Chapter 11

Where is "... and earth"?
Learning to preach in the Anthropocene

Graeme Garrett

For Ken Manley — exemplary practitioner and imaginative teacher of the difficult, delicate and mysterious art of preaching

Mervyn Himbury was a great preacher. And the best homilies critic I ever knew. As Principal of the Baptist College of Victoria, he used to hold what he called "preaching class" in Collins Street Baptist Church on Tuesday nights during term. We students took it in turns to conduct a worship service, complete with bible readings, hymns, prayers and sermon. Our fellow students, with Himbury in the midst, formed a ramshackle congregation scattered in ones and twos around the dark and cavernous belly of the church. At the conclusion of the ordeal we trooped into the vestry. There, as we sat in a circle of close-knit chairs, Himbury would lead a conversation "of appreciation and criticism" in response to what had just taken place. The lackless leader endured whatever glib or outrageous remarks his—and in the early 1960s it always was his—colleagues might care to heap upon him. At the close Himbury summed up. He spoke uninterruptedly 10 or 15 minutes, occasionally glancing at notes scribbled on a scrap of paper. His critique could be devastating, and often was. But for those who had ears to hear it was inevitably instructive. It went to the heart of the challenge which speaking the word of God in the church presents to any would-be preacher. Limping from the scorching earth of such exchanges I frequently felt dazed and bewildered. Out of my depth. In time, however, I discovered there was more to be learned about theology, hermeneutics, biblical exegesis, pastoral care and prayer—in short about preaching—in those terrifying Tuesday evenings than in most other classes put together.

Back then Victorian Baptists tended not to follow the common lectio continua which other denominations used to guide the course of their biblical teaching across the church’s year (a practice now happily changing). We made our own selection of bible readings from week to week. Of course, the question arose how, given this freedom, we might ensure a balanced and comprehensive coverage of biblical revelation in the course of our ministries. Himbury made a suggestion that stayed with me. At the end of the year, he said, take the Nicene Creed and set it against the preaching you have done in the past twelve months. A balanced diet for your congregation should include all the major themes touched on in the text. Early in my ministry I followed his advice. And it really helped. The credal test uncovered themes I favoured; and ones I avoided. It forced me to widen and deepen my preaching to encompass a fuller account of biblical truth.

In response to the invitation to contribute a piece on contemporary preaching to a volume in honour of Ken Manley (Mervyn Himbury’s successor), I decided to revisit the Himbury homilies texts; applying it this time not to a single year, but across a life’s ministry. The result was salutary. I discovered the weight of my preaching concentrates in paragraphs two and three of the creed: the parts that have to do with Christology ("We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God,... etc.") and pneumatology ("We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,... etc."). There are lots of sermons on the incarnation, life, words, actions, suffering, death, resurrection, ascension and anticipated return of Jesus Christ. Lots more on the gifts and presence of the Spirit; on the life of faith, hope and love; on the mission of the church; on baptism and the Lord’s Supper; on the struggle for justice; on human suffering and death; on the hope for eternal life. But, judged by Himbury’s test, my life’s preaching has been weak, perhaps disastrously so, in relation to paragraph one. “We believe in one God, the Father, the almighty, maker of heaven and earth...” 2. Yes, God as Father is represented. And heaven, God’s dwelling place, finds room. But then, silence. Where is "... and earth" in my preaching? I turned up a couple of late sermons written for “Creation Sunday”, a recently included feast in the church’s calendar; found some scattered references to "lilies of the field" and "birds of the air" arising from reflections on the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 6:25–33). There was a piece on Psalm 19:1, “the heavens declare the glory of God”, with some stuff about the beauty of the Milky Way at night, and a quote from Gerard Manley Hopkins: "the world is charged with the grandeur of God". Sermons on the creation stories of Genesis 1 and 2 appear. But predictably they deal with verses 26–31 of chapter one, the story of the creation of humankind in "God’s image and likeness". No preaching of mine recalls any part of the extraordinary words of God in Job 38–41, or takes off from Psalms 8, 65, 95, 104 or 148. Jeremiah 4 might as well not have been written. Homiletic silence greets me in relation to texts on the "cosmic Christ" in Colossians 1. And the extraordinary scenes played out in chapter 16 of the book of Revelation lie dormant. The prologue to the Gospel of John gets plenty of attention. But not a word on verse 3: “All things came into being through him (Christ), and without him not one thing came into being” (Jn 1:3). It’s scary.


2. I have used the lower case ‘e’ for earth in quotations taken from scripture, creed, etc., but, in accordance with common practice in nature writing these days; the upper case Earth elsewhere to underline the independent significance of this planet.
The context of preaching

Good preaching is always contextual. This is one reason why we can't simply replicate in our pulpits the sermons of great preachers from the past. No one doubts that Augustine, Luther, C. H. Spurgeon, Martin Luther King Jr. and Barbara Brown Taylor are far better preachers than I. But 5th century Africa, 16th century Germany, 19th century England, and 20th century USA are not 21st century Australia. St Augustine may be pulpit eloquence personified, but he preached the gospel to people whose language, history, culture and contemporary challenges were vastly different from our own. His words, however profound, will not find ready access to hearts shaped in the language and culture of today's Australia. We are called to preach Christ in our context, as Augustine was in his. We may strive for the excellence he manifest. But that cannot be achieved by mere imitation.

And what is our context? No simple answer exists. Issues personal, local, national and international all vie for a place. And good preaching should be sensitive to them. But for all the complexity, one matter forces itself on us. In the words of Bill McKibben, "environmental devastation stands as the single great crisis of our times, surpassing and encompassing all others". Violence, terrorism, war and poverty must be addressed.

These challenges, however, have been with us for centuries. If we are unable to solve them, they will be with us for eras to come. But the environmental crisis is new, and in McKibben's terms, it is a "timed exam". A hundred years from now our descendants will not be trying to solve the greenhouse effect. We will solve it, or it will be too late to solve, and endurance will be the challenge. And the problem is multidimensional. Jared Diamond in his brilliant book, Collapse, identifies twelve aspects of the crisis: destruction of natural habitats, reduction of wild foods, loss of biodiversity, erosion of soil, depletion of natural resources, pollution of freshwater, maximalising of natural photosynthetic resources, introduction by humans of toxins and alien species, artificially induced climate change, and overpopulation. All these threatening changes in Earth's environment have been caused (or substantially accelerated) by human activities, especially our breeding rate and our insatiable urge to consume. Recently, scientists have coined a new term to characterise this period of Earth's history: the Anthropocene (from anthropos "man" and eon "new"). The term is important because it is a "strong reminder to the general public that we are now having undeniable impacts on the environment at the scale of the planet as a whole, so much so that a new geological epoch has begun". And those impacts are, on the whole, disturbingly for the worse.

The Anthropocene affects everything: politics, agriculture, economics, science, education, law, architecture, city planning—and religion. Yet we are strangely reluctant to talk about it. Even more reluctant to act on it. The manoeuvring of our Government to try to avoid discussing climate change at the G20 meeting in Brisbane in November 2014 is a depressing case in point. The reason is that we don't want to believe it is really happening; we don't want to acknowledge our contribution to the emissions that underlie the problem; and, most of all, we don't want to take a substantial cut in our standard of living. Thus an "invisible forcefield of silence" hovers around the subject. And most of us have a vested interest in holding it firmly in place. This forcefield of silence affects preaching as well; my preaching at least. Hindley's test reveals it.

This is not a silence of our sacred texts, however, and it is not a silence of our God. Jeremiah knew nothing of melting ice sheets, dying corals and rising CO2 levels. But his words speak to the Anthropocene.

I looked on the earth, and lo,
It was waste and void;
And to the heavens, and they had no light. I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking, and all the hills moved to and fro. I looked, and lo, there was no one at all, and all the birds of the air had fled. I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert, and all its cities were laid in ruins before the Lord, before his fierce anger. (Jer 4:23–26)

This is a vivid picture of de-creation, of the un-making, of Earth. It amounts to a reversal of the Genesis account of Earth's emergence into being in response to the Creator's call. In our time, Jeremiah's words cease to be a poetic or metaphorical figuration and become something much closer to a report of the way things are. How can we recite the words, "We believe in one God, the Father, the almighty, maker of heaven and earth" and yet


5. The words are from the head of AML's Climate Change Institute, Professor Will Steffen, as quoted by Joseph Stromberg in an essay, "What is the Anthropocene and are we in it?" at <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/> accessed 3 January 2015.


7. I owe this observation to a conversation with Professor Terry Fallis of Wheaton College.
The conditions of preaching

This “and earth” is not important to contemporary preaching for contextual reasons alone. Paul famously wrote, “Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ” and “how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?” (Rom 10:17, 14). This implies that preaching and saving faith in Christ are essentially linked. How? What conditions must be in place for these sentences to be true? We don’t often spell them out. But they lurk in the background nonetheless. For example, if preaching as understood by Paul is to make any kind of sense God must exist. In a godless world preaching is a hoax or anyway an awful mistake. And God must speak. A silent God is no help. It is difficult enough in our dealings with each other to know how to interpret one who deliberately falls silent or who cannot speak. What can we hope to know of the deep mystery that surrounds us on all sides, unless from the heart of that mystery a word is spoken, a sign given? And it must be trustworthy. If the word spoken is reneged upon, if the theological carpet is laid down and then pulled out from under our homiletic feet, so to speak, how can we preach? In the Christian tradition this trustworthy word comes in its most transparent and intimate form in the life of Jesus, the “Word made flesh” (Jn 1:14). And this Word made flesh, to which scripture bears testimony, must in turn be able to take up habitation in human speech. Christ must be in the word proclaimed, a real presence. Otherwise preaching is merely a report of a life once lived long ago and far away. But if preaching is this living encounter it means that God as Holy Spirit must be active in our speaking, and in the hearing of those who listen.

These, however, are only what we might call the theological conditions of preaching. What of the other side, the anthropological conditions of preaching?

At the very least, preaching presupposes human bodies; bodies which speak, hear, think, feel and see. That much is evident in Paul’s description. No proclamation without a voice. No hearing without an ear. But no voice and no ear without a body. And no body without the conditions under which human bodies come into being. That entails the whole history of Earth, as the Creation accounts of Genesis make clear. Human beings

with their voices and ears appear right at the end of the creative process, following on and presupposing the earlier presence of day and night, land and sea, rain and wind, sun and moon, plants and animals (Gen 1:1–31). If we place this biblical narrative within a modern evolutionary understanding of the emergence of life on Earth, an astonishing picture appears. Consider just one contemporary analysis of some of the conditions of speech in humans.

We know that spoken language is dependent, not only on sufficient brain space to house the dictionary and grammar, but on quite specific features of the vocal apparatus (not just vocal chords, but the articulatory bits and pieces of the tongue and mouth) enabling us to articulate a wide range of sounds, as well as on a remarkable degree of respiratory control, allowing us to sustain long, fluent, articulated phrases, and to modulate intonations subtly over the length of a single breath. All known languages require these features. Monkeys and apes do not have any such control, which is one reason why attempts to train them to speak have been so unsuccessful.9

In order to be able to say “faith comes by hearing” or to hear “the Word became flesh,” all this bodily equipment (and more) must be in place and in play. God cannot—or at least God has chosen not to—mediate the gospel to human beings without a complex historical/evolutionary process having reached the stage where such sentences can be generated by human voices which can articulate them and be received by human ears that can decipher them. And according to the best science available to us, this process has taken some 4 billion years of development of the surface of Earth. Human life is older than scripture, animal life is older than human life, the ocean is older than animal life, and Earth is older than the ocean. In all cases, the later realities presuppose the earlier and depend upon them. But even that is not the full story. Earth itself is the creation of star dust drawn into immense clusters by the forces of gravitation, inertia and nuclear fusion operating through measureless amplitudes of space. And the process of star formation and disintegration has been underway since the Big Bang some 15 billion years ago. If preaching requires human voices and human ears to get underway—and it does—then preaching presupposes this astonishing incubation process. Preaching the gospel requires the history of the universe as its condition of operation.

Sadly, as a preacher I have scarcely stopped to marvel at this reality. I blithely stepped into the pulpit, bible in hand, and let fly; more often than I care to think, addressing the

---


9. Iain McGilchrist, The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 101. The whole chapter (pp. 94–132) in which these words appear, entitled 'Language, Truth and Music' is a brilliant exposition of what conditions must apply for speaking (and music making) animals to evolve on Earth.
hearsers as if they were disembodied souls. Had I taken more seriously the witness of that same bible to Earth as God's creation, instead of simply assuming it as a kind of passive and largely insignificant stage on which human activity (my own included) took front and centre spot. I might have been more respectful, more in awe of the vocation that preaching actually is. To speak the word “God” as it is spoken in preaching, not only requires that God be living, speaking, trustworthy and “with us” (made flesh), which is marvellous beyond telling. It also requires that the world be formed over billions of years by the intentions of the same Creator God. So that at last, and in the fullness of unbelievable stretches of time, I, with my voice and my ears, along with you and yours, and countless other human beings, have appeared on Earth and been granted a share in God’s speech, which is a share in God’s life and God’s love. In preaching we are granted a part in the bodily sonship of Jesus Christ. And in preaching we offer this same gift to others. In the light of what we know of God and of God's Earth, that is one truly astonishing gift.

The content of preaching

In addition to the influence it exerts on context and conditions, “and earth” has direct implications for the content of our preaching.

As noted above, the omission of certain biblical texts from the source of regular preaching leads to the neglect of matters of urgent theological and ethical importance in our time. Of many possible themes, let me mention just two. The first has to do with our understanding of God, the second of ourselves.

The book of Job is famous for its discussion of the theological problem of human suffering. How is it that an upright and pious man, Job, who fears God and seeks to live a just and compassionate life, is cut down in his prime with a crippling, painful and disgusting disease? Friends gather to comfort him. In the course of their stay they cannot resist offering advice, interpretation and counsel. Like many preachers, these friends seem confident—very confident—that they know who God is and how God will and should act in these difficult human circumstances. Theological debate on the meaning of suffering goes back and forth between Job and his friends for 35 long chapters. Then at last, in chapter 38, God makes an appearance. God speaks to Job. And God’s speech lasts for the next 71 verses (chapters 38 and 39). This is the longest uninterrupted speech of God in the entire bible, which in itself ought to make us sit up and take notice. And it is surprising from start to finish.

10. A second speech from God occupies most of chapters 40-41. We have space only to consider speech one.

“Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: ‘Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?’” (Job 38:1) Sobering for a preacher. Job and his friends have been spouting theology for days! But notice where the divine voice comes from. It does not come from a sacred book or from a sermon based on it. It comes from the wind. A whirlwind speaks to Job as a burning bush spoke to Moses (Exodus 3:1–6). The dynamics of the atmosphere of Earth become the medium for the word of God. This does not mean that the text advocates some simple “natural theology” as our only or primary source of knowledge of God, as some commentators maintain. The book of Job presupposes the revelation of Yahweh through the covenant with Israel and the history of its outworking as recorded in scripture. But the voice from the whirlwind reminds us that God is active, and active as word—as communication—in God’s creation. The world, as God’s own making, has being, but it also has truth.

What God says is as surprising as how God says it. Job and his friends have been preoccupied with human concerns. That is understandable. Job’s life is in disarray. He has lost family and fortune. His world is in pieces and his body in pain. Of course he is concerned with this. And with how God relates to it. But the reply that comes from God makes no mention of what has dominated the human discussion. God’s speech is beautifully crafted. It is a poetically vivid “tour guide” of Earth; Earth filled with untamed wonder that reflects the glory of its maker. The force of the utterance can only be felt by reading the speech in one sitting, and preferably aloud. But let me just list, in utterly unpoetic fashion, the elements of creation as they appear. Earth, stars, sea, clouds, morning, light, death, darkness, snow, hail, wind, rain, thunder, desert, ground, grass, dew, ice, frost, dust, cedars, lion, raven, mountain goat, deer, ass, salt land, mountain, pasture, ox, ostrich, egg, horse, hawk, vulture. The list is impressive enough. But as each element is dwelt upon by its Creator in turn, the cumulative weight of the discourse is overwhelming. This is Earth in majestic unity and incredible diversity. And there is no mistaking that this is God’s Earth through and through. God accepts responsibility for the world as it is. Earth is not ours. It is sourced and sustained from elsewhere. A series of rhetorical questions addressed to Job underline this point relentlessly.

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? 
Tell me, if you have understanding.
Who determined its measurements—surely you know! (38:4–5)

Have you commanded the morning since your days began,
and caused the dawn to know its place…? (38:12)
Have you entered into the springs of the sea,
or walked in the recesses of the deep?
Have the gates of death been revealed to you...? (38:16–17)

Not only is the making of Earth God’s business and not ours, the ordering of Earth is
God’s as well. And God orders Earth for all God’s creatures, not only for humans. Each
creature has its own place and dignity. Each is the object of the Creator’s care.

Who has let the wild ass go free?
Who has loosed the bonds of the swift ass,
to which I have given the steppes for its home,
the salt land for its dwelling place? (39:5–6, italics added)

It is not just that the wild ass happens to live in the steppes. The steppes are given to it as
its rightful home by God.11

And the great earthly drama of sea and land, sky and cloud, rain and wind, light and
dark, life and death exists and operates with and for itself, at God’s behest, independent
of human presence or human interests.

Who has cut a channel for the torrents of rain
and a way for the thunderbolt,
to bring rain on a land where no one lives,
on the desert, which is empty of human life,
to satisfy the waste and desolate land,
and to make the ground put forth grass? (38:25–27, italics added)

As McKibben puts it: “God seems untroubled by the notion of a place where no man [sic]
lives—in fact, God says he makes it rain there even though it has no human benefit at
all.”12 It would be hard to think of a stronger way of putting the point that from God’s
perspective Earth and its creatures have integrity, value and meaning in their own right,
independent of their value or meaning for us.

And God delights in Earth in all its wild, fierce, abundant, raw interaction.

Can you hunt the prey for the lion,
or satisfy the appetite of the young lions,
when they crouch in their dens,
or lie in wait in the covert? (38:39–40)

In contrast to Job, we moderns with our 4-wheel drives and high powered rifles, can not
only hunt prey for the lions, but hunt lions themselves to the point of extinction. And
yet according to this speech, lions are beloved of God. And provided for by God. And it
is not just the great and the beautiful (in our judgment) that God honours. Keeping up
the relentless questioning of Job’s limitations, God finishes the speech with a celebration
of the grotesque and the repulsive.

Is it at your command that the vulture mounts up
and makes its nest on high?
It lives on the rock and makes its home
in the fastness of the rocky crag.
From there it spies the prey;
its eyes see it from far away.
Its young ones suck up blood;
and where the slain are, there it is. (39:27–30)13

A sense of wild, frightening, glorious, tough, even grisly “otherness” runs through God’s
speech. Job complains that the world makes no human sense. God shows him the wild
Earth all about him and beyond. It is not that God ignores or forsakes Job. In the end
of the story Job’s fortunes are restored. He is redeemed. But God’s encounter with Job
has left him in no doubt that God has intentions and affections—indeed loves—that are
greater and wider than human interests and desires. Job 38–39 is a vision of a beloved
world that is more than human. Modern science has only filled out that vision with
greater and more astonishing detail.

The preacher is called to give voice to the name and nature of God as revealed in Christ
and testified in scripture. The Histories text has shown that my homiletic efforts have
been unfortunately truncated. I have spoken much of God the Redeemer, God in Christ
made human, suffering under Pontius Pilate and resurrected on the third day. I have
spoken much of God the Redeemer, the “Lord and giver of life”, with all that implies for
action in the church and in the world. But I have not spoken much of God the Creator,
“maker of heaven and earth”. And yet this, too, is God as revealed in scripture. God has
chosen to create the universe in all its astonishing splendour, vastness, complexity and
mystery. That means Earth is no accident or after-thought. God will not be God without
Earth. Earth is as central to God’s identity for us as the incarnation and the giving of the
Spirit. My practice of preaching has been binitarian (Christ, Spirit) rather than properly
trinitarian (Creator, Christ, Spirit). Until “and earth” is truly integrated in my preaching
this distortion of the name and nature of God will remain.

12. McKibben, The Comforting Whirlwind, 28; see also pp. 27–47
which have influenced me strongly in writing this section of the chapter.
13. The NRSV refers to “eagle” where I have put “vulture”. But the bloody sense of the text make the latter more likely as
the meaning intended.
But a shift in emphasis in understanding "and earth" in relation to the naming of God has inevitable consequences for our naming and understanding of ourselves. To speak of this age as the Anthropocene already points the way. Ours is an age when human (anthropo-) ambitions have begun to alter Earth and its dynamics at a planetary rather than merely a local level. God's rhetorical questions to Job about whether he is able to measure “the foundations of the earth” (38:4), or enter "the storehouses of the snow" (38:22), or alter the “prescribed bounds” of the sea (38:10), all rightly anticipate the answer "no"! Job is put in his place well and truly in comparison to God's creative designs. But we of the Anthropocene are in a markedly different position. We know a lot about the foundations of Earth. And we put that knowledge to practical use every day in our mining, agriculture, travel, commerce and city building. In so doing we alter those measurements significantly to our own ends. Snow is absolutely out of reach of any influence Job could wield. But we have become "weather makers" of genuine clout! The on-going dumping of CO2 and other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere in the post-industrial age is warming the planet to the point where huge plates of snow and ice are melting from the storehouse. And as for the bounds of the sea, anthropogenic change, again linked with increasing mean surface temperatures of Earth, is resulting in ocean levels rising, waters warming and acidic levels climbing.  This changes the conversation between God and humanity. Where Job was forced to be silent, we can and have answered back.

What does that mean theologically? Many things. And not all of them negative. Our God-given capacity for thought, intention and organised action has led to discovery, invention and technology of immense benefit to humankind: medicine, machinery, communications, transport, food distribution and so on. But the Anthropocene presents a darker and more ominous side as human influence widens. Anthropo-centre all too easily becomes anthropo-centred, that is, an almost exclusive focus on human interests and desires to the disregard of the interests and desires of other beings who share Earth with us. Martin Luther classically described sin as in secular, the turning or curving inward of the human being upon itself; a turning in which involves a turning away from God and from fellow human beings. The curved-in self, Luther argues, "seeks itself and its own interests in everything; it brings about that man [sic] is finally and ultimately concerned only for himself." 14 Radical distortion is thereby introduced into personal and social life. The will and intention of God are ignored or down-played. The legitimate interests of others are discounted or displaced altogether. Jesus’ words, "the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news" (Mk 1:15) call for a re-turning (repentance) from dominating narcissism to acknowledgment of the requirements of the kingdom of God; the kingdom of God "on earth" as the Lord’s prayer bluntly reminds us.

Preaching has always addressed this issue. The Anthropocene gives it a new and more sinister twist. The insecularus in se that marks our time has blown out beyond self and society. It has become planetary. Much of our activity is now impacting disastrously on Earth. God’s speech to Job shows God delights in the full range of beings that God has seen fit to place on Earth: wind, rain, ice, lions, ravens, mountain goats, and the rest. But humans of the Anthropocene largely ignore this catalogue of God-respected creatures in the pursuit of their own wealth and power. The assumption that Earth exists for human convenience and its bounty for human consumption pervades much of our culture. It is not so much that we consciously choose anthropocentrism as our preferred philosophical position. Rather, this is just the way we respond to the world. We live and breathe it daily. But given our numbers and technology, this means humans are in fact living at the expense of almost every other species on Earth, and finally of Earth itself. Let me just cite one issue close to home. The Great Barrier Reef is one of the astonishing splendours of the natural world, an irreplaceable glory of our nation and its land. But climate change, mining and agricultural runoff are threatening its future. In his book, The Reef: A Passionate History, Iain McCalman documents the decline of this wonder. If, as AIMS tells us, the Great Barrier has already lost half its coral cover during the last twenty-seven years through bleaching, cyclones, pollution and crown-of-thorns starfish, what will happen to this figure as the effects of acidification take hold? Reef corals will be among the first organisms in the oceans to be affected by this alarming process, stricken, in effect, with a fatal form of "coralline osteoporosis". Their aragonite skeletons will either stop growing altogether or become too brittle to resist the eroding effects of waves [and]...eventually a remorseless domino effect...will preface a succession of ecosystem disasters. 15

From the preacher’s point of view this is not just an ecological disaster, though it certainly is that; and it is not just an economic disaster, though it is as well. It is a theological disaster. It is a wifful defacing of the beauty of God’s Earth and of the integrity of a host of creaturest given their body form by the same God who took our flesh in Jesus Christ to bring us a share in God’s life. But God’s creation of Earth and Christ’s redemptive

15. See the latest IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) Reports:
work in Earth are for the world as a whole, not just for us. The great hymn in Colossians 1 (another of those texts I have ignored in my preaching) says of Christ:

in him all things in heaven and on earth were created,...all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together...For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. (Col 1:16-20, italics added.)

The word all used five times presumably means what it says. God has created all things in Christ and God intends in Christ to reconcile all things to himself. God has not created a vast universe of which Earth is an integral part, and all the things that are part of Earth's living history (as mentioned representatively in God's speech to Job), simply to focus his loving and redemptive passion on human beings to the exclusion and rejection of all other things. "And earth" matters to God in creation, to Christ in reconciliation and to the Spirit in redemption.

This means "and earth" must matter to us. Like Job, but even more urgently, humans of the Anthropocene need to be re-placed; that is, put in a new, more fitting place in the scheme of all things. We need to repent of our current inccursatus in se. To quote Bill McKibben one last time, "the first meaning...of God's speech to Job [and, I think, of the Christological speech to the Colossians] is that we are a part of the whole order of creation—simply a part".18 This is a radical message to proclaim in the Anthropocene. It runs hard against vast interests that dominate much of our politics, economies and media. To understand God as the God of all beings and to understand ourselves as just a part of God's creation—not its be all and end all—is a radical call to repentance and amendment of life.19

Conclusion

Learning to preach in the Anthropocene means learning to take seriously the "...and earth" of the creed.

This implies much more than devoting a sermon here and there to ecological topics of the moment, important though that is. It means, rather, altering our interpretive perspective
to take the biblical witness to God as Creator as seriously as we take its witness to Christ as Reconciler and the Spirit as Redeemer.

We do not preach the resurrection of Jesus only on Easter Sunday. The resurrection precipitates a "new creation" in the midst of the world (2 Cor 5:17). That changes everything. We now interpret all things, moral, spiritual, physical, economic through the eyes of resurrection life.

Again, we do not preach the Holy Spirit only at Pentecost. The life-giving presence of the Spirit transforms existence in all aspects. It affects every text we read, every sermon we deliver, every action we take.

Likewise, we do not preach "maker of heaven and earth" only on Creation Sunday. Earth is God's Earth and thus the context, condition and content of our lives. Earth must therefore significantly shape the form our preaching takes as a whole. Along with Easter Sunday and Pentecost it becomes an integral part of the theological framework in which we all "live and move and have our being" in God the blessed Trinity (Acts 17:28).

---

19. For a brilliant example of contemporary preaching which takes seriously 'and earth' see and hear Bill McKibben's sermon on Job at the Riverside Baptist Church in New York on youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GENE_BxQjMw>.