

Flooding Isengard:
Why a Peace Church Should be a Green Church

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2 April 2004

1,439 words

One of my favorite images from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is the flooding of Isengard. For those of you who haven't read this great novel or seen the excellent film adaptation, I'll explain: Isengard is the fortress of the wizard Saruman, who gives in to the temptations of power and throws in his lot with the Dark Lord.

Before Saruman falls from grace, his residence at Isengard is a wonder of natural beauty. But when the wizard turns to evil, he begins to make war on his neighbors, and war requires industry to support it. A military economy changes the valley of Isengard dramatically, as Tolkien describes:

... The plain ... was bored and delved. Shafts were driven deep into the ground; their upper ends were covered by low mounds and domes of stone, so that in the moonlight the Ring of Isengard looked like a graveyard of unquiet dead. For the ground trembled. Iron wheels revolved there endlessly, and hammers thudded. At night plumes of vapour steamed from the vents, lit from beneath with red light, or blue, or venomous green.

Saruman ravages the nearby forests to fuel his engines of war, and this is where he overreaches himself. In Tolkien's world, nature fights back. The forests themselves rise against Isengard and destroy it, tearing down a dam to flood the whole valley until, as Tolkien writes, "all the filth of Saruman is washed away." It reminds me of Amos 5.24 - "But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!"

What I like best about this little facet of Tolkien's epic is that it illustrates the intimate connection between warfare and destruction of Creation itself. It demonstrates that those of us who follow Christ's call to peace must also listen to his Father's call to take care of the world he gave us.

Why should a peace church be a green church? The Bible itself links restoration of the created world with humanity's salvation, which Anabaptists understand to mean the

end of strife and warfare. Wars throughout history have damaged Creation in the process of killing humans. Most importantly, an environmental perspective can inform and strengthen our understanding of conflicts in the modern world and open up new opportunities to spread the Gospel of peace.

From the literal Beginning, scripture connects the state of human souls to the state of all Creation. In Genesis 3.16-19, just after Adam and Eve have committed the first sin, God describes to them the consequences of their action:

Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it
all the days of your life.
It will produce thorns and thistles for you,
And you will eat the plants of the field.
By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food...

In turning from relationship with God, Adam and Eve have broken their relationship with the rest of Creation. No longer will the natural world support their needs without any work – life has become a struggle for survival, because all of Nature has fallen with its former caretakers.

The Bible often ties restoration of all Creation to the salvation of fallen humanity. Paul writes in Romans 8.22 that "...the *whole creation* has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth ... [until] the redemption of our bodies."

And at the other end of history, the author of Revelation pictures "a new heaven and a new earth" after the Second Coming, and describes the New Jerusalem in chapter 22:

...the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city.

On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse.

Christ's return is marked by the restoration of fallen and abused Creation as well as humanity's final salvation. Eternal peace reigns beneath the boughs of the healed tree of life.

It seems only natural that warfare, as one of the most visible symptoms of our fallen nature, should be as fundamentally damaging to Creation as it is to human life. John Howard Yoder wrote in *The Christian Witness to the State* that "even the smallest and most gentlemanly war strikes more innocent than guilty persons." Nature herself is the innocent person stricken by every war humans have ever fought.

In 146 BCE, Roman legions salted the ground of defeated Carthage to complete the destruction of their enemies' homeland and prevent the survivors from planting crops and rebuilding the city. But the same salt that prevented Carthage's rebuilding surely prevented wild plants from growing in the fields just as thoroughly, crippling an entire ecosystem just to keep Rome's enemies in check.

Nowadays, we have more effective things than salt. During the Vietnam War, the United States military dumped some 11 million gallons of the defoliant herbicide Agent Orange on about 10 percent of South Vietnam's land area. The strategic reason was to deprive enemy guerillas of cover – but the Vietnamese jungle received massive "collateral damage." Today the ecosystem is still poisoned by those herbicides. A study by native scientist Dr. Nguyen Viet Nhan, cited in a 1998 BBC report, links Agent

Orange to a tripling in the rate of children born with cleft palates, extra fingers or toes, and mental retardation. The war is over, but the salt lingers in Nature's wounds.

At the end of the first Gulf War, the Iraqi Army deliberately released some 460 million gallons of Kuwaiti crude oil into the Persian Gulf, killing fish, turtles, crabs, mollusks, and between 20 and 30,000 seabirds. The Iraqis also set fire to hundreds of Kuwaiti oil wells, filling the air with smoke that actually altered the local temperature before returning to earth as acid rain.

Beyond giving us one more reason to call war evil, concern for the environment can open doors for a church which wishes to make peace in the world. In the secular world, pacifism is often closely tied to environmentalism – witness Greenpeace, which was founded out of concern for the environmental effects of nuclear testing as much as it was to prevent nuclear war. People who seek a nonviolent worldview are also concerned for the health of Nature, and the church that offers them nonviolence must also offer a vision for the salvation of Creation.

In some ways, the Mennonite Church's wilderness camps are at the cutting edge of this idea. One of the best examples is the Outdoor School at the Spruce Lake resort and campground near Canadensis, Pennsylvania. As it provides lessons about the surrounding Pocono woodlands to families and school groups, the Outdoor School offers ways to move from the sense of awe we all find in the beauty of Creation to the worship of the Creator behind it all.

A field ripe for planting with environmental peacemaking is Israel-Palestine, where unequal distribution of water resources are as much a source of conflict as the

ownership of the Temple Mount. I remember well from the semester I spent there as part of Eastern Mennonite University's cross-cultural program: the shores of the Sea of Galilee are filthy with litter, Israeli bulldozers destroy forests as they secure land bordering West Bank settlements, and we were warned about wading in the Mediterranean Sea at Gaza Beach because of the untreated sewage that flows from Gaza City. Linford Stutzman, who led our cross-cultural group, suggested something then that made me think – why couldn't a peace church bring Israelis and Palestinians together to clean up the land for which they both care so passionately?

Truly the possibilities are endless, for we humans are as endlessly inventive in our destruction of Nature as we are in warfare. Churches committed to peace must also hear the Biblical connection between human and natural salvation. They must see the destruction wrought upon innocent Creation by the evils of warfare; and we must seek the opportunities born of the union between care for human life and care for the natural world. The Psalmist sings, "The Earth is the Lord's and everything in it/ the world, and all who live in it..." If we choose to see the work of the Church as the duty to care for all that belongs to the Lord, the Church's work in the world can be like the flooding of Isengard, washing away sin and all its ill effects in a never-failing stream of righteousness.