

Environmentalists Must Understand Thanksgiving

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We ought to give contemporary environmentalists a little slack for misreading Psalm 50.

After all, the Psalmist does give the strong impression that she is a member of the court, summoning the wicked—those who misuse and abuse the creation—to face the sternest and highest ranking judge on the bench.

It isn't unreasonable to picture the Psalmist as a kind of court-appointed notice-server, delivering to the accused a directive penned by the displeased Divine Magistrate to show up in court for the day of reckoning.

From the very beginning that's the tone of the court order:

The Mighty One, the Most High, speaks and summons the whole earth, from the rising of the sun to its setting... God calls to the heavens above and to the earth, in order to judge God's people.

Granted, the summons seems to make allowances for a special relationship between the Righteous Judge and a chosen people:

Gather to me my faithful ones, who made a covenant with me by sacrifice!

But it turns out that this special relationship only intensifies the judgment.

*Hear, O my people, and I will speak, O Israel, I will testify **against** you.*

That's pretty harsh.

Why? What's the cause of the divine displeasure?

The summons lays it out.

First, it's hypocrisy—the covenant people recite the divine laws and repeat the words of the covenant but they live without discipline, they get chummy with thieves, they keep company with adulterers. Then it's loose lips in other ways—they use their speech for evil and deceit, and for their own gain they slander their own family.

So the Righteous Judge states in the summons:

These things you have done and I have been silent; you thought that I was someone just like yourself. But now I rebuke you, and lay the charge before you point by point.

What, then, are the indicted people to do?

Here's where contemporary environmentalists make the crucial misinterpretation.

They think that the biblical and religious way of addressing the problems of global warming, and the fouling of land, air and water, and the exploitation of the earth's resources has to do with overcoming hypocrisy—to stop reciting all the right words but living wrongly, to start exercising very strict discipline about the use of the environment, to cease associating with the exploiters and polluters and adulterers of the earth, to halt all talking and tasking that ends up defaming and damaging our children, grandchildren and great grandchildren.

Contemporary environmentalists tend to think that it's all a matter of making sacrifices in our lives that will please the judging God.

But it turns out that isn't what the summons is about.

Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you. You can't please me by bringing your sacrificial and burnt offerings before me. I will not accept a bull from your house or goats from your folds.

After all, God says, these things you would sacrifice to make things right between us are all mine from beginning to end.

For every wild animal of the forest is mine (not yours to sacrifice), the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the air, and all that moves in the field is mine.

If I were hungry, I would not tell you (so you would think you have to feed me), for the world and all that is in it is mine.

In short, God says there is nothing you can give up because you think it is yours in order to please God. You can't satisfy the charges against you in the summons by sacrificing something that isn't yours to begin with.

What then is the summons of Psalm 50 about? What are all the people of the earth, and particularly those who are people of the covenant, to do?

The requirement God expects of us is a sacrifice, but not a sacrifice in the way we usually think about sacrifices.

The Psalmist reports that we are summoned to the Mighty One, the Most High, to offer thanksgiving.

Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High.

Or to quote the Author of the summons:

Those who bring thanksgiving as their sacrifice honor me; to those who go the right way (those who live their lives giving thanks to the One who provides everything for everyone), I will show the salvation of God.

So it turns out that contemporary environmentalists who are attentive to the testimony of scripture and its implications for personal ethics and public policy will have to undergo a conversion themselves: a conversion from living under the oppressive discipline of the law to living according to the liberating sacrifice of grace—which is always giving thanks.