

## War and Planetary Violence

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Strauss

In the Vedic tradition it is written: "The goddess Prithivi, Mother Earth, is the one in whom the sea and the River Sindhu and the waters, in whom our food and corn-lands had their being. In whom all that breathes and moves is active."  
(Rig Veda)

In the Talmud it is written: "Alas for creatures who see but know not what they see, who stand but know not upon what they stand."

In the Qur'an it is written: "Surely the creation of heaven and earth is greater than the creation of man, but most people don't know it."

In Genesis chapter 1 it is written: (following closely on the verse regarding man's dominion over the earth) "Behold I have given you every plant yielding seed which is upon the face of all the earth and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the air and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food. And it was so. And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good."

Is there any doubt that the earth, its waters, air, plant and animal life...even the very stones of the earth are sacred...and deserving awe, respect and protection? Is there any doubt that our lives depend on the gifts of Gaia, Mother Earth. Is there any doubt that the very survival of the planet depends on us?

We humans travel the world in search of sacred geography- to view the Grand Canyon, to climb the mountains of India, to ride the waters of the Amazon, sail past the white cliffs of Dover, and listen to the unique music of Niagra Falls.

And yet, we who love nature, stand by in silent helplessness as so much of the world- its land and its water, its bio-diversity, along with its people, suffer destruction and devastation which will affect the planet for generations.

Yesterday, August 6<sup>th</sup> is another anniversary of the dropping of the Atomic Bomb on Hiroshima. We, who love the earth and all its people...shall not forget...the aftermath of that horrible act of war.

Next month we will mark the 10<sup>th</sup> year of the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that followed and continue still. Who will cry out for peace?

Who will stop the destruction of earth being caused by war? The 1990s were a war-filled decade. So much has been destroyed. We who live comfortably surrounded by green lawns, blue skies, clean water, and breathable air...might fail to understand the environmental costs of war. It is almost beyond our imagining.

We who live in homes and apartments and condos...rather than refugee camps, tents or under a narrow tree, might fail to feel the pain of the thousands upon thousands of dying children. It is tragic beyond words. More than the world can bear.

Yet, humans have made a god of war...first called Mars, war is an angry god that demands sacrifices of human lives and of innocent species of birds and fish and trees ...it is heart breaking. It is truly, earth shattering.

*Let us pause ...to grieve the loss of life, human and animal life, plant life- ...let us remember the places where war has scorched the earth, poisoned the water, polluted the air, mined the killing fields, dug mass graves, burned lakes of oil, - it is a litany that begins in human history , a litany never ending.*

*Manassas and Gettysburg -Austria and Hungary and Russia--London and Paris--Warsaw--Berlin--Japan--Korea---Viet Nam--Cambodia -Israel -Palestine --Angola--Columbia ---Congo---El Salvador - Ethiopia -Liberia -Nicaragua - Rwanda ---Sierra Leone--Kosovo--Kuwait -New York City--Iraq--Afghanistan--Sudan -Somalia--*

*We pray for the healing of the earth. We ask for forgiveness for humanity...we seek solace for the bereaved of the world.*

*We ask that all nations turn swords into plowshares, study peace rather than war. May the god of war, be replaced with a song of peace. This is our prayer.*

There are hopeful signs. The effects of war on the environment are being taken seriously, at last. There is a new discipline within conservation ecology called warfare ecology. Science is researching the impacts of war on species and landscapes and ecologies. The truth of war, the scope of the killing, is being revealed.

The Laws of the Geneva and Hague Conventions are not adequate to protect the environment. The question is being asked; "What protection does the natural environment merit in wartime?"

According to a U.S. State Department report, "The most toxic and widespread pollution facing mankind is landmines and other unexploded ordinance. These buried explosives not only endanger human life, but have rendered large areas of land around the world unusable."

How will we protect the natural environment from war...how will we keep huge portions of the globe from being killed off?

Within the field of environmental ethics there is a conversation focused on the Just War Theory and whether it can be extended as a theory to protect the rights of the environment in war zones.

Just War Theory was part of the Summa Theologicae of St. Thomas Aquinas, a 13<sup>th</sup> c. Dominican priest. A Just War has four core requirements: right intention, probability of success, recourse of last resort, and proportionality.

Self-defense and safe guarding of the innocent are considered part of right intention. The natural environment becomes a victim of war- an innocent victim. Under the ethic of "distinction" it is expected that warfare be directed only at combatants and that non-combatants are protected. Certainly the earth is a non-combatant.

Aquinas, like most religiously committed men and women, posits the inherent value of nature...thus including nature as a legitimate sphere of moral concern.

Humanity is vested with stewardship of the earth...we are meant to delight in natural things, not use them up...or destroy them. It is our moral obligation to protect the innocent earth.

If ethicists agree that the environment is due protection within just war theory, it could have a positive effect on universal declarations of care for the earth during times of war. Over time it could contribute to an attitude shift, a change of heart...and a change of behavior in war.

This was the intention of the 1992 Rio Declaration crafted at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development.

Principle 24 of that declaration reads:

“Warfare is inherently destructive of sustainable development. States shall therefore respect international law providing protection for the environment in times of armed conflict and co-operate in its further development, as necessary.”

Principle 25 declares:

“Peace, development and environmental protection are interdependent and indivisible.”

Just War Theory and declarations like those of the Rio conference, assume that morality is possible even in times of war.

And therefore morality ought to be expected. But the weapons of war in the 21<sup>st</sup> century present a real challenge to the exercise of morality in war. Hand to hand combat is a thing of the past. Unmanned drones operated at a computer counsel thousands of miles away make it so very easy to destroy from a distance.

The burying of land mines leads to slaughter of the innocents and the pollution of the land. The garbage of war, the mess left behind leads to uranium depletion and toxic waste.

I place my hope in our children and grandchildren who are growing up with an increased respect for the earth's resources and with an increased awareness of their responsibility for stewardship.

I pray that governments around the world will exercise their responsibility to protect the earth and its people...especially in times of war.

Is it too much to pray for peace? Is it too much to hope that my grandchildren will not grow up in a world of unending wars?

My 6 yr old grandson told me of his recent first visit to the Jefferson Memorial. His eyes were shining – it was clear that he had felt something of magnitude standing in the shadow of the author of the Declaration of Independence. I was reminded of the power of place and how deeply it hurts to see a sacred landscape, or site, destroyed.

Think for a moment of a favorite place of yours...an out of door place from your present or your past. A childhood backyard or farm. The tree you seek out each autumn. The stream you remember sitting near. The view from a certain hill. Your favorite monument.

Or the songbird that visits your porch or deck.

Think for a moment of a favorite place of yours.

Our land has mostly been a safe haven in the world.

War has seldom touched these shores. Sometimes I push myself to look at the photos of families in refugee camps, people who have had to leave their homes and the land that they loved.

Perhaps they will never again see the sunset over a familiar hilltop or the moon rise over the village where their ancestors lived for generations. Perhaps the tree under which they first made love is gone forever.

At times it seems there is little we can do to advance world peace. But there are virtues we can practice...and if more people are virtuous, perhaps fewer will hate and fight.

There are things we can do.

Giving thanks for the beauty of the earth...we can do.

Tending one small garden, we can do.

Respecting the cycle of sun and rain and seed that brings food to our table, we can do.

Eating low on the food chain, to conserve nature's resources, we can do.

Teaching our children the ways of peace, we can do.

Never giving up hope...we can only do that, together.

This morning I give you a kernel of hope for peace...let us pass the peace as we used to do. Peace be with you...and with you.

Amen/Blessed Be