

Creation groans and so do we

By [Guy Sayles](#)

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Over the last few months, I've often traveled north on I-26/U.S. 23 into the broken heart of eastern Kentucky's coal country.

The land looks weary. There are gashes in the hillsides which huge machines have stripped bare not only of coal but of topsoil; peaks blasted away from once-majestic mountains, now flattened and scoured of life; and scraggly but tenacious trees struggle to make a stand where giant hardwoods once towered.

More than 10,000 coal-related jobs have disappeared from Kentucky in recent years, and the reasons are complex. They include environmental concerns, prices of other forms of energy, dangerous working conditions, and policy decisions by both coal-company leaders and government officials.

The land weariness and job losses mean that, in coal country, there are countless boarded-up storefronts, abandoned roadside motels and barbecue joints, and sagging, empty houses.

For the most part, people live from paycheck to paycheck (if they still have jobs), lottery ticket to lottery ticket, and deer season to deer season. On Saturdays, now that temperatures are warmer, there are makeshift roadside stores at numerous wide spots in the road and yard sales in many front yards. On Sundays, most folks gather to worship in myriad small churches.

A few weeks ago, I stopped at a Wal-Mart near Pikeville to buy toothpaste I'd forgotten to pack; and I watched a daddy and his boy pick out a fishing rod for the boy. From their excited conversation, I learned that it was the boy's first fishing rod of his own and a gift for his birthday. In front of me at the checkout, a woman counted out the coins she scraped from the bottom of her pocketbook to pay for Easter candy. I was glad I had forgotten toothpaste.

The hills look gray and grizzled to me, even in spring. The valleys sigh; the narrowing, shallowing streams lament. The people in coal country, who live on land

that others control and who are affected by decisions made in places remote from Harlan, Hazard, Prestonburg, Paintsville, and Pikeville, laugh and cry, hope and despair. The weeping of the land and the striving of the people are inextricably joined.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul said that, because of human folly and sinfulness, creation is in bondage to futility and human beings wrestle with despair. We are part of creation, and we share its destiny, a destiny we too often distort. As Paul put it: “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pain until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves groan.”

What we have done, and do, has affected and affects creation itself. In turn, creation’s suffering intensifies our own. As Chief Seattle said to representatives of the U.S. government in 1854: “If men spit on the earth, they spit on themselves—all things are connected.”

We exhaust ourselves and the world. We push ourselves past our limits and drive the good earth into crisis. It doesn’t have to be this way. We could live as who we most truly are: living images of God who represent God’s gracious rule over the earth. We could remind each other that earth belongs to its creator.

We could, if we would, tend the earth the way God nurtures us, with servanthood, wisdom, and love, committed to its flourishing and becoming.

The earth is not a warehouse of cheap resources for our indiscriminate use. People, including the people in coal country, are not tools and means; they, too, are images of God, with dignity and worth. We are called to reverence the earth and all its inhabitants as magnificent creations of God.

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