

The Earth: Handle with Prayer

BY JAN JOHNSON

As the plane descended that Saturday evening, I watched forest fires raging over my special place on the planet: Southern California. Fire after fire lined the eastern corridor to Los Angeles. Once home, I could see the sky lit up and the hills above us on fire.

The next morning as the winds picked up, firefighters knocked on our door and told us to pack up to be ready to leave. But the fire receded and they didn't come back, so we went wandering toward the hills to gaze at the fire.

That's when I did something odd. I shut my eyes and held up my hand toward the direction I wanted the wind to blow so that the fire would bypass our neighborhood and move back into the hills.

My daughter's friend quizzed me, "What are you doing?"

With hesitant uncertainty, I offered, "Uh . . . I'm praying for the wind to shift."

At the time, I thought it was odd that I did that. But now I'd probably pray with determination and imitate the Master: "Peace, be still" (Mark 4:39, *King James Version*). What has changed is that my fledgling ideas about praying for our planet, its forces, its creatures, and our part in that have grown.

God could work wonders without anyone's help, but God likes having a team of partners, rather than merely puppets. Jesus told the disciples they were no longer mere servants, but friends who *knew the master's business* (John 15:15). We are part of this team, and part of our "master's business" is caring for the earth: "The highest heavens belong to the Lord, but the earth he has given to man" (Psalm 115:16). As team members, we "rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground" (Genesis 1:26).

To some, "rule over" has meant to be exploitive, but that really isn't imitating Christ, who did not find power and authority something to be exploited. Instead, the mind of Christ (which we have) involved self-giving, even self-emptying love (Philippians 2:3, 6). God tenderly cares for



creation (Psalm 104:2-32), and as partners chosen to care for and tenderly manage or "be responsible for" creation (Genesis 1:26, *The Message*), we aren't chosen for our own benefit, but for what God wants to accomplish through us.

This responsibility as God's agents—the human job description—goes against contemporary tendencies to either disregard creation or to manipulate it, praying: "God, please don't let it rain (even if there's a drought) because I want to take my boat out on the lake today." (The latter may not always be an unwise prayer unless it's the only kind of creation prayer we ever offer—manipulative). Can I let go of my manipulative ways, on the one hand, but also of my unthinking, indifferent ways ("I'm too busy to recycle") to join God in tenderly caring for creation?

Hearing the Groaning of the Earth

As God's agents on earth (Genesis 1:26), we are like estate managers, so it behooves us to learn how to be more responsible and vigilant in caring for the

earth. While there are many ways to take responsibility, one simple, overlooked way is in praying for the earth.

Such prayer requires that we understand the natural world as God's idea and God's workmanship, full of beauty and wonder. Yet this natural world is also full of ugliness and violence, but "that wasn't the original intention, and the living God has now acted to heal the world of wickedness and corruption which have so radically infected it."¹ This action involves the coming of the Christ, and through Christ, God was pleased to "reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross." The gospel of Christ (life, death, and resurrection) has now been "proclaimed to every creature under heaven" (Colossians 1:20, 23). Paul believed that the "whole cosmos is good, God-given, and despite the rebellion of the powers within it, it has been reconciled to its maker . . . new creation has been born, and must now be implemented."² How can we be a part of that?

