

**“The Star Thrower”**  
**The Very Rev. Samuel T. Lloyd III**  
**Dean of Washington National Cathedral**  
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It was an early morning some years ago, when nature writer Loren Eiseley went out for his usual walk. The beaches were littered with pieces of sea life washed up on the shore—shells, hermit crabs about to be plucked away by the gulls, fragments of green sponge, and starfish.

Ambling down the beach the hour before dawn, Eiseley encountered professional shellers racing around gathering up the shells. They were hurrying to beat out their competitive neighbors, clutching bags of living shells containing occupants that would slowly be cooked and dissolved in outdoor kettles for the resort hotels. The closer Eiseley looked at these shellers, the less he liked them. There was a casualness in their dealing with the sea life, an eagerness to grab it up and use it unthinkingly, a mindset focused strictly on making a profit.

Then up ahead he saw a man doing something different. Slowly and steadily this human figure would stoop down and pick up one of the starfish strewn across the beach and fling it back out to sea, so that it could survive. The two men exchanged a few quiet words, and Eiseley walked on. But when he looked back at the man he saw him now with a great rainbow in the sky behind him as he patiently threw back one starfish after another.

Eiseley writes about the strangeness of this man he calls the “star thrower”—that in a natural universe that knows little other than birth and striving for survival and death, a creature could emerge of such freedom and compassion as that star thrower.

One day Eiseley returned to where he saw the thrower and spotted him again, and this time Eiseley himself began to pick up star after star and fling it back out into the sea. And it struck him that perhaps other would come after them. And maybe, just maybe, he thought, there is a great hurler of stars, flinging worlds joyfully into life, and that it is the human vocation to join in breaking nature’s relentless pattern and to fling back life in the face of death.

Eiseley’s account captures, it seems to me, the sheer surprise of our human species. We earthlings are part of nature ourselves. We are made of stardust; every atom and molecule in our bodies comes from the earth and the physical universe beyond it. But we also wield power over nature either to protect or to destroy.

This morning we are joining with congregations around the country in reflecting on our calling as Christians to care for this fragile planet on which we humans

have built our lives. This planet is our nest, our home, our Mother Earth. It is the source and context in which we live our days. And now it faces immense dangers, and so in fact do we humans.

A recent cover story in *Time* magazine on global warming begins this way: "No one can say exactly what it looks like when a planet takes ill, but it probably looks a lot like Earth. Never mind what you've heard about global warming as a slow-motion emergency that should take decades to play out. Suddenly and unexpectedly the crisis is upon us...The global climate seems to be crashing around us."

And it lists the evidence—the explosion of high intensity storms around the world, the rampant spread of droughts and range fires, the rapid melting of glaciers and ice caps on mountain peaks and in Greenland, the Arctic and Antarctic. Twenty of the twenty-one hottest years since the Civil War have occurred in the last twenty-five years. Last year, 2005, was the hottest of them all.

Much of the power of the film *An Inconvenient Truth*, which was shown here in the Cathedral yesterday, is the careful documentation it provides of this rapidly intensifying climate change as a result of what scientists call "the Greenhouse Effect." The overheating of the earth arises from the increasing burning of fossil fuels—oil and coal especially—which traps the sun's heat and is warming our planet to dangerous levels.

Global warming unchecked threatens the destruction of half the species of plant and animal life on the globe and the health and well-being of hundreds of millions of people, many of them poor. Were the sea levels around the globe to rise the 20 feet that scientists predict, vast stretches of cities and nations would be under water.

For decades scientists have been warning us about the Greenhouse Effect. While some still dispute both the danger and the cause of this warming, the consensus is overwhelming. As *Time* puts it, "In the past five years, the serious debate has ended. Global warming is the real thing and human activity is causing it." And furthermore, there is a real danger that the global climate system is reaching some tipping points where slow environmental decay gives way to "sudden and self-perpetuating collapse."

And so it is urgent that we as people of faith address what some are calling the moral issue of our day, so central because unless we attend to this, the necessary foundation of everything else in our lives could be undermined. Our Judeo-Christian tradition calls us to see the earth and its creatures as God's gifts. Our scriptures begin with the story of God creating the heavens and the earth, plants and living creatures, and finally human beings—as gifts from God's generous bounty. And God gives the human creatures "dominion" over all the earth—not to use it as they wish, but to care for it reverently on God's behalf.

The Psalms are filled with a sense of the sacredness of nature as God's creation. "The heavens are telling the glory of God," we hear in one psalm. "The firmament proclaims God's handiwork." In another Psalm we hear that God "sets the earth on its foundation, makes springs gush forth and grass to grow, trees and birds, mountains and wild animals, and wine to gladden the human heart."

"The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it," another says. The earth belongs to God. It has been entrusted to us. We are temporary guests, here for awhile, to manage, to use this earth graciously for God's purposes.

Jesus saw himself as living in a holy world—of fields and lakes, pastures and mountains, the birds in the air and the lilies of the field, even, as in our gospel lesson today, the seeds that bring forth life—all these are within God's loving care.

The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber once wrote that there are two basic ways that we human beings can relate to life. The first he calls the I-You relationship, in which we exist in communion with one another and the world. All creation is alive with the presence of God, and so we relate to the world around us with gratitude and reverence.

Do you remember that first photograph of the earth that came back from outer space in 1969? There it was, a beautiful blue globe with its swirls of clouds floating through the fathomless dark night of space. James Irwin, one of the astronauts first to behold this sight said, "This beautiful, warm living object looked so fragile, so delicate, that if you touched it with a finger it would crumble and fall apart." That is an I-You way of seeing, full of wonder and respect. "Seeing this has changed [us]," he said. But has it?

The other kind of relationship Buber calls I-It, in which everything becomes an object to use, consume, and enjoy for our pleasure. The world around us is placed here solely for our benefit and convenience.

When we see the world that way we don't mind polluting the air with our vast armada of oversized cars. We don't see anything wrong with buying a healthy salad for lunch and then throwing away plastic fold-over containers, a plastic cup, and a plastic fork. We now like our water in hundreds of millions of plastic bottles that will be polluting the earth long after we're gone. It doesn't seem to worry us as companies destroy more and more Brazilian rainforests that are the purifying lungs that replenish our air with oxygen, or that we in America with 5% of the world's population produce 25 percent of the world's greenhouse gases. We Americans use twice the energy per capita of our Western European friends.

Our environmental crisis is fundamentally a spiritual one. We are only seeing the earth and the natural world in an I-It way—all of it there for our use and benefit. In our arrogance and greed we are using up the earth's nonrenewable resources and endangering our home.

And this is not only a failure to care for God's world. It is a failure in our calling to love our neighbors. We are destroying the birthright that we should be handing on to our children and their children's children. If nothing changes we will leave to the generations after us an overheated, polluted planet, having destroyed nearly half of its species, with drastically different weather patterns and whole populations displaced by rising sea levels. Mountains will have been strip-mined away and cast reserves of fish and wildlife will have been permanently eliminated. When I was talking recently to an expert on what is happening to us, he said that what he dreads most is hearing his children say to him one day, "What were you thinking?"

The challenge we face is as significant as the civil rights movement or the struggle for women's rights. As with those efforts, it's easy to conclude that there is little that you or I alone can do. But change on a sweeping scale requires the personal dedication of countless individuals, along with the commitment to social change through changing the policies and structures of a society. And certainly in this case, change must be achieved in the face of many forces and groups who have a stake in ensuring that things don't change.

Can we learn to live on this earth differently? Are we willing to sacrifice some parts of our American way of life, to use less gasoline, to develop renewable sources of energy, to take our fair place among the other nations in caring for the environment?

There is much we can do, starting with our own lives. It matters what kind of car we drive, you know. There's a whole movement getting started called "What Would Jesus Drive?" It actually matters whether we will recycle and conserve energy at home and at work as we can. Of course by itself the difference this will make is small. But joining the ranks of those who are choosing to live differently, and then pushing for better environmental policies such as higher gas taxes—all of that can make a difference.

Of course, we have to use the earth's resources to live. But listen to Kentucky farmer and writer Wendell Berry describe what being a steward of our world means:

To live we must daily break the body and shed the blood of Creation. When we do this knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament. When we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration.

In fact because this is so profound a spiritual issue, the healing of the earth starts here in worship such as this, here at this altar, where everything in the universe becomes a You and nothing is an It. God and all of us, all the earth and its creatures, become alive and personal as we belong to each other because we all belong to God. Our task is to honor God's good creation as our way of offering our obedience, our love and service, in thanksgiving for the privilege of being guests on this small planet for a few years.

It is not up to us individually to save the earth. We are simply called to do our part. We are called to be star throwers.