



Caring for the Earth: THE BIBLE TELLS ME SO

March 20, 2019

FIRST THINGS FIRST

The first ingredient in tending the soil is ... not compost or fertilizer or seeds, but gratitude.

- **Gratitude (n):** the quality of being thankful; readiness to show appreciation for and to return kindness; a practice or journey rather than an end product
- **Gratitude is** 1) an affirmation of goodness - there are good things in the world, gifts and benefits we've received; and 2) a recognition that the sources of this goodness are outside of ourselves: other people, God, creation

SOIL, LITERALLY

- **Soil** is the diverse but integrated community of living and inanimate things that make up the ground beneath our feet: microorganisms, decaying plants, animals, animal waste, carbon, water, rocks, and minerals.
- **Dirt** is what you get under your fingernails – it's a group of (once soil) runaways or kidnapped individuals that can't easily be associated with where they were born and grew up. In a sense, they're particles that have been rendered anonymous.
- **Carbon farming** is an approach to farming or gardening that prioritizes the preservation of carbon in the soil; often uses no-till methods, crop diversity or rotation, and cover cropping.
- **Erosion** is the process by which earthen material is worn away, usually by wind or water. Erosion is a natural process that can be sped up or altered by humans.

Land Use Rabbit hole!

Origin of crops: <https://blog.ciat.cgiar.org/origin-of-crops/>

United States land use: <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2018-us-land-use/>

SOIL, METAPHORICALLY

Ecosystem – living community of interacting organisms

From <https://qz.com/1570179/how-to-make-friends-build-a-community-and-create-the-life-you-want/>

“This was community. And what I would come to learn, slowly, is that community is about a series of small choices and everyday actions: how to spend a Saturday, what to do when a neighbor falls ill, how to make time when there is none. Knowing others and being known; investing in somewhere instead of trying to be everywhere. Communities are built, like Legos, one brick at a time. There's no hack.”

What is the makeup of your soil or ecosystem? Who/what represents your minerals, water, organic matter, gases, and microorganisms? Who/what holds you together?

SOIL, SCRIPTURALLY

From the accounts of creation in Genesis to Revelation's tree of life, the Bible is filled with references and reliance on the natural world. Add in human relations and there's almost no verse without it.

Creation stories, the garden, and the serpent; Flood, famine, springs as gathering places, promised land, inheritances, holy ground, sacrifices, and stews; Sheep! Flaming bushes, plagues, forty years (days) in the wilderness, laws (and laws) about land use; Throwing stones, rams horns, lions, fire, Ruth working the fields, Job, the Psalms, and Isaiah; Bread and wine; Swine, gold, frankincense, and myrrh, seeds, and other parables; the food someone grew and prepared and the disciples and early church congregants ate every time they came together; Horses and the tree of life.

How do we know how to interpret scripture? Didn't Christians for centuries argue that "this world is not my home?"

- Scripture, tradition, reason
- Exegesis – who, what, when, where, how; context & culture, power & privilege, decentering (taking ourselves out of the story) & reapplication
- Faith & "provisional tries"

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Ellen Davis writes:

"The fertile earth is the best assurance of God's generosity toward humankind. At the same time its fruitful yet fragile beauty constitutes an ongoing call to responsibility and, for many of us, repentance and change of life."

Read the chapter provided from Davis' book to use as a starting point for your own reflection.

FINAL REFLECTION

Mary Oliver writes: "Instructions for living a life. Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it."

How might you pay better or different attention to the soil or the land in your daily life?

What astonishes you about soil, literal, scriptural, or metaphorical? Do you feel nudged or called toward *metanoia* in your relationship with the land? If so, how? If not, what is the source of your conviction?

Who can you tell?

RESOURCES

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The Green Bible. New Revised Standard Edition. Harper One, 2008.

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Wirzba, Norman. *Food & Faith: A Theology of Eating*. Cambridge, 2011.

other. Conversely, reverence for the earth and reverence for God cannot be separated. The fertile earth is the best assurance of God's generosity toward humankind. At the same time its fruitful yet fragile beauty constitutes an ongoing call to responsibility and, for many of us, repentance and change of life.

“GOOD-FAITH SPRINGS UP FROM THE EARTH”

Learning Ecology From the Bible

AT FIRST BLUSH, the concept of “biblical ecology” seems to be an oxymoron—like “jumbo shrimp.” Ecology as a specialized academic subject, a “science,” is barely a couple of generations old, and the ecological crisis we now face is largely a by-product of technological changes that have taken place in the last two hundred years. The Bible comes from a primarily agrarian society that would have been puzzled by our academic-specializations and compartmentalizations. Nonetheless, I think it is no exaggeration to say that the Bible can teach us or (better, perhaps) help us to understand all the fundamentals of ecology. The Bible can enable us to grasp the depth dimensions of the ecological crisis because the ecological crisis is essentially not a technological crisis, but a theological one. It is a massive disordering in our relationship with God, the Creator of heaven and earth.

Ecology, then, is a distinctly theological subject, even a distinctly Old Testament subject. The word ecology literally means “the study of relationships,” and it is a striking fact

that the Old Testament is pervasively interested in the relationships that obtain between humanity and the non-human creation—most especially, our relationship with the fertile soil. As we shall see, the health (or the dis-ease) of that relationship is viewed as a primary index of the health of the relationship between humanity and God. Therefore, one of the surprises in store for contemporary readers of the Bible is the depth of insight into our present situation that the Old Testament consistently offers.

I read the Old Testament in order to grasp the depth dimension, that is, the genuinely theological dimension of the ecological crisis, and to look for guidance in moving beyond it. This is not to say that the Old Testament is an early ecological tract. Out of necessity, the ancient Israelites were indeed what we would call “ecologically sensitive”: the highlands and deserts of Israel constituted one of the most fragile of the habitable zones on the planet, and the most essential resources of soil and water stood always in danger of depletion. But I do not wish to collapse the historical distance between ancient Israel’s situation and our own experience of widespread degradation of the planet as a result of advanced technologies and modern population growth. The biblical writers neither knew firsthand our planet’s great distress, nor did they mystically foresee it.

Yet even if the Bible is not in this sense “prophetic” about the modern situation, that word may still suggest how it provides guidance for us who are in acute crisis. For what all true prophets do is help us to see our situation as it really is. They let us catch a glimpse of our hearts and our actions as God must view them—and, if we are wise, we will render our own judgment on them. In various ways, all the biblical prophets call us to “righteousness” (Hebrew *tsedek*, *tsedaqah*) in relationships with God and neighbor. Righteousness is not a static condition, attainable by following a fixed set of

prescriptions. Rather, it is a quality of wholeness in all our relationships. Of course, we never achieve such integrity once and for all; at best, we are always “pursuing” righteousness, as the prophetic preacher of Deuteronomy (16:20) puts it.

In our present situation, the Bible’s prophetic word to us may be that the most pivotal of all our neighborly relations is one we hardly consider at all, namely our relationship with the fertile soil. The disorienting and reorienting message of the Bible is, simply stated: *Righteousness means living in humble, care-full, and godly relationship with the soil on which the life of every one of us wholly depends.* This view of righteousness is considerably different from—and probably more than—what modern churchgoers (urbanites and suburbanites as most of us are) think we have signed on for. Hearing and accepting it necessitates a hard look at the biblical text from a new perspective. Finally, it necessitates what the New Testament writers call *metanoia*, literally “a change of mind,” the radical shift of mindset that we call “repentance.”

A first step toward ecological repentance is the recognition that the Bible does not confine the operation of righteousness to the human sphere, as we generally do. When the biblical poets open up their imaginations to envision righteousness in full bloom, this is the kind of thing they see:

Ahhh, [God’s] saving-grace is close to those who
fear him,

so that glory may dwell on our earth.

Covenant-loyalty and good-faith meet one another,
righteousness and wellbeing [*shalom*] kiss.

Good-faith springs up from the earth,
and righteousness peers out of the heavens.

Yes, YHWH will give what is good,

and our earth will give its full-yield.

Righteousness will go before him

and make a path for his steps. (Psalm 85:10-14)

Here the psalmist casts a net so wide that we can scarcely comprehend how she holds these ideas together. What possible connection could there be between human fear of God and the earth giving a good crop? Is "good-faith springs up from the earth" anything more than a metaphor that once strayed across a poet's mind and somehow got immortalized as scripture? In order to begin to answer those questions, we need to go back to the vision of what we might call "original righteousness," the picture of the first human beings at the moment when God formed them and gave them their own special place in the web of life.

A Healthy Materiality

As is well known, modern biblical scholarship has identified two originally separate creation accounts that have been fused in the first two chapters of Genesis. They apparently come from two writers, working perhaps several centuries apart, who differ considerably in their interests and literary styles. Of particular interest to us are the distinct ways each of them characterizes the newly created human being. For the writer of the first chapter, known as "the Priestly Source," the salient fact, repeated three times, is that humanity—both male and female—is created "in the image of God" (Genesis 1:26, 27). Their exalted vocation is to "exercise dominion" over the other creatures and even to "conquer the earth (or: land; Hebrew *'eret*)"—the identical charge given to the Israelites poised at the edge of the Promised Land. In both cases, human beings are given the weighty honor and responsibility of representing God's benevolent dominion in the world, of standing up for God's interests in the face of every threat. They are to stand for God even against the threat of their own short-sighted self-interest. (The long story of the Bible will demonstrate that the unenlightened self-

interest of those whom God has chosen for special responsibility is by far the greatest challenge to God's sovereignty.)

The second writer, known as "the Yahwist,"¹ sees a very different derivation: "And YHWH God formed the human being [*'adam*], dust from the fertile soil [*'adamah*]..." (2:7). This is a rare instance where Hebrew wordplay can be captured well in English: humans come from humus. In this account, the vocation of humanity is to get their hands dirty: "And YHWH God took the human being and set 'him' in the Garden of Eden to work it and to watch it" (2:15).

Unquestionably, the editors who fused the two creation accounts intended us to see them as complementary components of a single story. Together, the two images give us a rich understanding of the derivation and the destiny of the human being: we are connected on one side of the family with divinity; on the other, with the fertile soil. To use a phrase from the African-American tradition, we might say that the first chapter of Genesis gives us a sense of "somebodyness." We are made in the image of God; we have infinite worth and a high destiny. But the second creation account implicitly warns us not to get a distorted opinion of ourselves. The Yahwist advises that the humus has left an indelible imprint on every human being: "For dust you are, and to dust you shall return" (3:19). In the context of the biblical narrative, that reminder is God's counter to the attractive but deadly delusion encouraged by the snake, of power exercised without limit. The snake enticed the humans to imagine themselves becoming "like gods, knowing good and bad" (3:5). God pops that bubble and introduces them to the difficult concept of their own finitude: dust to dust.

The two biblical symbols—humanity made in the image of God and human from humus—belong together, but in practice most contemporary Christians separate them. I think it is fair to say that our self-estimation generally owes

more to the first chapter of the Bible than to the second. We rightly remember that we have something of God in us, but we tend to forget the equal claim that the soil lays upon us. For us in this generation, the call to discipleship may well be a call to remember our kinship with the fertile earth. If we are listening to the Bible's prophetic witness to the present rapacious age, then we should be as shocked and radically reoriented as were those (few, perhaps) who heard and heeded Amos or Jeremiah, when we are told that the soil is more like a relative than a resource: it is to be respected, and not just used. For us, heeding the prophetic call means turning away from the rampant materialism that infects our society to the *healthy materiality* that is the first principle of a biblical ecology.

Every Ash Wednesday, Christians participate in an exercise in healthy materiality. "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return," the priest recites (BCP 265). This rehearsal of the second creation account warns us against an over-spiritualized understanding of our discipleship; the dusty cross on our foreheads signals where our "spiritual journey" is headed. In the traditional language of Christian monasticism, living in holy awareness of our mortality is known as "mortifying the flesh." Mortification literally means "making death." Some monastics have given the practice a bad name, taking it as an occasion to abuse their bodies with whips or excessive fasting.

But there is a completely different way of understanding mortification. One contemporary monk defines mortification as "the decision to live a simple life of moderation as much in tune with the dignity of life as is possible."² By this definition, mortification is the furthest thing from a torturous denial of our physical being. Rather, "making death" means acknowledging in all our ways that we are dust-bound creatures. Although our existence is finite, we are

privileged to extend the significance of our lives beyond the confines of our own egos. This is possible through the divine gift of community. And the way we join in community with the other creatures with whom we share this earth, now and after our own death, is by limiting our own consumption in order to honor the dignity of *all* life. Mortification is, then, one traditional name for the way of living and thinking that I am calling "healthy materiality." It is the exact opposite of the attitude that finds popular expression in the bumper sticker, "Whoever has the most stuff when they die wins."

Torah of the Earth

The link between humans and humus represents more than family history. As the biblical writer we call "the Yahwist" understands it, the link also bespeaks vocation: "And YHWH God took the human being and set 'him' in the Garden of Eden to work it and to watch it" (2:15). It would be easy enough to explain this first biblical reference to human work as no more than what one would expect from ancient Israelites. They were, most of them, farmers; how else would they reconstruct the first human job description? But close examination shows that this statement is more than a cultural—or agricultural—commonplace. The Yahwist has chosen words carefully, and made some unexpected choices. When those words are probed, they reveal a profound and far-reaching statement of the relationship that God wills to obtain between humanity and the fertile soil on which the life of every person depends. The biblical writer is giving us a glimpse of "original righteousness," the divinely desired state of relationship that, we might imagine, existed for the shimmering moment before human disobedience threw things out of kilter.

Neither of the key verbs designating human activity in the garden belongs primarily to the Hebrew vocabulary of

horticulture or agriculture. The standard translation—"to till it and tend it"³—is therefore somewhat misleading. Each of these words, which I have provisionally translated as "work" (*avad*) and "watch" (*shamar*), occurs hundreds of times throughout the Old Testament, and in only a tiny fraction of those occurrences do they have anything to do with working the soil. What they do frequently designate is human activity directed toward God, and we might guess that the Yahwist chose them precisely for their strong religious resonance. The word *avad* means "to work" but also "to work for" someone. In the context of ancient societies, it denotes a slave's or a servant's service to a master, either human or divine. And the Supreme Master in the Bible is, of course, God. Thus YHWH repeatedly challenges Pharaoh the slave-master to release the Israelites to an alternative form of nonelective service: "Let my people go, that they may *avad* me!" (Exodus 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13). When *avad* is directed toward God, it means "worship." Even stronger are the religious connotations of the second verb, *shamar* ("to watch" or "watch over," "observe," "keep" or "preserve"). In the vast majority of occurrences of this verb, the thing that is to be "observed" is God's Torah: "You shall *shamar* my commandment, ordinance, covenant, Sabbath" (for example, Exodus 13:10, 20:6, 31:14). Thus Israel is repeatedly charged to keep on the watch against violation, distortion, or simple forgetfulness of the divine Teaching on which its life depends.

The philological details are important. Taken together, these two resonant verbs give depth and precision to our understanding of the kind of relationship that God first envisioned between the human creatures and the soil from which they were taken. And if we are surprised by the understandings they yield, then that is the Bible's prophetic function at work. When familiar relationships are suddenly seen from a wholly new perspective—seen as God might see

work to
God (YHWH)

shamar to
preserve (often)

them—then we are being prophetically disoriented and at the same time reoriented toward Torah's urgent commandment: "Righteousness, righteousness you must pursue" (Deuteronomy 16:20).

The first reorienting idea, stemming from the verb *avad*, is that the land is something we may be expected to serve. Typically we think of fertile soil as a "natural resource." But the Bible has chosen a verb which implies that we are to see ourselves in a relation of *subordination* to the land on which we live. Recognizing the metaphor of servitude implicit in this first job description, we can say that the biblical writer—or, to use a more traditional and still valid concept about biblical authorship, the Holy Spirit—envisions humans habitually deferring to the soil. The needs of the land take clear precedence over our own immediate preferences, as the master's requirements override a servant's desires. The Bible's prophetic speech is typically not only startling, but also realistic. For in plain fact, we humans are dependents living in the household of which the fertile earth is the head. It is the soil that determines how the household economy runs. We are something like household retainers—rendering useful service, but nonetheless remaining in dependent relationship. We need the food, clothing, and shelter that are guaranteed only by the prosperity and good favor of the head of the household.

The second verb, *shamar*, suggests the metaphor of legal observance: the charge to keep the fertile soil is akin to the familiar charge to keep God's Torah and commandments. This metaphor is as unexpected as that of servitude. It implies something most of us have never considered: there are *divinely established rules and constraints attached to our use of the soil*, and it has always been so. "Observe it"—learn from it and about it; "keep it"—from harm and violation. Thus the word *shamar* suggests that, even under the ideal

NOT
GOOD

Soil is
what
the
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conditions of Eden, humans were laboring under God's Torah of the soil. Far from inventing our relationship to the land, our task has always been (in the words of one modern agrarian thinker) "meeting the expectations of the land."⁴

Alongside the metaphorical meaning of legal observance, the verb *shamar* has a second common meaning that is important for our understanding of our relationship to the soil. Often *shamar* denotes the act of watchful protection. Thus the psalmist frequently appeals to God:

Watch over [*shamar*] me, God, for I have taken
refuge in you. (Psalm 16:1)

Keep [*shamar*] me as the apple of your eye.
(Psalm 17:8)

Preserve [*shamar*] my life, for I am faithful.

Save your servant—you, God!—the one who is
trusting in you! (Psalm 86:2)

For the person who is vulnerable, God's acts of watching over, keeping, and preserving are the substance of covenant relationship. Reciprocally, Torah and Prophets repeatedly call on Israel to protect weak members of the covenant community: the widow, the orphan, and the sojourner. The charge in Genesis to keep the land can be heard as an extension of that prophetic concern for the vulnerable, expanding the sphere of covenant obligation to include the soil itself.⁵

Together, these two verbs outline humanity's complex relationship with the fertile soil, a relationship that is meant to be deferential, observant, and protective. We must serve (*avad*) the land, not worshipping it but showing it reverence as God's own creation⁶, respecting it as one whose needs take priority over our immediate desires. We must watch it and watch over it (*shamar*) as one who has something to teach us and yet at the same time needs our vigilant care. The

religiously resonant language of this first job description from Eden suggests the remarkable teaching that in showing proper regard for the fertile earth, we meet the two great goals of all Torah observance: serving God and protecting the weak. This indeed is Torah of the earth.

Good-Faith Eating

This biblical picture of right relationship between humanity and the soil should disturb us, for it gives the lie to an idea now well established in our culture. The dominant practices of modern industrial agriculture are based on the idea that technology has given us the power to reinvent our human relationship to the soil. So this is the idea by which most of us are now eating. But it is a dangerous idea:

For a long time now we have understood ourselves as traveling toward some sort of industrial paradise, some new Eden conceived and constructed entirely by human ingenuity. And we have thought ourselves free to use and abuse nature in any way that might further this enterprise. Now we face overwhelming evidence that we are not smart enough to recover Eden by assault, and that nature does not tolerate or excuse our abuses. If, in spite of the evidence against us, we are finding it hard to relinquish our old ambition, we are also seeing more clearly every day how that ambition has reduced or enslaved us. We see *how everything—the whole world—is belittled by the idea that all creation is moving or ought to move toward an end that some body, some human body, has thought up*. To be free of that end and that ambition would be a delightful and precious thing. Once free of it, we might again go about our work and our lives with a seriousness and a pleasure denied to us when we merely submit to a fate

already determined by gigantic politics, economics, and technology.⁷

Wendell Berry—poet, essayist, and novelist—is perhaps the most articulate spokesman for the perspective of modern agrarianism. The vision of people living in a permanent committed relationship with nature, a relationship of dependence on and responsibility to the fertile soil, is what animates the agrarian movement. In steadily growing numbers, farmers and non-farmers are identifying with that vision. In doing so, they are consciously setting themselves against the social and “natural” disaster now looming in the form of the apparently boom-business of corporate-owned agriculture. Agrarians are calling this generation to reckon with the fact that we are currently buying cheap food at the cost of the long-term health of our soil and water. Aquifers and rivers are over-pumped or polluted by chemical run-off. Hog factories produce “natural fertilizer” in such quantities that lakes and streams become uninhabitable for fish, and rural neighborhoods for people. Erosion rates soar as forests and other kinds of natural covering are removed and more marginal land is plowed. Agrarians bring us the prophetic message that there is a time limit set for the exercise of folly, “that nature does not tolerate or excuse our abuses.”

Consciously or not, the agrarians are bringing us a message that is genuinely prophetic—that is, it accords with what we may understand from the Bible about the function of prophecy. In a nontechnical but nonetheless authentic sense, it qualifies as prophecy on three grounds. First, what agrarians tell us about how we stand in relation to the fertile earth conforms on all essential points to the picture set forth in scripture. Serving and preserving the land, observing its natural limits, and protecting it from violation—all these are the basic operating principles of modern agrarianism. Although agrarians are more likely to be organic farmers

than preachers, they often talk in terms congenial with those of the biblical writers: “We are living from mystery, from creatures we did not make and powers we cannot comprehend.”⁸ An agrarian would comprehend these lines from Job more readily and deeply than the average biblical scholar:

Ask now the beasts, and they will teach you;
and the birds of the heavens, and they will declare
to you.

Or converse with the earth, and it will teach you:
and the fishes of the sea will recount to you.

Who among all these does not know
that the hand of YHWH has done this—
in whose hand is the life of every creature?

(Job 12:7-10)

Second, the agrarian movement qualifies as prophetic because, like the biblical prophets, agrarians are issuing a fundamental challenge to power. They expose the self-serving “wisdom” promoted by the multinational conglomerates that control the vast majority of food production and processing in this country. The stated goal of feeding the world glosses over a policy of securing maximum profit for corporations and their stockholders, whatever the cost to farmers, the land, and the heritage—of both genetic material and human knowledge—available to future generations of farmers. In industrialized nations, the seed base for many crops has been effectively reduced to a few hybrids that are chemically dependent and require extensive irrigation. In the Third World, rain forests are leveled to raise export crops and satisfy our appetite for coffee and beef. Probably the most essential “natural resource” now being lost is farmers themselves. As agribusiness booms, small farmers in this country and abroad are going under at an unprecedented rate. The American Midwest is now dotted with twentieth-

*A tempo
for grain*

century ghost-towns; there are more prisoners in this country than farmers. And when the farmers disappear from the land their families have tended for generations, so does the knowledge and the caring that preserve its long-term health and productivity. Against the food industry's single-minded insistence on profitability, the agrarians forcefully assert the goal of permanence. They are concerned to leave a rich inheritance for coming generations. In other words, they practice what the monastics call mortification: they live in healthy and humble awareness of their own death, and they desire to leave something good to be remembered by.

Third, the agrarian movement qualifies as prophetic in that it speaks for what we might call the interest of God—that is, the true interest of all people over many generations. Like the biblical prophets, the agrarians confront us with ancient and indispensable insight that is now in danger of being lost, with terrible consequences for this and future generations. Their insight is that not one of us can escape our dependence on the soil and our responsibility to it. That responsibility is shared by everyone who eats. Even if we live in the city and never set foot on a farm, agrarians remind us that we are negotiating our relationship to the soil every day of our lives, with every trip to the grocery store, every meal we cook or microwave or take out. We are negotiating the relationship between human and humus each time we decide (consciously or, more likely, unconsciously) whether to put the vegetable peels down the garbage disposal or in the compost bin.

In a word, agrarianism calls us to pay attention to the fact that eating is the act that embeds us most fully in creation, for better, for worse. Through it we may enact our faith that food is in reality not a commodity on the stock exchange but a gift from God. There is nothing new about that insight. It is as old as prophetic faith itself. Equally, there is nothing

new about mistaking the gift for a commodity. Already in the eighth century B.C.E., the prophet Hosea castigated Israel for completely missing the source of her agricultural wealth. Israelites were worshipping one or another local fertility god, whose generic name is Baal, using cultic sex in order to curry divine favor, and thus (they imagined) secure the food supply. Hosea enables us to hear YHWH's anguish at Israel's perverse faith:

And she did not know
that it was I, I who gave her
the grain and the new wine and the oil...
She said, "They are a present to me,
which my lovers gave me..."
And she went after her lovers—
but me she forgot! says YHWH. (Hosea 2:10, 14, 15)

Hosea's metaphor of harlotry makes the point that Israel is looking for agricultural "presents" from her sugar-daddy gods without taking on the demands of covenant relationship. And, stretching our capacity for cultural criticism over nearly three millennia, we can see that while the form of bad faith has changed, its substance is remarkably stable. For the Baal cult and the food-and-farming industry have this in common: they are seeking thrills without regard for the consequences. Inducing fertility by ritual sex or massive doses of chemical fertilizer and modified genes—these practices express ancient and modern failures to understand that we eat only in the context of covenant community, that is, in the context of long-term and inalienable responsibility both to God and to the soil that God has given us to "work and to watch."

The prophetic message for us is that we eat either in good faith or in bad; "good-faith springs up from the earth." For those of us who are not farmers, perhaps the first step to good-faith eating is learning something about where our

food comes from, and what is the real cost—to soil and water sources—of growing or raising it. What will our grandchildren have to pay for our cheap food? A second step is caring enough to make changes in our habits of buying and eating—for example, buying food from the community-supported agriculture networks that have sprung up around many urban areas, or buying local (and often endangered) varieties of apples and tomatoes at the farmer's market instead of commercial hybrids that are bred to be shipped three thousand miles and survive a shelf-life measured in months. Another step might be planting a garden that grows food as well as flowers, so we may have direct experience of our covenant partner, the fertile soil.

Sure, these steps may be "only symbolic." They will not work great changes in the food industry—although consumer aversion to genetically modified food has already created a global furor where the food industrialists once expected acquiescence. But people of biblical faith have always valued symbolic (in the church, we often call it "liturgical" or "sacramental") action as a powerful help to perceiving the deepest realities, and, however gradually, bringing our lives into line with them. For many of us in this generation, good-faith eating may be the best way to practice a steady awareness that our lives are at once graced and precarious—which is to say, we depend on the generosity of God for every meal we eat. The psalmist gives us a song and prayer that tells the whole truth about us, the soil, and God's phenomenal generosity:

Every one of them looks to you
to give them their food at its proper time.
You give to them; they gather it.
You open your hand; they are filled with good.
You hide your face; they are undone.
You gather in their breath; they expire, and to their

dust they return.

You send your breath; they are created;
and you renew the face of the fertile soil.

Let the glory of YHWH be forever;
Let YHWH rejoice in his works—

the One who looks to the earth, and it quakes;
he touches the mountains, and they smoke.

I will sing to YHWH as long as I live;

I will make melody to my God while I have being.

(Psalm 104:27-33)

It is a good song to sing at the dinner table.

Notes

1. The term derives from the form of the divine name (YHWH) that the writer employs.
2. Brother Timothy Jolley, O.H.C. This quotation originally appeared in a newsletter of the Order of the Holy Cross, West Park, New York.
3. See the NJPS *Tanakh*. The NRSV translates "to till it and keep it."
4. See Wendell Berry and Wes Jackson, eds., *Meeting the Expectations of the Land* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984).
5. The inclusion of the land in covenant community is supported by God's declaration following the flood: "I have set my bow in the heavens, and it will be a sign of covenant between me and the earth" (Genesis 9:13).
6. The notion that the earth should properly be revered is expressed thus in one contemporary prayer: "Give us all a reverence for the earth as your own creation, that we may use its resources rightly in the service of others and to your honor and glory" (BCP 388).
7. Wendell Berry, *What Are People For?* (New York: North Point Press, 1990), 209-210. *Italics mine*.
8. *Ibid.*, 152.