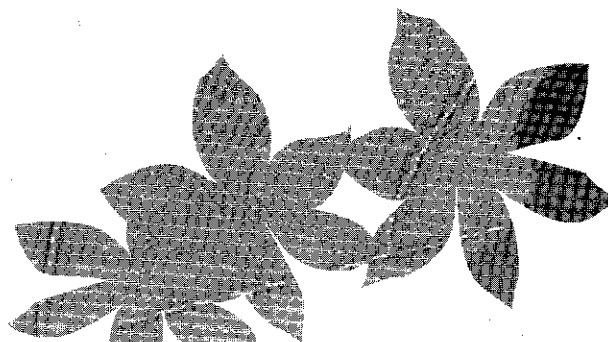


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THE CEDAR HAS FALLEN!

The Prophetic Word versus Imperial Clear-Cutting

CHED MYERS

THIS SERMON WAS DELIVERED at Albright College in Reading, Pennsylvania, in 2005.

Since you were laid low,
no one comes to cut us down. (Isa 14:8)



In mid-February 2005, a seventy-three-year-old nun was murdered by ranchers near Anapu, Brazil, because of her attempts to halt the illegal logging of the rainforest. Dorothy Stang, a Notre Dame Sister from Dayton, Ohio, was a faith leader, educator, and lobbyist on behalf of campesinos in the region. She was working on the Pilot Program to Conserve the Brazilian Rain Forest, which promotes environmental control to reduce deforestation and burning, and bolsters the economy by encouraging sustainable activities among poor peasants. "This is a hopeful project for the Amazon," Sister Dorothy wrote shortly after her name appeared on a death list in

2003, "but we are plagued by logging companies and ranches destroying thousands of acres each year." She was walking to a meeting with a community group when confronted by her assassins. Witnesses said Stang pulled a Bible from her bag and began reading a passage to them. They listened for a moment, then fired six times, killing her instantly. I wonder what scripture she might have been reading in that terrible moment.

"Like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be," wrote Third Isaiah (Isa 65:22). This old wisdom acknowledges an essential symbiosis between human culture and the forests. It is echoed by contemporary ecological forecasters, who warn that the health of our forests is *the* key to global environmental integrity. Jan Oosterhoek writes:

The destruction of the world's forests is a major concern in our age. According to the UN 40% of Central America's forests were destroyed between 1950 and 1980. During the same period Africa lost 23 percent of its forests. With deforestation comes a whole range of environmental problems, among them severe flooding, accelerated loss of soil, encroaching deserts and declining soil productivity.¹

The political and theological truth of this ultimatum was understood by Sister Dorothy, as well as by other forest-martyrs such as Father Nerilito Satur, a young priest murdered in Guinoyaran, Philippines, in October 1991 because of his opposition to illegal logging, or the more well-known Chico Mendes, head of the Brazilian rubber-tappers union, slain in 1988 for his organizing.² Their witness reminds us that forest preservation is a life and death struggle between communities who are reliant upon the forests and who value them spiritually, on the one hand, and the powerful interests who pillage old-growth forests for economic and political gain, destroying our treasured commonwealth, on the other hand. This, it turns out, is one of the oldest struggles in human history.

In indigenous cultures, the oldest and largest trees in the area were revered as the spiritual and social heart of the camp, offering

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witness to the past, shelter in the present, and continuity for the future. Such trees provide symbols for ritual as well as sustenance for daily life. According to the old ways from native California to Celtic Britain to the African savannah, the local great tree represented a sort of *axis mundi*, offering communion between heaven and earth. Elders would gather under its venerable branches in order to adjudicate community life: resolving conflicts, offering counsel, and telling sacred stories. The Bible too acknowledges the role of the sacred tree in the people's journey of liberation, from beginning to end: "Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beer-sheba, and called there on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God" (Gen 21:33). "On either side of the river, is the tree of life . . . ; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations" (Rev 22:2).

Abraham (Gen 12:6-7; 18:1), Gideon (Judg 6:11), and Elijah (1 Kgs 13:14; 19:4) all had divine encounters beneath the shade of oaks. Although sacred trees are no longer acknowledged as the center of our Western consciousness or communities, they are still the living heart of the land—if we have eyes to see.

The cedars of Lebanon are eulogized throughout the Scriptures. Anyone who has visited modern Lebanon (from the Semitic root *lhab*, meaning "the white mountain" because of its snowy covering) may find it hard to believe that vast tracts of timber once grew throughout that now relatively barren region. Indeed, these highlands were once blanketed with hardwood cedar forests, referred to in the Bible simply as "the glory of Lebanon" (Isa 60:13). *Cedrus libani* average a height of more than a hundred feet and forty-five feet in girth, many with an age of more than a thousand years. Indeed, the Hebrew word for cedar, *e'rez* (Greek, *kedros*) is nearly homonymous with the word for the earth itself (*eretz*). The mountain slopes of the Levant were covered with massive cedar forests at the start of the third millennium BCE, but these had almost disappeared by the time of Jesus. David Haslam estimates that there may have been anywhere from one hundred thousand to one million cedars in the forests of Lebanon at the time Solomon's temple was built.³ Today, however, less than 6 percent of Lebanon is

forested, with cedars comprising less than 3 percent of that area. This most ancient of all sacred trees, then, represents a sort of sentinel, witnessing to the oldest legacy of environmental destruction in the history of civilization. As the nineteenth-century French poet Lamartine put it, "The Cedars know the history of the earth better than history itself."

The cedar was to the Mediterranean cultures of antiquity what the redwood was to nineteenth-century Americans coming to California. On the one hand, it was revered and the subject of countless literary paeans; on the other hand, it was mercilessly exploited as a strategic economic asset. Because most of the lowland areas of the Mediterranean and Fertile Crescent were logged out by the earliest city-states, the tall stands of hardwood in the Lebanon were coveted for their size and durability. Cedar wood resists rot and insects, is aromatic, polishes well, and has a close, straight grain that is easy to work with. Most importantly, ancient rulers typically undertook massive building programs to display their power and wealth and built large navies for conquest; for these projects they needed tall cedar hardwood, especially for ship masts and the bearing beams of great temples and palaces. Thus, the forests of the Lebanon were repeatedly the target of exploitation by successive empires. This legacy of deforestation is alluded to often in the biblical prophets. But the story is much older than the Bible; indeed, it is told in the oldest known literature in the world—the epic of Gilgamesh.

Written in Mesopotamia sometime in the third millennium BCE, some fifteen centuries before Homer, this epic concerns Gilgamesh, the ruler of the city-state Uruk. In a manner typical of ancient kings, he wishes to aggrandize himself with "a name that endures" by building "walls, a great rampart and a temple." He needs large amounts of timber, and so in the second episode of the epic, called "The Forest Journey," Gilgamesh sets out for the primeval forests—"to the land where the cedar is felled." But this forest was considered to be the garden of the gods, and it was protected by the chief Sumerian deity Enlil, who entrusted the ferocious demigod Humbaba to guard it.

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Gilgamesh and his companion Enkidu cross seven mountain ranges (how archetypal!) before finding the cedars, and are awed by their initial encounter: "They stood quite still and looked at the forest, saw how high were the great cedars. . . . They saw also the Cedar Mountain, where lived the gods. . . . The cedar raised aloft its great luxuriant growth: What cool shade, what delight!" Nevertheless, Gilgamesh and Enkidu commence cutting down the cedars, while Humbaba howls in protest. A great struggle ensues, until finally Humbaba is slain. "For two leagues the cedars resounded. Then there followed confusion; for this was the guardian of the forest whom they had struck to the ground: he at whose words Hermon and Lebanon used to tremble. Now the mountains were moved . . . for the guardian of the cedar lay dead." When Enlil learns of the destruction of the cedar forest, he sends down a series of ecological curses on the offenders: "May the food you eat be eaten by fire; may the water you drink be drunk by fire."⁴

The Forest Journey cloaks a real historical pattern of ecological exploitation in the guise of a hero tale. But the myth also reflects keen anxiety too: There is a sense that once humans start exploiting the forests, nothing will stop them. So the chapter concludes with a chilling note: "So Gilgamesh felled the trees of the forests and Endiku cleared their roots as far as the bank of Euphrates." Indeed, the deforestation effected by Gilgamesh and his successors in southern Mesopotamia figured prominently in the decline of the Sumerian civilization, as analyzed most recently by Jared Diamond's *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. The Euphrates, Tigris, and Karun rivers and tributaries began to fill with salt and silt, clogging up the irrigation canals. After 1,500 years of successful farming, a serious salinity problem suddenly developed, resulting in declining food production. So it was that the very building schemes that sought to strengthen the empire brought on its destruction.

It was the Phoenicians who used the cedars to build history's first great maritime nation, and their famous seagoing triremes ruled the coast of Lebanon from such ancient cities as Byblos, Tyre, and Sidon. They eventually came to control the lucrative international cedar

market. As far back as 2800 BCE, the people of Byblos were cutting down cedar trees in the Lebanon to export to Egypt and Mesopotamia. The Egyptians used cedar sawdust for mummification; the resin, known as *Cedria*, for embalming and strengthening papyrus; and the oils as medicine. The biblical prophet Ezekiel writes at length about the Phoenician city-state of Tyre, its merchant marine grandeur, its militarism, its insatiable hunger for lumber (Ezek 27:2–11), and its eventual destruction by Yahweh (27:27–36). Ezekiel's elaborate taunt was appropriated centuries later by the political prisoner John of Patmos in his apocalyptic critique of Rome's oppressive international political economy in Revelation 18.

The Lebanon was eventually controlled by Egypt, and then successively by the Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman empires. The highlands were so denuded by the time of the Roman emperor Hadrian that he felt obligated to install markers around the remaining forests, declaring them an imperial domain. But periodic exploitation went on for another two millennia. The last clear-cutting was done by the Ottoman Turks, who took all of the cedars growing within transport distance of the Hijaz railway in order to provide fuel for their wood-burning engines. Only the highest and most remote groves escaped damage. From antiquity to the present, then, the pattern was the same: As Benjamin Kasoff put it, "The forests of Lebanon were under constant siege."⁵ No wonder then that the biblical prophets were forever warning Israel that the nearby forests were in danger: "I will prepare destroyers against you, all with their weapons; they shall cut down your choicest cedars and cast them into the fire" (Jer 22:7).

There are two main literary trajectories concerning the cedars in the Hebrew Scriptures. They represent the most common nature image, symbolizing beauty and strength (Ps 29:4; 92:12; Song 4:5, 8). They are the epitome of God's magnificent creation—"The trees of the LORD are watered abundantly, the cedars of Lebanon that [God] planted" (Ps 104:16)—although even their grandeur pales before the Creator's power (Ps 29:5–9). And they are a metaphor for Israel itself as the object of God's care (Hos 14:5–7).

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But the cedars also have a unique political connotation in Scrip-
 ture as well. During Israel's own short experiment with regional
 hegemony under the united monarchy, King Solomon's reign, like
 that of old Gilgamesh, was characterized by a lust after the cedar's
 hardwood. First Kings narrates in some detail how Solomon
 requested King Hiram of Tyre to supply cedar to build the first great
 temple and palace in Jerusalem (1 Kgs 5:6-10). Hiram's scheme to
 bring the logs to the sea from the Lebanon and float them down the
 coast in rafts is confirmed by a frieze depicting this very method
 found in the palace of Sargon at Nineveh (about 700 BCE). Solomon's
 treaty was a sweet deal between royal houses, with food going from
 one to the other in exchange for luxury imports (5:20). And all the
 logging was done by conscripted labor (5:13-15). This is not so
 unlike the political economy of bananas or coffee, zinc or uranium
 today, with the labor of poorly paid workers supporting a market
 controlled by highly paid profiteers, at an enormous (and unac-
 counted) environmental cost to the land itself. We might say, there-
 fore, that there was blood on the cedar that figured so prominently
 in Solomon's temple and his own royal house.

And prominent it was. First Kings 6-7 describes both the temple
 and the "House of the Forest of the Lebanon" as paneled in cedar
 "from floor to ceiling," with dozens of beams and pillars. The cedar
 trade was one of many ways that Solomon aped the habits of other
 ancient imperial leaders (he is portrayed in Song 3:7 as a military
 chieftain surrounded by a phalanx of warriors, carried on a royal
 litter made of cedar). It was just such royal patterns of apostasy that
 earned the scorn of Israel's prophets, who viewed them as the rea-
 son the Israelite monarchy was doomed.

It is with considerable irony and even sarcasm that the
 prophets—well aware the cedars were a target of royal hubris—also
 speak of the tree as a metaphor for empire itself. The psalmist likens
 Egypt to a cedar that will be felled (Ps 80:8-12). Amos celebrates the
 downfall of the Amorites, "whose height was like the height of
 cedars, and who was as strong as oaks" (Amos 2:9). This rhetorical
 tradition is most fully developed in Ezekiel 31:

Consider Assyria, a cedar of Lebanon,
with fair branches and forest shade,
and of great height,
its top among the clouds.

All the birds of the air
made their nests in its boughs;
under its branches all the animals of the field
gave birth to their young;
and in its shade
all great nations lived.

The cedars in the garden of God could not rival it. . . .

Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: Because it towered high and set
its top among the clouds, and its heart was proud of its height, I
gave it into the hand of the prince of the nations. (Ezek 31:3-11)

Jesus himself later alludes to this anti-imperial tree allegory in his
famous mustard seed parable (Mark 4:30-32).

The metaphor of the "great height" of empire is of course an
allusion to the ancient tale of Babel's tower: "Come, let us build our-
selves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make
a name for ourselves" (Gen 11:4). We hear clear echoes here of Gil-
gamesh's quest for an immortal name, and we see the archetypal
project of imperial urbanism. This warning fable is a thinly veiled
parody of Mesopotamian ziggurats, for *Babel* is a wordplay on the
Babylonian word for "gate of the gods" and on the Hebrew word
connoting "these people are deeply confused." Isaiah appropriates
this motif in his taunt against the king of Babylon: "How you are
fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! . . . You said in your
heart, 'I will ascend to heaven. . . . I will ascend to the tops of the
clouds, I will make myself like the Most High'" (Isa 14:12-14).

Zechariah's lament acknowledges that the forests were the first
objective of imperial conquest:

Open your doors, O Lebanon,
so that fire may devour your cedars!

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Wail, O cypress, for the cedar has fallen,
for the glorious trees are ruined!

Wail, oaks of Bashan, for the thick forest has been felled! (Zech 11:1-2)

Thus, the prophets longed for the day when, as Isaiah puts it, the very imperial powers who “lay the nations low” would be, in the justice of YHWH, themselves “cut down,” like the ancient cedars they exploited:

For the LORD of hosts has a day
against all that is proud and lofty,
against all that is lifted up and high;
against all the cedars of Lebanon,
lofty and lifted up;
against every high tower,
and against every fortified wall;
against all the ships of Tarshish. (Isa 2:12-16)

This tradition is best captured in Isaiah’s remarkable oracle specifically criticizing Assyria’s denuding of the forests. The context is Israelite king Hezekiah’s attempts to negotiate new alliances in the wake of King Sennacherib’s defeat of Egypt in 701 BCE and Babylon in 689. In Isaiah 37 (compare 2 Kgs 19:8-28), the prophet warns Hezekiah *not* to seek political and military security in an alliance with Sennacherib:

This is the word that the LORD has spoken concerning [Assyria]:

She despises you, she scorns you—
virgin daughter Zion;
she tosses her head—behind your back,
daughter Jerusalem.

Whom have you mocked and reviled?

Against whom have you raised your voice
and haughtily lifted your eyes?

Against the Holy One of Israel!

By your servants you have mocked the Lord,
and you have said, “With my many chariots

EARTH AND WORD

I have gone up the heights of the mountains,
to the far recesses of Lebanon;
I felled its tallest cedars,
its choicest cypresses;
I came to its remotest height,
its densest forest." (Isa 37:22-24)

Taking chariots up Mount Lebanon is like trying to drive heavy tractors deep into old-growth wilderness forest; it is difficult, but the imperial (or corporate) will to conquer eventually prevails. Isaiah understands that these forests are primarily a military objective. And today, war still is ultimately about resources—as is certainly the case in the US occupation of Iraq.

Little wonder, then, that Isaiah envisions the end of empire as a relief not only for oppressed peoples but for the forests as well:

When the LORD has given you rest from your pain and turmoil and the hard service with which you were made to serve, you will take up this taunt against the king of Babylon:

How the oppressor has ceased!

How his insolence has ceased!

The LORD has broken the staff of the wicked,

the scepter of rulers,

that struck down the peoples in wrath

with unceasing blows,

that ruled the nations in anger

with unrelenting persecution.

The whole earth is at rest and quiet;

they break forth into singing.

The cypresses exult over you,

the cedars of Lebanon, saying,

"Since you were laid low,

no one comes to cut us down." (Isa 14:3-8)

What a remarkable image: trees taking up the chant of praise for the downfall of kings who clear-cut them! It is an extraordinary

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hymn to environmental justice. And eschatological redemption will include the reforestation of "desertified" lands resulting from millennia of clear-cutting: "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad" because the "glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon" (Isa 35:1-2).

The Qadisha Valley in Lebanon has been the site of monastic communities continuously since the earliest years of Christianity. Early on, these communities claimed the role of "guardians" of the cedar forests, like Enlil of old. Thanks to them, and to modern environmentalists, the last remaining twelve stands of cedars in Lebanon were inscribed as a UNESCO world historic site in 1998. The most famous stand is named the "Cedars of the Lord" (*Arz el Rab*) and lies about eighty miles from Beirut, near the birthplace of the great Lebanese poet Kahlil Gibran. About 375 cedars—some over two thousand years old, are in a mile-high, sheltered glacial pocket of Mount Makmel. This small, surviving grove bears silent witness to clear-cutting that began some five thousand years ago, and it is a reminder both of the fragility and endurance of the creation, and of the duty of people of faith and conscience to guard it.⁶

The mythic fight between Gilgamesh and Humbaba and the prophetic rants against clear-cutting both narrate the imperial conquest of nature and the cultures that lived symbiotically with it. This war has been repeated in every generation since, in every corner of the globe, to satisfy civilization's ever increasing appetite for material growth. It is the oldest conflict on the planet, and it continues today, but now it includes also rivers, aquifers, mountains, tundra, the ozone layer, even our own genetic makeup. Countless endangered or extinct species are the toll in this war. But in destroying nature, we are in fact cannibalizing our very life-source, just as the Sumerians did. As Evan Eisenberg, in his brilliant book *The Ecology of Eden*, puts it: "Civilization depends upon wilderness; the inverse does not, however, apply."⁷

What then might this tradition of fierce prophetic eco-justice mean for us? When Julia Butterfly Hill sat in a northern California redwood for two years in the late 1990s to prevent old-growth logging,

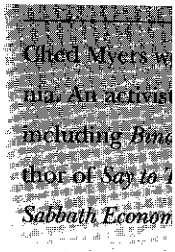
she did not rely on support from churches. Indeed, most Christians would have dismissed her as a wrongheaded idealist. But from the biblical perspective, she was acting squarely in the prophetic tradition, as were the forest martyrs I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon. This latter group did not die in vain: Chico Mendes became internationally famous, bringing the plight of the rain forests to worldwide attention. In the Philippines, the EarthSavers Movement gives an annual award in honor of Father Satur to those defending the environment, and many Catholics have become active in nonviolent resistance to illegal logging. Just one week after Dorothy Stang was gunned down, Luiz da Silva, the president of Brazil, responded to the outcry by ordering the creation of two massive Amazonian rain forest reserves.

The struggle goes on in North America too. For example, since 1999, the Anishnabe of the Grassy Narrows community in Ontario, Canada, have sustained a nonviolent blockade at two key logging roads to prevent government approved clear-cutting in violation of their treaty rights. Traditional warriors are putting their bodies in front of the logging trucks, supported by other First Nations and by Christian Peacemaker Team volunteers.⁸

"My love is as the cedars," wrote Kahlil Gibran in *A Tear and a Smile*, "and the elements shall not conquer it."⁹ The historic struggle between the exploiters and defenders of the forests continues, and upon it, in a very real, ecological sense, hinges the fate of our world. The Bible takes sides in this contest on behalf of the trees, a suppressed tradition that the church must recover. So let us listen to the story the cedars have to tell. If we have ears to hear, we will seek to embody Isaiah's ethic of resistance and hope:

When the poor and needy seek water,
I will make the wilderness a pool of water,
and the dry land springs of water.
I will put in the wilderness the cedar,
the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive;
I will set in the desert the cypress,

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Notes

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the plane and the pine together,
 so that all may see and know,
 all may consider and understand,
 that the hand of the LORD has done this. (Isa 41:17-20)

Ched Myers works with Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries in southern California. An activist for peace and justice, he is the author many articles and books, including *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, coauthor of *Say to This Mountain: Mark's Story of Discipleship*, and *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics*.

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1. Jan Oosthoek, "The Role of Wood in World History," 2000, accessed at <http://www.forth.stir.ac.uk/~kjwo1/essay3.html>.
2. On Father Satur, see Joseph Franke, "Faith and Martydom in the Forest," *Witness* 88, no. 8 (March 14, 2005), accessed at <http://thewitness.org/article.php?id=785>. On Mendes and his movement, see the 1994 documentary by John Frankenheimer, "The Burning Season: The Chico Mendes Story," and the book by Andrew Revkin, *Burning Season: The Murder of Chico Mendes and the Fight for the Amazon Rain Forest* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2004).
3. David Haslam, "The Cedars of Lebanon: An Engineer Looks at the Data," 1998, accessed at <http://web.ukonline.co.uk/d.haslam/mccheyne/cedars.htm>.
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7. Evan Eisenberg, *The Ecology of Eden* (New York: Random House, 1999).
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9. Kahlil Gibran, *A Tear and a Smile* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1914).