

Rolheiser: Can the ground cry out?

Does the earth feel pain? Can it groan and cry out to God? Can the earth curse us for our crimes?

It would seem so, and not just because ecologists, moralists, and Pope Francis are saying so. Scripture itself seems to say so.

There are some very revealing lines in the exchange between Cain and God, after Cain had murdered his brother Abel. Asked where his brother was, Cain tells God that he doesn't know and that he's not responsible for his brother. But God says to him: *Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are cursed from the ground which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you will till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength.*

Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground ... and from now on the ground will curse you! Is this a metaphor or a literal truth? Is the ground we walk on, till and plant seeds in, build highways and parking lots over, and call "Mother Earth, nothing other than simple dumb, lifeless, speechless, brute matter which is totally immune to the suffering and pain that humans and other sentient beings feel or indeed to the violence we sometimes inflict on it? Can the earth cry out to God in frustration and pain? Can it curse us?

A recent, wonderfully provocative book by Mark L. Wallace entitled *When God was a Bird – Christianity, Animism, and the Re-Enchantment of the Word* would say, yes, the world can and does feel pain and it can and does curse us for causing that pain. For Wallace, what God says to Cain about the earth crying out because it is soaked in murderous blood is more than a metaphor, more than just a spiritual teaching. It also expresses an ontological truth in that there is a real causal link between moral degeneration and ecological degeneration. We're not the only ones who bear the consequences of sin, so too does the earth.

Here's how Wallace puts it:

"The earth is not dumb matter, an inanimate object with no capacity of feeling and sentiment, but a spirited and vulnerable living being who experiences the terrible and catastrophic loss of Abel's death. Its heart is broken and its mouth agape, Earth 'swallows', in the text's startling imagery, mouthfuls of Abel's blood. ... Bubbling up from the red earth, Abel's cries signal not only that Cain had murdered his brother but that he has done lasting, perhaps irreparable, violence to the earth as well. ... [Now] wounded and bloodied, Earth strikes back. Earth has its revenge. Earth does not passively acquiesce to Cain's attacks and stand by and watch his gory rampage proceed with impunity. On the contrary, Earth retaliates and 'inflicts a curse' on Cain by

'withholding its bounty' from this farmer-killer who now must roam the land unprotected and without security."

The earth now refuses to give its bounty to Cain.

What Wallace affirms here is predicated on two beliefs, both true.

First, everyone and everything on this planet, sentient and non-sentient being alike, are all part of one and the same supreme living organism within which every part ultimately affects all the other parts in a real way.

Second, whenever we treat the earth (or each other) badly, the earth retaliates and withholds its strength and bounty from us, not just metaphorically but in a very real way.

Perhaps no one puts this more poignantly than John Steinbeck did some eighty years ago in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Describing how the soil which produces our food is now worked over by massive steel tractors and huge impersonal machines that, in effect, are the very antithesis of a woman or man lovingly coaxing a garden into growth, he writes:

And when that crop grew, and was harvested, no man had crumpled a hot clod in his fingers and let the earth sift past his fingertips. No man had touched the seed, or lusted for the growth. And men ate when they had not raised, had no connection with the bread. The land bore under iron, and under iron gradually died; for it was not loved or hated, it had not prayers or curses.

When Jesus says that the measure we measure out is the measure that will be measured back to us, he's not just speaking of a certain law of karma within human relationships where kindness will be met with kindness, generosity with generosity, pettiness with pettiness, and violence with violence.

He's also speaking about our relationship to Mother Earth. The more our houses, cars, and factories continue to breathe out carbon monoxide, the more we will inhale carbon monoxide. And the more we continue to do violence to the earth and to each other, the more the earth will withhold its bounty and strength from us and we will feel the curse of Cain in violent storms, deadly viruses, and cataclysmic upheavals.