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**GOD'S**

**GREEN EARTH:**

**Creation Care and Earth Day**

# Welcome - and happy Earth Day!

► [JOSH LARSEN](#), TC EDITOR

**If “there’s no such thing as secular,” as the Think Christian motto goes, how does that apply to Earth Day?**

That’s what this collection of TC articles on creation care explores. Curated from our archives to coincide with Earth Day, these pieces cover a variety of environment-related topics, from climate engineering to air conditioning to human composting (yes, that’s a thing). You’ll find work by our best contributors, from University of Michigan environmental ethics professor Rolf Bouma to popular TC columnists Branson Parler and Karen Swallow Prior.

If there’s one thing that unites these pieces – and drives much of our coverage of the environment at Think Christian – it’s a reverence for the cultural mandate of the Bible (Gen. 1:28). We especially like how theologian N.T. Wright describes this in his book *After You Believe*:

“The creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2, some of the most profound and evocative stories ever written, certainly don’t envision humans tyrannizing creation. ...A garden is what we have here in Genesis, a fruitful and richly varied landscape with the humans commanded to look after it, to make it fruitful and (while they’re at it) to give names to the animals. There’s no suggestion that the ‘reign’ in question is anything other than benign.”

If this is true, if our “reign” is meant to be one of beneficence and blessing, how might that look in our everyday lives? Is our infatuation with air conditioning benign? Is climate change the result of our tyranny over creation, and if so what should be our response? When a large section of a blighted city like Detroit is transformed into an urban forest, how does that echo the garden and city motifs we find in Scripture? Here at TC, we find such questions tantalizing. And we think you do too. So, join us in attempting to answer them.

# The allure of gardening, even in a convenience age

► [KAREN SWALLOW PRIOR](#)

**Gardening is as old as Adam and Eve. Yet, in recent years, growing one's own food has become as fashionable as microbrews and mustachios. Whether pursued as a means of sustenance or as a badge of style, gardening is a trend that unites a diverse range of people today, from the retro to the rural, from the foodie to the frugal.**

For my family, gardening is a heritage, going at least as far back as four generations. But only in recent years has my own lifestyle grown amenable to its rigors. I began with an abundant supply of fertilizer - horses. Then I turned my spade on flower gardening and found that perennials and antique roses are fairly forgiving of benign neglect. But the considerable time and care needed to maintain a vegetable garden - soil preparation, well-timed planting schedules, weeding, planning and execution of critter-prevention, more weeding - seemed impossible in a household run according to two school calendars.

Then the parents moved onto the homestead and a familial garden seemed manageable. So we cleared enough land for a small orchard and two raised beds, added rich horse "dirt," sat down with the seed catalogs and checkbook, and put my mother's green thumb to work.

Now, along with the simple pleasures of eating fresh produce plucked from the backyard, we enjoy taking just-picked beet greens - her favorite - to my 100-year-old grandmother in the nursing home. We then close the loop of our little eco-system by offering up garden scraps to the hens that, in return, provide us with eggs so rich they taste like steak.

Yet, understandably, some see the backyard gardening and [locavore movement](#) as a mere flash-in-the-pan. It's certainly true that, barring any apocalypse, we in this country aren't exactly likely to go back to tilling the ground with hand tools and eating only food grown within the distance of

horse-powered transportation. And, for the record, if there's ever a call for volunteers to return to washing clothes in the creek and knitting socks by hand, you'll find me slinking toward the nearest big box store for appliances and undergarments.

Yet, I can choose - as we all can - to rein in, if only slightly, the mega monster of consumerism and be a bit more in tune with the rhythms and textures of God's good earth. In our household, we do this by taking staycations instead of trips to Disneyland, eating [humane](#) meat, doing without a clothes dryer and dishwasher and instead line drying and hand washing. And, of course, growing a few fruits and vegetables.

Maybe it's not the gardening movement that's really the mere trend, but rather the late modern mindset of convenience at any cost. After all, within the entire range of human civilization, those who have subsisted on factory-canned and microwaveable food are the vast minority. Perhaps the return by so many to gardening is a strong signal that we have reached the end of a short-lived, bigger-faster-newer-and-improved era. While our man-made products and technologies will ever be outdated as soon as the next great thing comes along, in God's creation we will always find, as Gerard Manley Hopkins observes in his sonnet [God's Grandeur](#), that "nature is never spent; There lives the dearest freshest deep down thing."

*Karen Swallow Prior is Professor of English at Liberty University. She also blogs regularly at [Her.meneutics](#). Share your comments [here](#).*

# It's time for Christian consensus on climate change

► [CLAYTON CARLSON](#)

In 2015, as part of the 21st Conference of the Parties (COP21) of United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, nearly 200 nations adopted the final wording of the [Paris Agreement](#). After nine years of vigorous diplomatic work and 20 other international meetings, COP21 ended with the secretary general of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon, [saying](#), “We have a truly universal agreement on climate change.”

Universal agreement. A mighty feat indeed. But consensus on a plan of action is far from implementation. The governments represented at the conference must now work toward the ambitious goal of limiting the world's rise in average temperature to “well below 2 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels.” Many things will hinder the process of each country achieving this goal—things like corruption, financial limitations and bureaucracy. But no hurdle will be greater in the United States than public opinion. Today, a vocal segment of the American population, as well as a number of politicians, are [still unconvinced](#) of the dangers of climate change. Even among the Americans who accept the evidence on climate change, there is a [lack of concern](#) about its effects and our need to act.

Pope Francis rightly described our aversion to the truth about climate change in his 2015 *Laudato Si'*, where [he wrote](#), “This is the way human beings contrive to feed their self-destructive vices: trying not to see them, trying not to acknowledge them, delaying the important decisions and pretending that nothing will happen.” As citizens of the world and as Christians, the time for questioning the reality of climate change is over. With the Paris Agreement, global consensus states that climate change is happening; it is a threat to the health and well-being of individuals, communities, and nations; and it is the responsibility of all nations to respond.

Scripture [teaches](#) that the Earth is God's good world and that God has set up human beings as His stewards on Earth. We are to rule over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all that crawls across the ground. Clearly, God has entrusted us with much. Matthew reminds us of what God expects from His stewards. The foolish servant in [Matthew 25](#) returns to the master exactly what he was given, no more and no less. The master says of him, “Throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there is much weeping and gnashing of teeth.” How would the master have responded if the servant had squandered and wasted what he had been given? I want to do whatever I can to protect and improve what God has entrusted to me so that one day He will say, “Well done good and faithful servant...come and share your master's happiness.”

Skeptics may decry my lack of faith and assure me that God will provide a solution to global climate change. But I believe that God has provided a solution: us. As individuals, churches, and governmental bodies, we must have the courage and will to do what is needed to lower greenhouse gas emissions and be faithful stewards of God's world.

In preparation for COP21, many of the participating countries put forward individual plans explaining how they would work to reduce their contribution to CO2 levels. However, even if every nation succeeds at their proposed plan, we will still miss the 2 degrees Celsius goal. That is why the agreement calls for every country to publicly report on their successes and increase the boldness of their plans every five years. Since the agreement is not legally binding, the motivation for faithfulness comes from global peer pressure. The United States and China, who together produce [about 44%](#) of the world's CO2, both praised the agreement—and will be watching each other closely for any sign of abandoning their commitments.

Christian theologians, including [N.T. Wright](#) and [Walter Brueggemann](#), have argued that a role of the church is to hold the government accountable, to speak truth to power, and to highlight the moral dimension of our policies. This is our role as Christians in regard to the Paris Agreement. Many of us have already changed our light bulbs and are mindful of what we eat, what we buy, and what we throw away. Now it is our responsibility to make sure our homes, our local governments, and our national governments are working to reduce CO2 emissions as wisely as possible. It is our responsibility to recognize with the world, as the agreement states, "that sustainable lifestyles and sustainable patterns of consumption and production...play an important role in addressing climate change." It is our responsibility to demand sustainable lifestyles from ourselves, our employers, and our governments.

The Creation Stewardship Task Force of my own denomination, the Christian Reformed Church, issued a [report](#) in 2012 stating that, "As Christians called to care for creation and for the least among us, we are to respond to the degradation of our environment and the serious challenges posed by climate change, particularly to the poorest and most vulnerable." The Paris Agreement shows deep concern for the environment, in a way that cherishes individuals in every country, while trying to address a global problem. People of faith around the world should respond with praise and action.

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# Sins of emission: playing my part in the Volkswagen scandal

► [ERICA SCHEMPER](#)

In 2015, my husband and I purchased what we thought was the perfect family car for an environmentally sensitive but fun-loving family of five. After months of research, we ruled out larger SUVs (too environmentally destructive) and minivans (gas guzzlers and a little too frumpy for our taste). We narrowed our choices down to three wagons with sufficient backseat width and good stowage capacity. Among those three options was one that I jokingly referred to as my mid-life-crisis mommy car: the Volkswagen Jetta TDI wagon, preferably in lipstick red.

On Good Friday, the local dealer called my husband to tell him that someone had just traded in a barely used red Jetta SportWagen TDI. While I knew the theology of this was all off, it felt like God was smiling on me (through the car's massive sunroof), offering a reward for years of driving little economy cars. We christened her "Hildy" and took a cross-country family road trip over the summer, satisfied that her fuel economy and low emissions were part of our commitment to being good stewards of creation.

Then one day, while shuttling kids to school, I heard the news: my now-beloved Jetta was part of a [massive scheme of deception](#) by Volkswagen. An independent study revealed that Volkswagen installed software called a "defeat device" in its 2009 to 2015 diesel models. The defeat device kicks into gear when the car detects that it's undergoing an emissions test, and delivers the performance needed to pass. But under normal driving conditions, these engines emit [up to 40 times](#) the amount of nitrogen oxide permitted by EPA standards.

In a moment of dark humor, I posted this on Facebook: "Suggestions for bumper stickers for Volkswagen TDI drivers?" My wise friend Benjamin wrote: "On some level, I knew."

Of course, I couldn't have figured this out by myself. I'm no car expert, so I put my trust in government regulators and consumer advisory groups. I have very little understanding of how cars are put together, but I admire those who use their abilities to design and build vehicles. I assume, and hope, that there are people engineering cars and writing computer software for engines in ways that strive toward more efficient and clean use of energy. I consider that to be kingdom work, restoring the world to the *shalom* intended by the Creator.

Yet the Volkswagen scandal is a reminder of how our human sinfulness, in ways both individually and corporately, holds us back from *shalom*. It's a story of greed, pride, self-deception, and outright lies, mostly by engineers and corporate officials. And even if I didn't know about it, on some level, no matter how clean my fossil-fueled vehicle seemed to be, I remained complicit in a world economy that is damaging creation.

The psalmist [writes](#), "Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help. When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish." I feel Psalm 146 as I tool around in my Jetta and try not to think about what's actually coming out of the tailpipe. Becoming better stewards of creation will take constant vigilance against our fallenness, along with God's faithful guidance for everyone, from executives to engineers to legislators. And, of course, for drivers.

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# Is climate engineering good creation care?

► **ABBIE SCHROTENBOER**

**You may spend much of your day in climate-controlled environments where the touch of a button or the turn of a dial will adjust the temperature to your desired level. Could you imagine having the power of such a thermostat for Earth's climate? *The planet is getting too warm, so let's just dial down the temperature.***

Climate engineering – also referred to as geoengineering, climate intervention or climate hacking - is an attempt to purposefully manipulate the climate and reverse the unintentional changes humans have caused through burning fossil fuels and deforestation. Although global climate engineering may not be quite as simple as adjusting your home thermostat, its implementation could happen quickly and relatively inexpensively, at least when compared to other efforts to mitigate climate change. One example is solar radiation management. When sunlight passes through the atmosphere and is absorbed by Earth's surface, much of that energy is re-emitted as heat energy. Cut down on the amount of sunlight reaching Earth, and you've effectively turned down the thermostat. This could be accomplished by increasing aerosols in the atmosphere that would reflect sunlight back into space.

This possibility has a lot of appeal. Perhaps we don't have to worry so much about our use of fossil fuels? Perhaps we aren't looking at a future with rising oceans and major biodiversity losses due to climate change? If this answer seems a little bit too easy, that's probably because it is. The National Academy of Sciences recently released a report recommending that atmospheric changes to manage solar radiation not be implemented at this time. The reason? There remains too much uncertainty and risk involved in this type of climate intervention. Efforts to solve one problem could cause others, such as damage to the ozone layer or changes to precipitation patterns.

As Christians looking at the state of the planet, we can see that we have not fully lived into our role as stewards who have been given the mandate of creation care. High-income countries continue to

burn massive amount of fossil fuels, effectively ignoring the pressure that climate changes put on God's creatures. Brothers and sisters in Christ around the world are being affected by rising sea levels, extreme weather events and changes to agricultural and hunting practices as a result. In the midst of this grim picture, Christ is calling us to work alongside Him in His redemptive plan. What does this look like in the face of climate change? Could it include climate engineering? Or will this merely be a temptation to neglect other efforts?

Although the National Academy of Sciences has recommended taking large-scale solar radiation management efforts off the table for now, they have suggested further research to better understand how well the process would work and with what consequences. I cannot say that geoengineering is an inherently untenable option. God has given us the minds and capabilities to explore this possibility, yet I approach this option with great fear. Even with further knowledge of the subject, could hubris lead us to believe we have understood the implications of our actions, when in fact we might unleash a cascade of unintended consequences?

Meanwhile, as we consider our choices, "[the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.](#)" Let us heed the groaning of creation as we seek to live into our role as Earthkeepers. I pray that individuals and nations will seek wise ways to care for God's creation and His people, and that we will not create an equally dangerous problem in our efforts to solve the problem of climate warming.

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# Dominion by air conditioning

► **DAVID GREUSEL**

**In August of 2012, during the hot Arizona summer, there was some complaint and debate about the temperature inside the Sandra Day O'Connor Federal Courthouse in Phoenix. Occupants of the ultra modern and environmentally friendly-designed building, were upset by temperatures in a large atrium that consistently exceeded 90 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer. Certainly this level is outside the classic "comfort zone" used by engineers to design heating, ventilating and air-conditioning (HVAC) systems for office buildings. But as the building's defenders point out, the atrium is (except for security guards) unoccupied space that one passes through on the way to one's air-conditioned office, and the building's design called for it to be mostly unconditioned as part of the its energy-efficiency strategy.**

What I find remarkable about this story is the expectation of Phoenicians that all structural spaces in the city should be continuously less than 90 degrees in the summer. We are not that far removed, a scant 100 years, from the first use of air conditioning in buildings that didn't involve large blocks of ice. For most of human history, Phoenix was boiling hot in the summer. But now that air conditioning exists, we expect it to exist everywhere, all the time.

As a Christian, this gives me pause. As anyone who has paid a summer electric bill knows, air conditioning is an expensive choice. The fact that we make it routinely doesn't make it less of a choice. And the majority of the world's population, much of it in climates as warm as Phoenix, lives without it by necessity, not by choice.

I'm not suggesting that Christians eschew air conditioning as a show of solidarity with our impoverished global brethren (although that might not be a bad idea). I'm suggesting that most North American Christians have bought into a Modernist, man-versus-nature narrative that contradicts the creation story.

God created this good world for us to inhabit, to cultivate and subdue. Manufactured weather can be considered a part of subduing this world, but I think sometimes we need to step back from our unquestioning technological subjugation of nature and ask, is this really necessary? Is it necessary for an atrium in Phoenix to be cooled to 72 degrees so the workers passing through it don't break a sweat?

In idle moments, I think back to Kansas City summers of yore, before my birth, when downtown office buildings all had canvas awnings to keep summer sun off the windows, which were always open to the (hot

and humid) breeze. Paperweights were a necessity, as were short-sleeve dress shirts, cotton underwear and, presumably, deodorant. Was life really so much worse then? Did commerce grind to a halt in August as workers literally headed for the hills of Iowa and Minnesota to cool off? What if it did? Could August in Kansas City be God's way of telling us to take a break for a few weeks?

My complaint is that manufactured weather, like artificial lighting and other modern conveniences, has put us out of touch with the natural rhythms of God's good world. I'm not a Luddite. I'm not suggesting we go around smashing air conditioners and fluorescent lights (although fluorescent lighting is a tool of Satan - but that's another story). I'm simply suggesting that we consider, thoughtfully, Christianly, the ebbs and flows of light and heat that God baked into our world as we go about our daily work. Maybe there's a reason for days being longer in the summer than the winter if you don't live at the equator. Maybe August should be a month for leaving town. (Egad! What if the Europeans are right about that?) Maybe, in Phoenix, it's OK for a just-passing-through zone to be warm in the summer.

I have been in a cathedral in Belgium in February, where there was no warm air blowing from big ducts to keep me toasty warm, where the thought occurred to me: maybe it's OK to worship God with your coat on in the winter. Can your mind stretch that far? Can mine?

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# Human composting: ashes to ashes, dust to dust

► ROLF BOUMA

**A discussion on green burial recently led a friend to send me [a news item on human composting](#). That's not composting by humans. It's composting of humans (or, to be more specific, of human remains).**

A Seattle organization is proposing what they call the Urban Death Project. (They might want to give a little more thought to the name.) It's a facility designed to decompose human remains, much like a crematorium, except that instead of using fire to convert remains to ashes, biological processes will be optimized to convert human remains into soil. The right temperature; the right mix of wood chips, mulch and sawdust; the right organisms - it only takes a few weeks to go from being salt of the earth to being earth itself.

Whatever one's initial reaction to the proposal - and I think its sponsors have a lot of public perception work to do - Christians would do well to discuss openly what happens to our physical remains. The fact is we rarely talk about these things, often only confronting them in time-constrained emergencies when a loved one dies.

Funerary practices have significant ecological impacts. Here in Ann Arbor, Mich., for example, a small swale runs from Forest Hill Cemetery down to the Huron River. Known as School Girl's Glen, this swale collects run-off from the cemetery and occasionally needs to be dredged of sediment. The soil removed is taken to a hazardous waste disposal facility. Why? Because embalming fluid run-off from the cemetery makes the sediment toxic.

Embalming is the default practice in western Christian burials. When my parents passed away - my 89-year-old father in 2008 and my 94-year-old mother in 2014 - we specifically requested that embalming not be done. We were told it had to be done if we wanted an open casket, which we didn't. Instead, we bought caskets from the good monks at [New Melleray Abbey](#) in Iowa and buried our

parents with expectations of dust to dust. There was something poetically ecumenical about it, especially having my father, a staunch Reformed pastor, buried in a casket made and blessed by Trappist monks.

I suppose there will be environmental questions even with the Urban Death Project. The composted remains may contain heavy metals or pharmaceuticals (although certainly not on the order of embalming fluids). With the quantities of chemicals we ingest, especially in later life, our bodies may not be completely benign.

But I do like the idea of gently composting after the last breath has been taken. My son-in-law put it differently. A graduate student in aquatic biology, he commented that in his lab the sentiment ran towards becoming part of the food web after death. It reminded me of one of Garrison Keillor's [Lake Wobegon stories](#). Mr. Burgey tends his parents' graves on Memorial Day and discovers a luscious crop of morel mushrooms. He picks them and brings them home to cook, but his neighbors are grossed out. As Mr. Burgey observes, "If the whole point of existence is to produce really good mushrooms, it would be a shame to let them go to waste."

That's not the whole point of existence, of course, but if our physical remains are a parting gift to the earth, the least we can do is take our leave in considerate fashion.

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# Detroit's urban forest and giving way to the garden

## ► [BRANSON PARLER](#)

A [2013 Atlantic article](#) highlighted an effort by [Hantz Farms](#) to turn blighted and abandoned property in Detroit into an urban forest. Although some worry that this project is merely an attempt to drive up property values, the company notes that it plans to explore options that include using the area for orchards, maple syrup and the cultivation of ornamental plants (the extent of agricultural work is [limited](#) by city ordinances). Whatever the motivation, it's interesting to ponder part of a city being reconverted into a forest in light of the Biblical narrative.

Christians sometimes note that the overall narrative of Scripture moves from a garden to a city. This "garden to city" motif has been used to justify the modern myth of endless technological progress, as though history were a straight line from a "primitive" garden to a "civilized" city. Invoking this motif can also be used to make a normative judgment about cultures: those cultures which are more city-like are closer to the eschatological ideal, whereas those cultures that are more garden-like are further from the eschatological ideal. Some use this narrative to sanction the urbanizing forces in our world, many of which are problematic.

But is this garden to city motif really accurate? An argument can be made that, instead, the Biblical narrative ultimately follows a "city to garden" motif. In Revelations 18, God [utterly destroys](#) the main human city. This fits with the Biblical pattern of God's relationship to human cities. The people of Babel try to make a name for themselves, whereas God calls Abraham out of Ur in order for God to make a name for them. Furthermore, the prophetic vision of [Isaiah](#) also flips the standard "garden to city" motif on its head: nations will come to the city on a hill to learn the ways of the Lord and be sent out as gardeners. Their perverted culture-making - swords and spears - will be healed and transformed to become plowshares and pruning hooks.

So when modern-day Babels start to turn back into gardens, how should Christians respond? We would do well to remember that a garden is not the lack of human culture (in Biblical terms, that term would be "wilderness"). In fact, gardeners must be attuned with God's creation in a way that is often lost in the city.

The whole point of the original story of the Garden of Eden is that humans are called to accept limits. We are the image of God, but we are not God. Thus, when we allow gardens to flourish within the city limits, it may reawaken us to the limits of our cities. Our cities are not eternal and to treat them as such is blasphemy. We have good reason, then, to follow the lead of Detroit, where [seeking the good of the city](#) may be transforming the city back into a garden.

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# All God's critters? Even groundhogs?

► **ROLF BOUMA**

**All God's critters got a place in the choir**

**Some sing low, some sing higher**

**Some sing out loud on the telephone wire**

**And some just clap their hands, or paws or anything they got. (Bill Staines, "[A Place in the Choir](#)")**

June 6, 8:43 a.m. First groundhog of the year spotted ambling atop the garden retaining wall - with just a few feet and a bit of wing-and-prayer fencing separating it from my recent plantings of lettuce and broccoli. The game is now officially on. Either the groundhog goes or my vegetables' days are numbered.

As a general rule I love animals and can find it in my heart to love even the most ugly and warty. As a matter of intellectual assent, I concur with songwriter Bill Staines. But I cannot love a groundhog. Some think them cute with their chunky waddle and their clueless gaze. Perhaps for these they can be forgiven. But not for the way they nibble lettuce down to a mere nub in the ground or, even worse, the way they strip-mine in a single night every leaf and stalk from a row of broccoli plants.

Every year we get at least one groundhog in our neighborhood. In early May I pray a groundhog variation of the blessing for the Tsar from Fiddler on the Roof ("God bless and keep all groundhogs ... far away from us"). My prayer is never answered. Their first appearance is mid-May to early June. From then until final disposition, my garden suffers regular predations.

But their tyranny of nuisance usually does end. One year the groundhog ended up road kill - found two doors down in the middle of the street. I wept a crocodile tear. Another year I borrowed a Havahart trap. It was too easy. Two minutes after baiting with an apple core, mission accomplished. But how to dispose? I teach environmental ethics, for goodness' sakes. All animals have intrinsic value. They are God's creatures and to be valued as such. So I loaded the groundhog-occupied trap in the trunk of our car and drove six miles out into the country. When I opened the trunk, the groundhog had crapped mightily all over. What a mess!

I released it in the largest woodlot I could find. Releasing it salved my conscience, but down deep I knew I didn't really solve anything. Groundhog density at the release site was probably at saturation point. While the site was wooded,

there were farms within a quarter mile. I solved my problem by making it someone else's. Within two weeks another groundhog moved into our neighborhood. Serves me right.

Some might say that I should reconcile myself to sharing a bit of garden largesse with a few of God's creatures. I do, at least with what grows well. In the gardener's version of Murphy's law, our produce yield is inversely related to effort. Our garden produces rhubarb and strawberries with us barely lifting a finger, but carefully tended tomatoes and zucchini and peppers and broccoli struggle to yield more than a few edibles.

I do share the strawberries. Chipmunks take a nip or two out of almost every one, but I don't hate chipmunks. I just pare the gnawed area. There's still plenty of untouched fruit to cover my breakfast cereal on June mornings. I appreciate the dainty appetite of your average chipmunk.

But groundhogs? I hope God loves them because I just can't bring myself to. A friend just told me about a motion-detector sprinkler that shoots a jet of water at anything that moves in the garden. That could be fun, like Clint Eastwood in the garden patch. Go ahead, Punxsutawny Phil, make my day!

It's a satisfying thought. But then reality hits. What are the odds that the groundhog gets blasted first versus the likelihood that I forget to turn off the water when I step outside to pick my breakfast strawberries and get blasted myself? I don't think my ego could take being laughed at by a groundhog.

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# Earth Day won't save us

▶ **ALLISON BACKOUS TROY**

**When I was little, I had a strange obsession with the environment. I collected animal stickers, watched endless documentaries on the Discovery Channel and stayed up late at night worrying about the rain forest. It was an odd concern, one that made my parents and schoolteachers call me “mature for my years.”**

As I see it now, this interest was actually the development of guilt. How could I learn about oil spills and endangered species at school and not do anything? I even spent a whole Earth Day cleaning up the field behind my backyard, ripping buried plastic bags from the dirt, my back and hands aching from the unending task. At the end of the day, I looked over the field and thought, “I did a good job. I did something.”

If I were to return to that field, I know that the cleaning I did years ago would be for nothing – bags and trash would be everywhere. And, quite honestly, that shames me in a way that I don't quite fully understand. The environment feels huge to me, a problem that is too big for my small attempts to go green – my biodegradable laundry detergent simply cannot face the BP oil spill.

My childhood can-do attitude has lapsed into an uneasy apathy, but as Earth Day falls near the church's long season of Lent, I'm left thinking about Christ, the church, my response to the earth, to creation.

I'm left thinking about Christ because, leading up to Easter, we are called to reflect on our brokenness and our need for Him. Yet often, Lenten disciplines devolve into shameless attempts at fixing ourselves, when Easter reminds us that it is Christ who conquers all. And so on Earth Day, I do not want to launch myself into can-do spirituality, wondering how I can renew my earlier commitment to Earth. I do not want to slide into the language of Earth Day's organizers, who tell me to “discover energy” within myself and to fight climate change, rally the troops, pick up trash.

I picked up trash as a child because the enormity of sin terrified me. Here was a brokenness that I didn't understand, a field that no amount of back-breaking work could clean. A heart that no amount of my own effort could make whole. What breaks the creation – and what breaks me – is sin,

its absolute pervasive nastiness, a dark streak running down the middle of me, spilling across the Louisiana gulf, piling in our landfills.

Living greenly and caring for the environment are good, moral things to do. It is irresponsible and sinful for us to pretend that this world doesn't matter.

But it is also sinful to believe that my efforts, or the efforts of collective humanity, are the complete answer to creation's ills. My recycling is an important act, not because it alone saves the earth, but because it is an act of penitence. I recycle because the act of recycling reminds me of my dependence on the earth, my ability to ruin it and God's call to see the created world as my neighbor. If, as Paul writes, the creation “groans” for redemption, part of our work as disciples is to see our efforts as part of that groaning, that yearning, for Christ's return.

Christ died for the greed that created the BP oil spill and Christ rose for a new heaven and a new earth. The work of discipleship is to ask God's Spirit to continually transform us, and to help us hope and work for the coming of God's kingdom. Can picking up trash be a dual act of repentance and hope? And if so, can we see the earth and its needs, not as a chance to be heroic, but to be neighborly?

If Christ's death and resurrection is cosmic in scope, and if the Spirit empowers us to live as God's people, then attempts to care for the creation must be seen as signs of that coming kingdom, which will truly make all things new. As we reflect on the cross and empty tomb, may we groan with all creation, our hearts weeping with the trees and stones, who, for Christ, have the sense to sing.

*Allison Backous Troy is a writer and educator currently living in Boston, Mass., with her family. Share your comments [here](#).*