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Preaching Addressing Environmental Crises through the Use of Scripture: An Exploration of a Practical Theological Methodology

HyeRan Kim-Cragg

Emmanuel College of Victoria University, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON M5S 1K7, Canada; hyeran.kimcragg@utoronto.ca

Abstract: This article considers the critical roles of preaching in addressing the environmental crises by way of engaging with Paul Ballard's work as a particular practical theological methodology, namely the use of Scripture. This methodological consideration is followed by highlighting the work of the Earth Bible Team, which compliments Ballard's work. Both works are used as an example of a homiletical practice as well as a learning exercise, demonstrating how Scripture can be used as a homiletical resource of and hermeneutical source for doing practical theology with an eye to address environmental crises.

Keywords: environmental crises; preaching; homiletics; practical theological method; use of scripture; Earth Bible Team

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1. Introduction

In the world of the COVID-19 pandemic, we often hear the phrase: "We are all in this together." However, not everyone is equally impacted by this problem. In a world experiencing the impacts of global warming, or a climate crisis, we hear a similar phrase: "we are all part of the problem, and we are also part of the solution." However, some individuals have suffered and will suffer more than others. Whether we are an individual, a corporation, or a nation, some people have contributed to the cause of the ecological problem more than others, and thus ought to grapple with this unequal injustice. I am saying these things as someone living in a nation that has been more of a cause to the ecological problem than its solution. I am also speaking as a Christian. I am taking a confessional posture regarding my own privileged social location. I am also taking a repentant stance acknowledging that in some Christian groups, the alarm of climate change and global warming is treated as fake news. I join with many Christians who are deeply dismayed by modern millennialists and creationists who believe that it is God's will to "burn up" this world. Facing climate-change-denying Christians, those concerned about climate change are reminded of Lynn White Jr.'s question: "Is Christianity the most anthropocentric religion that the world has ever known?" (White 1967).

In 1992, feminist homiletician Christine Smith defined preaching as weeping, confessing, and resisting in order to respond to structural evil. She was primarily concerned with six systematic injustices, namely, ableism, ageism, sexism, heterosexism, White racism, and classism (Smith 1992). While her work was prophetic and ahead of its time, ecological injustice was not presented on her list. This is not surprising; as John Cobb observed at the American Academy of Religion in the same year, Christian biblical and theological discourse proceeds as if there is no environmental crisis, sometimes as if there is no natural world at all (Cobb 1992, pp. 22, 38). Such omissions continue more than two decades later in recent publications, including *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, in which the volume lists racism, sexism, heterosexism, colonialism, postcolonialism, globalization, classism, ableism, and Christian-centrism as the issues, contexts, and perspectives of practical theology, but notably omits environmentalism (Miller-McLemore 2014).

The lack of, one, the keen awareness of and, two, the adequate attention to environmental crises[1] in practical theology and homiletics has contributed to re-inscribing oppressive and colonizing relationships among humans, and has also further isolated humans from the natural world. This article considers the critical roles of preaching in addressing the environmental crises by way of engaging with Paul Ballard's work as a particular practical theological methodology, namely the use of Scripture. This methodological consideration is followed by highlighting the work of the Earth Bible Team, which compliments Ballard's work. Considering both works enables an analysis of a sermon. This sermon is used as an example of homiletical practice as well as a learning exercise, demonstrating how Scripture can be used as a homiletical resource of and for conducting practical theology with an eye to address environmental crises.

Before delving into the use of Scripture as a practical theological method, let us consider the intersectional positionality of the environmental crises as a subject matter of practical theology. Practical theologians, including homileticians, need to take into account the ways in which different forms of oppressions converge. Ecofeminist theologians have already shown how patriarchy and anthropocentrism are interlocking forms of oppression (McFague 1993; Gebara 1999; Eaton 2005; Grey 2004; Kim-Cragg 2018). They point out that when nature is associated with women, and both are subordinated to the human male, accumulative injustice and collateral suffering often occurs. Making this intersectional stance visible is critical, as part of the challenge of addressing environmental crises in preaching exposes its invisibility and the resultant indifference of Christians towards it. Despite the wildfires, floods, and droughts occurring all over the world, it is still somehow difficult to display environmental crises as the central issue in Christian preaching practice. This is not just a Christians problem. The authors of *Eco Bible*, Rabbi Yonatan Neril and Rabbi Leo Dee, also note that most "Hebrew Bible study, teaching, and preaching occur without addressing the ecological crisis" in Jewish faith communities.[2] Many Christian and Jewish preachers do not seem to feel the rising global temperature, so to speak. That is why it is both urgent and imperative to make the issues of environmental crises explicit by using evocative language and tapping into the imagination in preaching. In this vein, Philosopher Wendy Lynn Lee's naming of fracking as a form of environmental rape is exemplary. Such naming is a visceral example of an intersectional analysis of how the forces of the oil and mining industry, capitalism, colonialism, and a sexist view of nature converge (Lee 2011).

2. Reasons for the Use of Scripture Addressing Environmental Crises in Preaching

It may be useful to delineate three reasons why the use of Scripture is a helpful research method for tackling these crises in homiletics. Despite the centrality of Scripture in Christian communities (and arguably in other Abrahamic religious communities as well), the use of Scripture in contemporary practical theologies seems weak (Ballard 2011). However, this is not the case for preachers who deny global warming and climate change. Scripture is extensively used to justify such denial. For example, John MacArthur preached a sermon titled "Cal Tech and the Global Warming Hoax," citing Revelation: "God intended us to use this planet, to fill this planet for the benefit of man. Never was it intended to be a permanent planet. It is a disposable planet. Christians ought to know that."[3] MacArthur is an influential preacher and the author of *Study Bible* (MacArthur 2013), which has sold almost 2 million copies. In the same sermon mentioned above, he apprehends the creation story in Genesis 1 literally and that God created the world in six days, dismissing the scientific evidence of evolution. This is the first reason why preachers should engage the use of Scripture. It is an important tool to adequately and critically counter Christian naysayers. An adequate and critical engagement requires preachers to go beyond interpreting the Bible literally. Yet, most adult Christians have a low level of biblical understanding. This is a problem Edward Farley bemoaned in pointing out the challenges of theological education in the 1980s (Farley 1983, pp. 152–53; 1988). A 2014 study shows that Christians feel that they need some help interpreting the Bible (Goff et al. 2014). This need is a call to practical theologians, such as preachers, to provide an informed biblical understanding

for those in the pew and outside the church who may be otherwise easily misguided by an ideological interpretation coded in popular culture and social media (Beavis and Kim-Cragg 2017, p. xi).

Another reason why it may be instructive to maximize the use of Scripture is simply the fact that the Bible can offer robust arguments for why we should stop environmental destruction. Under the influence of hermeneutics, chiefly the work of Paul Ricoeur, the focus on biblical studies shifted from a focus on what lies "behind" the text to a focus on what is "before" or "in front of" the text.[4] Such a shift has introduced the importance of the context as a site for interpreting Scripture. This context provides a situated knowing and allows practical theology to make use of the life conditions of people as raw material in their theologizing (Fulkerson 2007, p. 7). The environmental crisis calls for practical theologians to interpret the Bible in ways that respond to the situated ecological conditions and complex suffering realities that result from ecological injustices.

The other reason why the use of Scripture is helpful in addressing the environmental crisis has to do with its capacity to influence the imagination. This is connected to the ability to observe the past and behold the future in a non-linear way. Postcolonial biblical scholar Tat-siong Benny Liew talks about having "yin and yang eyes", when one interprets the Bible (Benny Liew 2008, pp. 2, 19). Scripture is an ancient text. It comes from the past and captures a particular wisdom of ancestors regarding faith, their resilience, struggles, and failures as well as their faithfulness. Scripture, in this regard, is the written record of the past. However, this past is not unrelated to the present and the future. In fact, when we read the Scripture closely, guided by the Holy Spirit, we see that the issues that people in the Bible grappled with are not so foreign from what we, the people in the 21st century, are dealing with. However, to hear the voices from the past loud and clear, one needs to exercise the imagination. My point here is circular. We need the imagination to understand Scripture and we need Scripture to develop the imagination. The use of Scripture helps to cultivate the imagination (Kim-Cragg 2021, see chapter 2 on imagination, pp. 29–76). In a similar vein, to adequately and steadily address the environmental crises today, we need to behave as if the future is already here. We must be able to listen to the future heirs of planet Earth. To be able to see and hear the future generations of our descendants also requires the power of the imagination. The use of Scripture has the power to tap into people's imagination in such a way as to release this potential. With imagination, as the prophet Isaiah proclaimed, we will be able to hear the mountains and hills burst into song, and the trees of the field will clap their hands (Isaiah 55: 12).

3. The Use of Scripture: A Practical Theological Methodology

Paul Ballard proposes four different modes of the use of Scripture in practical theology. These modes emerged from collaborative research that was published under the title, "the Bible in Pastoral Practice Project" (2000–2005) (Ballard and Holmes 2006). The four modes of the use of Scripture include (1) the Bible as resource, (2) Bible in worship and spirituality, (3) Bible as wisdom for theological reflection, and (4) Bible as a source of empirical research (Ballard 2011, pp. 165–71). A brief examination of these modes is helpful here as I employ them, respectively, in the analysis of the sermon in the next section.

The first mode views Scripture as a resource for performing practical theology. The term "resource" has multi-layered meanings. For Ballard, using Scripture as a resource means that it can provide a normative framework for practical theology in general and pastoral counseling in particular. The notion of Scripture as a resource assumes that Scripture is a living text, which invites readers to correlate it to a present reality. Scripture is also used as a resource for performing contextual analysis, for examining the sociocultural and economic realities, both then and now. This is a mode that is often taken up by liberation theologians. In summary, the mode of Scripture as a resource identifies it as a reservoir into which practical theologians can tap. Scripture contains many different, albeit partial, stories and events that can shed light on current issues and present-day situations, while illuminating how God is at work in those situations.

The second mode of the use of Scripture is found in liturgy or worship settings. It is in the corporate and consistent practice of worshipping together as a gathered body of Christ that Scripture is most prevalently used, directly cited in the case of preaching or during sacraments, praise and prayers. In this regard, the use of Scripture is closely related to congregational studies as it compliments liturgical theology where the concern is not only what the Bible says, but how it has been used, enacted and re-membered as the work of the people of God in a setting in relation to worship.

The third mode of the use of Scripture is hermeneutics. This interpretive mode helps readers to discern where God is at work in the Bible and today. It supports and enhances a spiral praxis model of performing theological reflection, starting from the current reality, through the critical analysis, and moving on to action, a spiral that is especially important for a participatory action approach to practical theology. Theological reflection may also begin from the reality in the Bible, which relates to the contemporary context or a reality that informs a pastoral prophetic response from a correlational theological perspective.

The fourth mode is to view the Bible as an object of practical theological research. As a topic of the research in practical theology, the following questions can be asked of it: how has a scriptural text been received in the church (i.e., the congregational and/or denominational study), how has the Bible been used as content and a process (i.e., Christian education and faith formation), how is the Bible read and understood by the laity or clergy, and how has the Bible been portrayed or distorted (i.e., in or by popular culture and media studies or socio-cultural studies).

Ballard's approach brings the Bible into critical conversation with the work of practical theology. Yet, a more substantial and sustained attempt to engage with the Bible is required in order to address environmental crises. One such attempt is found in the work of the Earth Bible project, which was first developed by a team of biblical researchers from Adelaide, South Australia.[5] The project grew as a collaboration of scholars from around the world who use specific eco-justice principles to foreground their reading and analysis of biblical texts.

The Earth Bible Team underscores the agency of the natural world as they suggest six ecojustice principles for developing a hermeneutic method to read the Bible. These principles, developed over several years, are chosen to facilitate a dialogue with biologists, ecologists, and other religious leaders beyond the Christian Church. These principles state that (1) the Earth has intrinsic worth (the Earth is valuable in itself and not just in a utilitarian sense as a means to an human end), (2) all life is interconnected (the earth and human life are interdependent), (3) the Earth has a voice (and its own language), (4) the Earth has purpose (which can be found in the cycle of life), (5) the Earth is subject to mutual custodianship (the Earth and humans have co-responsibility for the household, oikumene), and (6) the Earth is an agent of resistance (the Earth has the power to survive and revive) (The Earth Bible Team 2000). These principles provide a helpful way to pose questions of the biblical text by using a hermeneutic of both suspicion and retrieval. Readers, including preachers, should suspect that the Bible was written by privileged men and that the work of interpretation calls for a retrieval of the Earth community that has been suppressed or hidden.

In the present work, a specific sermon is analyzed by highlighting the work of Ballard and the Earth Bible Team's six principles to demonstrate how the use of Scripture in preaching as a particular method of conducting practical theology can be employed in relation to the environmental crises, and how it can inform necessary actions. It should be noted that not all four modes of Ballard's work and not all six principles are fully reflected in the analysis of the sermon.

4. Sermon as an Example of the Use of Scripture for Addressing Environmental Crises

Sermon Title: The Pruning God[6]

Scripture Passages: John 15: 1–2

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. 2 He [sic] removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he [sic] prunes to make it bear more fruit." (NRSV)

One sunny afternoon many years ago, my partner and I were in my old stomping grounds in Toronto's Koreatown near Christie on Bloor. We had stopped to admire a concrete planter full of flowers sitting at the edge of a grocery store parking lot. A woman entering her house just beyond noticed us standing there. She told us she had planted these flowers. They were not on her property, but since the big planters had been left unattended, she had taken it upon herself to see that there were flowers in them, a wonderful act of service to the neighbourhood. After a very short visit with this lovely lady, she surprised us further by inviting us into her backyard to show us her own private little vineyard! She enjoyed telling us how the grapes grew and how she made wine from them. She told us that she had to prune and tend to the vines, a 10 min lesson in grape growing. It was a remarkable and joyful encounter.

Some years passed and my family moved to Saskatoon. A church friend in Saskatoon invited my family to visit their home one summer day. Our friends are gardeners and had all kinds of plants in their backyard but we were particularly taken by their grape vine. We tasted the grapes. They tasted heavenly. Our friends encouraged us to grow our own vine and gave us a few plants to get started. We found the sunniest and warmest spot in our garden and put them in a row. Every day, we faithfully checked the plants, watered them, put supports in so that the vines could grow and weave.

In the Gospel of John, God is the vine grower and Jesus is the true vine and we are his branches. As a good gardener, God removes every branch that bears no fruit. God does a bit of pruning. God is the pruning God.

Vineyards were familiar to Jesus' disciples and also to the Jewish Christian community within which the Gospel of John was written. Jesus' followers and the earliest Christians would pass vineyards as they walked from place to place every day. Some likely had their own vineyard or worked in a vineyard. They were able to discern fruitful branches from those that would drain the vine's energy and yield no fruit in return. They would learn how to trim branches, all the while feeling good about the surgical purpose of their work. Pruning might seem cruel, but it renews the vine's vitality. Useless branches drain the plant's strength to leave them in place serves no purpose and reduces the value of the vineyard. The vine growers need to cut away unfruitful branches and burn them to get rid of them.

Crisis events often require us to prune our lives. We learn to prioritize things that really matter, not just as individuals but for the community collectively. COVID 19 pruned us. It cut some aspects of our lives down to the bare necessities. It also showed us where branches of our community tree need tending. This pandemic revealed poverty, racism, sexism, ageism, ableism, ecological danger and violence. It revealed things in society, branches of human-centric anthropocentrism, that should not be there, branches of our culture that need pruning.

Though there are signs that the vaccines are helping us move out of the pandemic, we will not be able to return to the ways things were before COVID 19. There are areas of life that have been changed and will not come back. But there are also new shoots pushing out to replace what was lost. We have to keep a careful watch, as followers of the Pruning God. Has there been damage to the vine that needs tending to? Are old unfruitful branches in danger of springing back?

Crises are one thing that will prune our lives. Moving is another. And if that move means traveling thousands of kilometers and adjusting to a new language and culture, that will require even more. This past year I have been working on a book project to write about preaching in the United Church of Canada, anticipating a centennial anniversary of our Church in 2025. My colleague from St. Andrew's College, Prof. Don Schweitzer

and I have collected sermons from a variety of UCC preachers going back 110 years! We have sermons from well-known preachers such as George Pidgeon, Lois Wilson, Cliff Elliott, and Stan Lucyk. We also included sermons from lesser known preachers such one preached in a Japanese internment camp during the Second World War and two short Christmas sermons preached to French congregations in Quebec. In order to behold the future, we need to look back on the past. Reading through these sermons from the past has been comforting and assuring because I have found many of them so insightful, visionary, and bold, grappling with their own issues of the day, which are mysteriously not so different from our own issues today. I felt God's presence in these sermons.

One sermon speaks very powerfully to me and shares a similar message that we have heard from the Gospel of John today. It is the sermon of the Right Rev. Dr. Sang Chul Lee, the former moderator of the United Church of Canada and the former Chancellor of Victoria University in the University of Toronto. This is Rev. Lee's inaugural sermon which he preached on the very first Sunday at Toronto Korean United Church in 1969. The Rt. Rev. Sang Chul Lee served that church for more than 20 years and, of course, went on to be the moderator of the UCC in 1988. Keep in mind, however when you hear his words today, that in 1969 he was relatively new to Canada and that he was preaching to a group of immigrants. Most of the congregation members would have arrived in Canada no earlier than 1966, the year Canada's immigration policy changed allowing more racialized people to settle in the country. Therefore, most of the congregation would have been in Canada no more than three years when Rev. Lee preached this sermon to them. That is at the heart of Rev. Lee's message. Let me translate his words for you:

The new world developing before us is amazing and bright. But those things that we have become psychologically attached to in the past still call out to us and create a kind of hesitation and anxiety. We have not been practicing the new way of life. Still we have to spur ourselves on and try to throw ourselves into this new world. For this is the life we have been given. This is the duty that needs our secret stores of courage. It is a task of great value.

Those old things that we need to get rid of are the things our bodies have become used to and things we have become familiar with and so throwing them away will cause sorrow. But in order to learn new things we have to clear those things out . . . . It requires us to cut away a long-accrued part of our life and this is a task which is marked with pain. This cutting requires vulnerability. It is a work of completely exposing our weakness and ignorance. That is why it is not something we can do without suffering and passion. But there is a reward of being open to newness. It is like having the innocent heart of a child.

The Rt. Rev. Lee invited his congregation to cut away the old way of life. For Lee, allowing God to prune and teach results in a renewed life.

The Greek word for "pruning" in the Gospel of John is kathaírō (καταχάιρο)—which means to make clean by purging (removing undesirable elements); eliminating what is fruitless by purifying. The word, pruning, kathairo means to cleanse and purify. The pruning God is a decisive God. God engages a decisive action to cut things off and remove things that are taxing the life of the vine and preventing the fruit of new life to come forward. Humans need to confess a pruning and purifying God and join God's work today more than ever.

Take environmental crises seriously, for example.

Dear people of faith,

This is an issue that I feel, more than any other, requires our attention today. "The UN Report on Climate Change" in August 2021 is startling. God is calling us to make decisions and prune our life in ways that will allow human life to continue to thrive on the planet. We need to follow God who engages decisive actions that will stop global warming. God is urging us to cut food waste, cut garbage, and cut the use of energy for

heating and cooling, cut buildings that are inefficient and energy burning houses in the suburbs and cities, cut out our private car use, and much more besides!

This old Greek wisdom on pruning is so instructive to those of us living in the current climate crisis and ecological devastation.

Mark Carney, the former governor of both the bank of Canada and the bank of England, now a UN special envoy on Climate and Finance, gave the 2020 BBC Reith Lecture based on his book, Values: Building a Better World for All (Carney 2021). He identified three crises facing the world today, each starting with the letter "C": COVID-19, Credit, and Climate. The recovery from COVID-19 and the recovery of the economy are closely related to the restoration of the damaged planet earth. He said that the ultimate test of a fair economy will be how it addresses the growing climate crisis. What is valued is not always the same as what is profitable. In fact, we painfully learned during the pandemic that financial values have to be replaced with communal and social values. I would add that market values are not greater than the divine values, what God favors. And I say again, market values are not greater than the divine values.)

When the ecosystem is on the verge of collapse, many economic considerations need to be cut away. The sooner we act, the less costly it will be. Speed and scale will be critical. The goal of achieving net zero carbon emissions must be our priority. The good news is that 140 big countries have committed to achieve this goal and the numbers of the countries are increasing. The manufacture of certain cars that pollute the air will be pruned in Europe in 2030. The Canadian government also pledged that the sale of gas running cars will be purged by 2035. Cutting out the use of coal as fuel has yet to happen. There is lots to do, still.

Dear branches of the True Vine,

I invite you to look at your home, your workplace, and your congregation! What needs to be pruned in order to tackle the climate crisis? What decisive action do you as a community of faith need to make to allow life on earth to flourish? What pruning can you think of as a spiritual discipline to cut down waste and eliminate overconsumption? How shall we contribute to saving the earth as a daily Christian practice?

Let me suggest how we can join God in the work of pruning every day of the week individually and collectively.

Monday for Meditation. Think about, read about, learn about our planet and what we need to do to keep it healthy. Monday for Meditation includes simply delighting in the beauty of the life around you in creation while walking and biking or doing nothing else.

Tuesday for Turning off machines and lights. Try not to use cars or airplanes and look out for lights left on.

Wednesday for Waste free. Try not to make unnecessary waste, whether it is food, water or other waste.

Thursday for Thrift. Don't throw things out that can be used later or by others. Spend less. Borrow or lend something rather than buying something new.

Friday for Future. This motto is not my original idea but the international movement of young people that started by Greta Thunberg, August 2018, exactly 3 years ago. Millions of young people from over 150 countries are doing a prophetic act, demonstrating on Friday to demand action from political leaders to take action to prevent climate change and for the fossil fuel industry to transition to renewable energy.

Saturday for Sabbath. This is an ancient Jewish practice of resting. Resting can be good for you and I. It is also good for the Earth! We join this Jewish practice as a way of pruning our life and saving the earth, even if as Christian we celebrate Sunday as our sabbath.

Sunday for Sharing. As we gather as a congregation, let's find ways to share the work we have done to prune our lives for a thriving planet! Be with people that you love and who need your love. Encourage one another!

Monday for Meditation, Tuesday for Turning Off, Wednesday for Waste Free, Thursday for Thrift, Friday for the Future, Saturday for Sabbath and Sunday for Sharing. I will look forward to hearing how you have been doing regarding this matter next time when we meet in person.

These are some tips for pruning. The guiding principle of all these actions is to prune branches of despair and apathy so that branches of hope and renewal can flourish. Pruning is holy work. May God, the chief gardener, bless your gardening this day and always.

What happened to the vine we grew in Saskatoon? Well, let's just say we did not leave that house with a vineyard in the backyard! We did our best, but God is the real gardener. And sometimes God saves and gives life by pruning. God in Jesus can give you life–life abundant and free. A life that grows, a life that bears fruit, a life that takes root even in these troubled times. If we do our part, the divine gardener will do the gardener's part. And not only will the dead flowerpots on the street corner come back to life but the dead dreams, dead relationships, dead careers, and even this dying, nearly dead world will come back to life.

Amen and thanks be to God.

5. Sermon Analysis: A Critical Reflection

The main idea of the sermon is to invite the congregation to observe God as the pruning God, while drawing our attention to environmental crises. While we must admit that God as Father is still androcentric and anthropocentric, thus, a hermeneutic of suspicion is warranted as the Earth Bible Team pointed out (Habel 2000, p. 39), it is God in Jesus as the True Vine who embodies a community of interconnectedness, which is the second principle suggested by the Earth Bible Team. In embracing both an androcentric and plant-centered theology, the sermon focuses on John 15:2, and highlights the verb, *prune*. Here, this verse containing the particular verb serves as a resource of practicing theology that addresses the environmental crises, resonating with Ballard's first mode of Scripture. This verb is active, involving a human agency inviting a costly and vulnerable act, affirming the work of the Earth Bible Team. It further develops the idea of the original Greek word for pruning, *kathaírō*, which means purging and purifying, to address the current reality of the COVID-19 pandemic and urge concrete actions. The sermon taps into the ancient text in order to relate to the current context that calls for action addressing environmental crises, which is the third mode suggested by Ballard. Hermeneutically speaking, to name God as the pruning God is to interpret the biblical text by unearthing a divine activity that is not obvious. One may argue that not only is the agency of the Earth community is hidden, but also that of God is overlooked in our theological understanding. This draws on the insight of the Earth Bible Team regarding the retrieval of hidden traditions.

Preaching takes place in worship and contributes to the strengthening of the spirituality of the people in the pew as well as of the preacher. As a central piece in the sermon, it can easily demonstrate Ballard's second mode of the use of Scripture for enhancing worship and spirituality. The sermon was preached during a Sunday in summer, intentionally celebrating the liturgical season of the creation. Congregations were invited to deeply encounter the natural world in this season, while hearing about the U.N. report on climate change and that of the COP 26 Conference was being organized in October 2021. Ballard's third mode of the use of Scripture, viewing the Bible as hermeneutical wisdom for theological reflection, is employed in this sermon. Following the Earth Bible Team's third principle, the scripture allows us to hear the cries of the creation (Habel 2000, pp. 46–48). Instead of allowing itself to be co-opted by a dominant reading, a reading that silences the language of the Earth, we are also able to hear the voice of the Earth, groaning and resisting, through the agony of God as a gardener who must cut the branch off and unroot

the plant that is not going to bear fruit. Using the words of the Earth Bible Team's fourth principle, the Earth has a purpose, which is to sustain life in all its diversity and beauty. Hence, the use of Scripture in this sermon helps preachers proclaim God who attends to the condition of the creation and invites humans to join in this work.

The writer of the Gospel of John uses the theological metaphor of chief gardener and True Vine. The sermon highlights this theological metaphor by evoking the congregation's capacity to imagine Jesus in a non-androcentric and non-anthropocentric way. This promotes ecological consciousness and interdependent perspectives. The very agenda of practical theology is found in the use of the theological metaphor. Bonnie Miller-McLemore proposed that the future of practical theology lies in the shift of the guiding metaphor from "living human document" to "living human web", with the recognition of interdependence between personal, political and public well-being (Miller-McLemore 1993). Yet, a decade later, she admitted that this shift did not observe the presence of the "non-human" natural world and noted the absent theme for pastoral theologians (Miller-McLemore 2020). The sermon, in this regard, reveals the interdependence of and inseparability between the Triune God, humans and non-human lives for the sake of addressing compounded by environmental crises.

The sermon presented here, entitled "The Pruning God," compels us to grapple with human greed to confess, expose, and resist our exploitation of nature in ways that reorient our priority to make decisive actions by pruning our life with a view to the Earth's purpose. The sermon has a confessional posture. This confessional posture meets the resistance of the Earth. The resistance of the Earth is what reveals sin and judgement in a way that is similar to how Hebrew Scripture relays God's judgements and calls to repentance (Jer. 12: 4, 7–11, Hos. 4:1–3). Canadian ecofeminist theologian Heather Eaton, commenting on the Earth Bible Team's principles, notes that the last principle, resistance, "requires imagining the Earth not only as a subject capable of agency, but one that has a sensitivity toward justice for the Earth and to the human community." (Eaton 2000, p. 69). The sermon shares the preacher's personal experience. It indirectly communicates the Earth's intrinsic agency and purpose. Yet, the sermon equally calls for an interdependent stance vis– vis human, creation, and Creator.

The sermon proclaims God's desire to mend the broken relationship between the non-human creation and that of humans, even if this mending requires pruning, a costly and uneasy reorientation, a radically different way of life. In this regard, the sermon moves to invite people to participate in concrete (and manageable) actions, highlighting the value of mutual custodianship as the fifth principle laid out by the Earth Bible Team. To follow and believe in the pruning God requires repentance involving a change of heart and habits. Repentance as truth-telling requires honesty. Repentance requires vulnerability. Repentance requires courage. It is hard work. That is why we need to seek the help of our ancestors in faith who have traveled the way of confession and repentance ahead of us. Tapping into the wisdom of the ancestors is similar to imagining that they are tapping on our shoulders, by encouraging us to see that we are not alone in performing the hard work of repentance. That is why repentance as an essential practice of Christianity is related to remembering the past. Confession as a part of repentance in this regard involves naming our own mistakes, complacency, and complicity and actively drawing wisdom from our ancestors guided by the work of the Holy Spirit, so that we can turn to God, a re-orientation toward the Earth and the Divine mystery, as a source of life.

Drawing wisdom from our ancestors in faith through the Book of Revelation, John Holbert argues that this particular biblical text exposes the horror of the economic and social monster of the Roman Empire in the first century, and that it can help us to repent of our complicity in similarly monstrous empires in the twenty-first century (Holbert 2011, p. 86). The same point can be made in the Gospel of John, the text for the sermon, because, arguably, it is the same author, John, or the community to which John belonged who wrote both the Gospel and Revelation. It is also important to note that the author, John, did not write the books specifically for us with our context in mind. Yet, we "overhear" what was

written and "tell" it to our own people in a confessional manner (Craddock 2002). This overhearing and telling is what it means to proclaim the Gospel in an age of environmental crises. This is the preaching act. It is about bearing public witness to the exposure of a sinful act, by owning our own complicity and complacency and inviting the hearers to take necessary action. Confession and repentance, in a homiletical sense, are not doctrinal but performative. John of Patmos himself, writing the book of Revelation, performed a funeral liturgy and delivered a sermon exposing the ugly face of the Roman Empire (Rev. 18). John the homilist helped his hearers envision the end of the world of the imperial economic system. We overhear his homily and it is our task to tell it to our people by addressing today's Empire (Keller 2005, p. 2), which threatens the ecosystem of the Earth.

6. Conclusions

The article has attempted to showcase how the use of Scripture as a methodology of practical theology, following Ballard's four modes, and the Earth Bible Team's six ecojustice principles, can be effective in addressing environmental crises through preaching. It suggests that Scripture can be used as a resource for and of conducting practical theology. In particular, the preaching ministry unveils sins by way of truth-telling as confession, and invites congregations to practice repentance, turning to God who is at work healing the ecological wounds and reorienting the human mind and spirits towards a concern for the wellbeing of the planet.

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Notes

1 The term "environmental crises" is mainly used to encompass various and inter-locking problems of climate change, global warming, environmental racism, and forced migration. The use of this term is also conducive to the Special Issue of this journal theme.

2 See (Neril and Dee 2020, p. xvi). It is published through The Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development, found at www.interfaithsustain.com.

3 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZTlYl8E_B14&t=1s, accessed on 3 March 2022; see the critical review of his sermon, John MacArthur on Cal Tech and the Global Warming Hoax, https://theconversation.com/god-intended-it-as-a-disposable-planet-meet-the-us-pastor-preaching-climate-change-denial-147712, accessed on 18 February 2022).

4 *Semeia* 4: Paul Ricoeur on Biblical Hermeutics (1975). Additionally, Ricoeur's work on hermeneutics is found in 1980. *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*. Edited by Lewis S. Mudge. Philadelphia: Fortress. Available online: https://www.religion-online.org/book/essays-on-biblical-interpretation (accessed on 3 March 2022).

5 The Earth Bible Project. Available online: http://www.webofcreation.org/Earthbible/ebteam.html (accessed on 3 March 2022).

6 This sermon was preached in August, 2021, at a local United Church Congregation in Toronto.

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