, mammals, among whom emerged human beings with a consciousness and freedom that

concentrate the self-transcendence of matter itself.

If the inelegantly named Big Bang exploded on January 1, then our sun and planets came into existence September 10, and human beings came on the scene on December 31 at ten minutes to midnight. Bacteria, pine trees, blueberries, horses, the great gray whales...we are all genetic relatives in the great community of life. And we are all part of the larger universe. Everything is connected with everything else; nothing conceivable is isolated.

Telling the story of creation this way leads to three insights. First, we realize that human beings are not pilgrims or strangers on this Earth, merely passing through; rather we belong here. Second, while the Earth does have instrumental value for human use, we realize that it is more than just a stage or backdrop for the human drama of redemption; rather, it is a marvelous creation in its own right, loved by God for itself, saved by Christ, destined for eternal life in the new creation. It has its own intrinsic value. Third, since amid the whole web of life human beings are the ones consciously aware of the Holy One who created everything, we have a unique distinction and responsibility. In Abraham Heschel's words, human beings are the cantors of the universe.

In our day the human race is inflicting deadly damage on the life systems that keep this planet a habitat for life. The twin engines of destruction are over-consumption and overpopulation. In 1950 the world numbered two billion people; now, at the turn of the mil-



lennium it numbers six billion; and by the year 2030 there will be ten billion persons on the planet. Think of it this way: the Earth's population will have multiplied five times during the lifetime of someone born in 1950.

To translate these statistics into a vivid image: another Mexico City is added every sixty days; another Brazil joins the planet every year. Our species now uses up resources faster than Earth's power to replenish itself. By a conservative estimate, in the last quarter of the 20th century, 20 percent of all living species have gone extinct. We are killing birth itself, wiping out the future of our fellow creatures who took millions of years to evolve. We live in a time of a great dying off.

But the odd thing is that, with some notable exceptions, many religious people and the church as a whole are curiously silent about the Earth. We are like the disciples asleep in the garden of Gethsemane while Earth undergoes its passion and death.

Responses in the Spirit

In spiritual terms, what this time calls for is nothing less than a conversion of our minds and hearts to the good of the Earth. Catholic Christians need to unlearn the dualism that led us to pit the spirit against matter and caused us to pursue paths of holiness marked "flee the world." We need to learn to relate anew to the natural world not as dominators, not even as stewards (which does not go far enough) but as real kin in the one creation of God. How we pray and live responsibly in this community will determine whether life on this planet has a glorious or miserable future. The very glory of God is at stake.

The sacramental response gazes contemplatively on the world with the eyes of love rather than with an arrogant, utilitarian stare, and sees there the handiwork of God. Moreover, in the incarnation God chose to unite with the material of Earth in a profoundly personal way. The resurrection of the crucified Jesus transforms a piece of this Earth, real to the core, into glory in God's eternal presence. "Charged with the glory of God," as poet Gerard Manley Hopkins penned, the world with its beauties and terrors makes present the loving power of the Creator whose image it reflects.

The ascetic response calls for intellectual humility in our assessment of the human place in the universe and practical discipline in our use of natural resources. An ecological asceticism works to restore right relations between humankind and otherkind distorted by hubris and greed. Rather than the medieval construct of the hierarchy of being and honor ascending from the pebble to the peach to the poodle to the person, all under the sway of the monarchical God at the apex, asceticism reconfigures that pyramid into a circle of life with human beings thoroughly interwoven with all other creatures, special in virtue of being conscious and free but utterly interdependent on others for their life.

The prophetic response moves us to



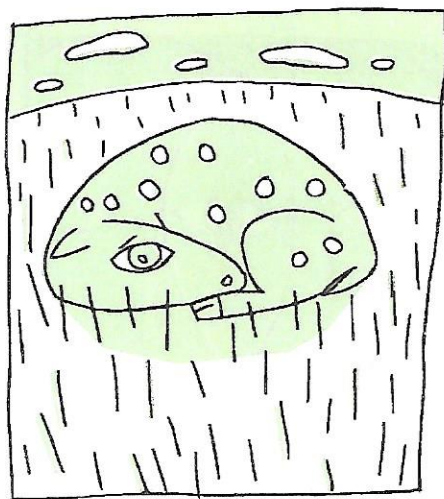
Living the Scriptures

- **What concrete measures are you able to take right now to bring yourself into right relationship with the Earth? How can you personally address one of the most crucial spiritual and ethical issues the world faces in the 21st century?**

action on behalf of justice for the Earth. One stringent criterion must now measure the morality of our actions: whether or not these contribute to a sustainable Earth community. Undergirding this ethic is a startling idea: we need to extend vigorous moral consideration to the nonhuman community of Earth. We need to respect life and resist the culture of death not only among humankind but also among other living creatures. In such ethical reflection, the great commandment to love your neighbor as yourself is extended to include all members of the community. We all share the status of creature; we are all kin in the evolving community of life now under siege; our vision of justice must be one of cosmic justice. The aim is to establish and protect healthy ecosystems where all living creatures can flourish.

Conclusion

A flourishing humanity on a thriving Earth in an evolving universe, all together filled with the glory of God; such is the theological vision and praxis we are being called to in this critical age of Earth's distress. We need to appreciate all over again that Earth is a sacrament vivified by the living Spirit of God. We need to realize that the way we are destroying



it is tantamount to a sacrilege. And we need to act as members of the Earth community called to be partners with God in the ongoing creation rather than destruction of the world.

This moment of crisis calls for a spirituality and ethics that will empower us to live in the web of life as sustainers rather than destroyers of the world. Ignoring this view keeps the church and its members locked into fatal irrelevance while the great drama is being played out in the actual wider world. But being converted to the Earth sets us who are the church and our ministries off on a great spiritual, intellectual, and moral adventure. Instead of living as thoughtless or greedy exploiters, we, by conversion to the Earth, are empowered to rediscover

our kinship and live as sisters and brothers, friends and lovers, mothers and fathers, priests and prophets, co-creators and children of the Earth as God's good creation gives us life.

This is our generation's great religious adventure which is absolutely a matter of life or death. No more monumental challenge faces those who are led by the Spirit of God at the start of the third millennium. ■

Elizabeth A. Johnson, CSJ, is Distinguished Professor of Theology at Fordham University. One of American Catholicism's most highly regarded theologians, Johnson teaches and lectures on a variety of theological issues. Her prolific writings include an issue of Scripture from Scratch, "Trinity: To Let the Symbol Sing Again." This article is a condensed version of an essay that originally appeared in Spiritual Questions for the Twenty-First Century (Orbis Books, 2001).

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Talking About Scripture

- How do you interpret the sacramental, ascetic and prophetic responses to the earth's problems? Why is right relationship with the Earth such a pressing issue for godly people?
- If worldview is such a determinant in establishing that relationship, how might that worldview be defined today? Does it matter whether we see ourselves as belonging to the Earth or just passing through?



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