

Let's make Earth Day about the Earth martyrs

Flowers and creation hymns aren't going to cut it this year.

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Members of the Landless Workers Movement in Brazil. [Some rights reserved](#) by Wilson Dias/ABr - Agencia Brasil.

This weekend, many churches will celebrate Earth Day. Preachers will extoll the beauty of God's creation. Hymns like "This is My Father's World," "Earth and All Stars," and "For the Beauty of the Earth" will be sung. The emphasis will be on celebrating the glories of creation.

I can't do it this year.

When I was a pastor I would place a pot of soil, a watering can, and a basket of seeds on the altar and invite the children to help me bless them. We would invite

congregants to bring their garden tools and gloves, wheelbarrows, and even tractors to church, and we would process outside and ask for God's blessings on our labors for and with the earth. Everyone would choose a packet of seeds from the basket and depart with the promise of spring and new life—and with the satisfaction that we had done our part for God's creation.

These rituals of creation care are right and salutary. But they're not going to cut the mustard right now.

Now is not the time for feel-good "green" hymns and ecological tokenism in our churches. Not when [the Trump administration has installed the most anti-environmental cabinet in our nation's history](#) and [Congress has voted to give coal mining companies free rein to pollute waterways](#) to their stone-cold hearts' content. Not when air pollution, pesticides, poor diets, and radiation have led to [a sharp increase in cancer diagnoses among children](#). Not when fracking and drilling are poisoning the air, water, and land of our communities.

And not when people like Waldomiro Costa Pereira are being murdered for trying to protect their land from rapacious corporations and wealthy landowners. [According to the Guardian](#), Brazil saw 61 killings of land rights activists last year and 150 since 2012. Pereira, who was affiliated with the [Landless Workers Movement \(MST\)](#), was killed on March 20, when half the world was celebrating the beginning of spring. Gunmen stormed the hospital in which he was recovering from a previous assassination attempt. He stood up for poor farmers, a heroic act that cost him his life.

Latin American has a long history of struggles over land and resources, with the rural poor eking out a living while those in control of the land seek to extract riches from its bounty. The murder of environmental activists is not a new development; it's been almost 30 years since [Chico Mendes was killed](#). But there's a new layer of urgency in recent years, with the exacerbation of climate change and the increased desperation of people fighting for their communities and their very lives.

Take for instance [Luiz Alberto Araújo](#), a Brazilian government official in the environmental office, who was shot dead in his car in front of his family in 2016. Araújo had broken up a deforestation operation that relied on slave labor, reported a hydroelectric dam operator for causing the death of 16 tons of fish, and helped shut down a gold mine that was poisoning an indigenous tribe's food supply.

When people are dying for God's Earth and for indigenous communities, little packets of seeds for Earth Day are simply not going to be enough. Singing "This Is My Father's World" for one spring Sunday service is not sufficient Christian witness when we know the evil that reigns with impunity against people working for environmental justice.

My book [Creation-Crisis Preaching](#) discusses *eco-crucifixion*—my word for describing environmental devastation in terms of Jesus' death. Jesus was tortured and killed in order to strengthen what Walter Wink calls the "domination system." I see a direct parallel to what is happening today to the earth and its most vulnerable people. Pereira's and Araújo's deaths are part of the ongoing eco-crucifixion against Earth—and against the people standing up to the structures of evil that are perpetrating abominable crimes.

This Earth Day we need to forego the pretty flowers and tell the truth: there is a life-and-death struggle being waged against corrupt governments, companies, and criminal gangs that are seizing land from people in order to meet the demand for minerals, timber, and fossil fuels. We in developed countries may condemn these barbaric acts. But the demand for these products comes from us, particularly in the United States. Not to mention the blood-tinged waves of immigrants fleeing lands devastated by climate change, for which we share a huge responsibility.

Since its earliest days the church has honored the martyrs who die for their faith. From Stephen to Perpetua to Ignatius of Antioch, martyrs are models of courage in the face of hatred, fear, and evil. They refuse to cower to violent regimes, and they face their deaths knowing they have fought the good fight. Certain days of the church year are dedicated to their memory, with prayers offered in thanksgiving for their witness.

I move that Earth Day be a time to venerate the Earth martyrs. They are models of courage for refusing to renounce their faith in the sacredness of Earth and indigenous communities, in the virtues of integrity and radical compassion—without which the human species will dwindle to extinction. [These murdered men and women](#) of Brazil, Columbia, Peru, the Philippines, and many other countries have, in fact, been martyred, and they need to be mourned and honored for the heroes they are.

Dorothy Stang, a Catholic sister murdered in 2005 for her work protecting impoverished Brazilian communities in the Amazon, is considered by many to be a martyr. She and her fellow eco-martyrs exemplify the sacrificial love of God, who steadfastly proclaims that those most vulnerable—including Earth itself—are worth dying for. Their faithfulness humbles me and calls me to account.

So this Earth Day, I'm standing in solidarity with the Earth-martyrs and praying that I may have such dedication and courage. I'm trusting in the mercy of a creator who declared this planet *good*—not for the sake of commodification but simply because it exists. That existence is threatened more each day, so I can no longer take it for granted.

On Earth Day this year let's pick up more than seed packets. Let's take up the cross.

And let's remember that eco-crucifixion is followed eventually by eco-resurrection. Along with remembering the Earth martyrs, we need to tell the stories of new life. El Salvador, with the support of the Catholic Church, recently [banned all metal mining](#) in favor of protecting its fragile water systems. Mexico has moved to [designate 160 million acres of land for environmental conservation](#).

Creation-care proclamation puts the systems of domination on notice: the crucifixions they perpetrate will not be the final word, nor will their oppressive reign endure without resistance. The resurrected one will open our eyes to creation “[liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.](#)”