

## The Dark Side of the Mountain

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One August night in 1968, four men drove onto a strip mine site owned by the Round Mountain Coal Company in Leslie County, Kentucky. They shined a flashlight in the eyes of the lone watchman, tied him up, and drove around in his jeep for four hours, quietly and expertly setting the company's own explosive charges. Just before sunrise, they removed the guard to a safe place, detonated the charges, and left behind the smoking hulks of a giant diesel shovel, D-9 bulldozer, auger, conveyor belt, three hi-lifts, a truck, three generators, and one jeep. Altogether, property damage totaled \$750,000. Detective J. E. Cromer, of the state police force, described the destruction as the most extensive he had ever seen in eleven years of investigating sabotage.<sup>1</sup>

The men responsible for the damage were never identified, but their actions belie a strong rebuke of coal mining and have been interpreted by many as a response to the dangerous and severe working conditions that miners were made to endure during the 1960s.

This event also makes another important historical point: opposition to coal mining in Appalachia is not a recent development. While the exact date of the first protest or demonstration is unknown, American coal mining historian Chad Montrie helpfully notes, "The campaign to abolish stripping was primarily a movement of farmers and working people of various sorts, originating at the local level."<sup>2</sup> Montrie illustrates what those who do not live in Appalachia often forget: opposition to coal mining was not transplanted to Appalachia,

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<sup>1</sup> This story first appeared in T. N. Bethell, "Hot Time Ahead," in *Mountain Life and Work* (April 1969). Reprinted in Chad Montrie, *To Save the Land and People: A History of Opposition to Surface Coal Mining in Appalachia* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Montrie, *To Save the Land and People*, 3. The word "stripping" is often used to describe surface-level coal mining in which large sections of the surface are stripped in order to extract coal near the surface.

it began there. Furthermore, Montrie's argument points to a more nuanced reality: arguments in favor of coal mining are by no means simply a matter of economic prosperity, nor are arguments against coal mining simply a matter of ecology and environmentalism. These arguments are much more complex and are inextricably bound up in the identity, narrative, and memory of those who live in Appalachia.

The guiding question of this project has been and continues to be: how can the church develop an ethical response to coal mining in Appalachia that takes into account both the economic benefits and the environmental costs, providing both for God's people and God's creation? My intention in this paper is to provide a brief sketch of the ethical dilemma that coal mining in Appalachia presents for Christians, paying particular attention to how the narrative, memory, and identity of people from Appalachia can inform ethical decision-making. As I have continued to discern my own response to this crisis, I have discovered that it is crucial to take these issues into account if there is any hope for an efficacious or solvent Christian ethical response. I will conclude by reflecting upon my own engagement with the crisis of coal mining in Appalachia. In particular, I want to suggest that resolving this crisis requires hope in God.

Among the most critical reasons cited for putting an end to coal mining are its disastrous impacts on the region's ecology and environment. Ellen Davis calls coal mining, specifically mountaintop removal,<sup>3</sup> "an emblematic act," adding that it is "the most dramatic rupture of the created order that North Americans have effected on our own continent."<sup>4</sup> Even more provocative, agrarian activist and author Wendell Berry writes of mountaintop removal, "I have been unable to escape the sense that I have been to the top of the mountain, and that I have looked over and seen, not the promised land vouchsafed to a chosen people, but a land of violence and sterility prepared and set aside for the damned."<sup>5</sup>

These prophetic witnesses bring to light the environmental and ecological destruction wrought by coal mining. As James Gustafson

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<sup>3</sup> Mountaintop removal is a type of surface mining that extracts coal by removing the land above the coal seam. It is among the most controversial forms of coal mining used in Appalachia.

<sup>4</sup> Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 12.

<sup>5</sup> Wendell Berry, "The Landscaping of Hell: Strip-Mine Morality in East Kentucky," in *The Long-Legged House* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969), 29.

notes in his article, “The Relationship of Empirical Science to Moral Thought,” the ways in which we select data—whether from empirical sources or from more abstract sources—is always linked to our own presuppositions, biases, and values.<sup>6</sup> This is also true in my case. As a native of Appalachia, voices like Davis and Berry have a profound effect on my understanding of the problem. They evoke powerful images from my own experiences and stories that have been told around my own family’s dinner table. For myself and for the millions of people who make their homes in Appalachia, this crisis is personal.

As I began working on my own response to this crisis, what stood out as noticeably absent from the public discourse is the fact that people in Appalachia are marginalized. While many consider people in Appalachia “ideal Americans” because of their status as white, rural citizens, the reality is that they are marginalized both culturally and economically.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, coal miners are often quite literally invisible. Working underground keeps them out of sight and out of mind. As I researched positions opposite my own, I discovered that while many arguments in favor of coal mining focus on empirical economic data about job creation and employee compensation, they also focus on underlying issues that play on notions of pride, honor, and duty in order to imbue a sense of cultural pride and obligation. As Rebecca Scott and others have pointed out, the national and corporate interests that people in Appalachia are asked to serve are not always compatible with the economic and environmental sustainability of their communities.<sup>8</sup>

Those who do not live in mining communities are often not confronted with the tangible benefits that coal mining brings to the community and are therefore oblivious to the ways in which coal mining is wrapped up in intricate webs of meaning for people in Appalachia. While there is no question about the environmental and ecological degradation wrought by coal mining, an ethical response to this crisis must also take into account the fact that coal mines feed people,

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<sup>6</sup> James M. Gustafson, “The Relationship of Empirical Science to Moral Thought,” in *From Christ to the World: Introductory Readings in Christian Ethics*, ed. Wayne G. Boulton, Thomas D. Kennedy, and Allen Verhey (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1994), 171.

<sup>7</sup> For a fuller treatment of this concept, see Rebecca R. Scott, *Removing Mountains: Extracting Nature and Identity in the Appalachian Coalfields* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 31.

<sup>8</sup> Scott, *Removing Mountains*, 31.

educate people, and are increasingly removed from the sight and hearing of those who live in Appalachia. As one coal miner employed by Arch Coal asked a group of anti-coal mining activists, “What are we going to give the next generation to live on? How are they going to make it? What are we going to do for jobs for our families?”<sup>9</sup>

Beyond the public and overt arguments in favor of coal mining, the more covert—and arguably more effective—arguments take into account issues of cultural identity, memory, and narrative. As a result, people in Appalachia continue to go to the mines. As *New York Times* op-ed contributor Jason Howard observed, the coal industry often utilizes propaganda to reframe the issue. In the lead up to the 2012 presidential election, a billboard was erected on Interstate 77 just north of Charleston, West Virginia that proclaimed, “Obama’s No Jobs Zone.”<sup>10</sup> The coal industry utilizes covert arguments such as this to take the focus off environmental consequences and recast the debate to be primarily about access to jobs. Increased environmental regulations often do not provide added safety for miners and those who live near the mines. Instead, increased regulations are understood as the government’s—or in this case, the President’s—war on coal miners and their families.

Holding in tension the reality of the positive and the negative aspects of coal mining, one is confronted with the paradox that coal mining brings to ethical and moral decision-making. At once, coal puts food on the table, but poisons those who work the mines in order to purchase the food. Coal gives scholarships to children, but in so doing, creates a direct line from the classroom to the coal mine. Coal miners work deep under the surface, out of sight and out of mind of many, but their presence roars to the surface of the community’s collective consciousness when there is an explosion, an accident, or an earthquake.

My initial response to the crisis and paradox of coal mining was to attempt to place the ecological and environmental needs of the region over against the needs of the individuals and families who depend upon coal mining for support. However, as I traveled again and again to Eastern Kentucky, I began to realize that the question asked by the Arch Coal miner was asked out of deep conviction and urgency.

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<sup>9</sup> Ken Ward, Jr., “Miners Pack Hearing to Support Strip Permit: Area Needs the Jobs, UMW Member Says,” *Charleston Gazette*, May 6, 1998.

<sup>10</sup> Jason Howard, “Appalachia Turns on Itself,” *The New York Times*, July 9, 2012.

As I began to unravel the arguments in favor of coal mining, I realized that these arguments focused on the short-term economic benefits of coal mining. From a teleological perspective, proponents of coal mining set economic utilitarianism as the way in which to arbitrate ethical and moral decision-making. In their article, "Mountaintop Removal and Job Creation," Brad Woods and Jason Gordon point out that "the 'coal means jobs' mantra is clearly of vital importance for justifying the initiation and maintenance of extraction activities in coal-dependent communities."<sup>11</sup> High wages, tax revenue, and low educational requirements make coal mining an enticing opportunity for unemployed and underemployed workers. The economic utility with which proponents of coal mining measure the industry's benefits assumes that the most important goods for people in Appalachia are tangible and monetary. I offer two thoughts in response to this mindset. The first seeks to reexamine the economic utilitarianism set forth by proponents of coal mining. The second seeks to reframe utilitarianism to include more than economic data for ethical and moral decision-making.

Economic utilitarianism measures the costs and benefits of coal mining by asking: what produces the greatest amount of economic wealth for the greatest number of people? The question seems straightforward enough and, indeed, utilitarianism itself is among the most commonly used frameworks for economic policy making.<sup>12</sup> However, economic utilitarianism is a one-dimensional understanding of a multidimensional and multivalent situation. Economic utilitarianism is concerned primarily with maximizing the income levels of individuals, irrespective of the distribution of these levels.<sup>13</sup> Economic utilitarianism cannot consider cultural notions such as privilege, education, ability, gender, race, ethnicity, or even socio-economic status. Its merits are limited to a one-dimensional system of cost-benefit analysis, which ignores an entire genre of vitally important questions.<sup>14</sup> Economic utility cannot measure the physical and emotional harms that coal mining

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<sup>11</sup> Brad R. Woods and Jason S. Gordon, "Mountaintop Removal and Job Creation: Exploring the Relationship Using Spatial Regression," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 101, no. 4 (April 28, 2011): 807, doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00045608.2011.567947>.

<sup>12</sup> Amartya Sen, "Utilitarianism and Equality," *Economic & Political Weekly* 7, no. 5 (February 1972): 343.

<sup>13</sup> Sen, "Utilitarianism and Equality," 343.

<sup>14</sup> Sen, "Utilitarianism and Equality," 343.

inflicts on a miner's health and well-being. Notions of "good" and "environment" and "person" confound economic utility because it examines and evaluates solely economic gains and losses. Pope John Paul II was correct in pointing out that utilitarianism cultivates "a civilization of production and of use, a civilization of 'things' and not of 'persons,' a civilization in which persons are used in the same way as things are used."<sup>15</sup> Measuring the costs and benefits of coal mining must be based on something broader than economic utilitarianism.

As we have seen, the implications of coal mining are far-reaching, extending well beyond economic costs and benefits. These other, perhaps less familiar realms of influence must also be weighed and adjudicated as to their impacts. Moving beyond the realm of economic utilitarianism allows for a careful examination of the narrative, memory, and identity of people in Appalachia, and I contend that it is only within this realm that a faithful and effective Christian ethical response to the crisis of coal mining can be found.

Perhaps the best way to get a sense of the narrative, memory, and identity of people in Appalachia is to pay particular attention to the rhetoric used in relation to coal mining. Words such as conservation, ecology, and environmentalism are often interpreted and portrayed by proponents of coal mining as wilderness conservation, which is an inaccurate and incomplete definition. For similar reasons, many anti-coal mining advocates prefer the term "concerned citizen" over "tree hugger." Terms such as "environmentalist," "tree hugger," and "environmental conservationist" seem to suggest a misplaced affection for another form of life—a kind of betrayal of humanity.<sup>16</sup>

As one man living in Appalachia put it, "Environmentalists want to 'save crickets and let people starve.'" Another woman living in Appalachia said it this way: "Environmentalists would 'kill a man to save a tree,'" adding, "The people that are posting against [coal mining] are from California and Illinois. Do you want me to pick a tree over my child? . . . Do you love a tree that much?"<sup>17</sup>

Without an acute appreciation for and understanding of the narrative that is created by coal companies in Appalachia, these

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<sup>15</sup> Pope John Paul II, "*Gratissimam Sane*: Letter to Families from Pope John Paul II," February 2, 1994, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/letters/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_let\\_02021994\\_families\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_02021994_families_en.html).

<sup>16</sup> Scott, *Removing Mountains*, 211.

<sup>17</sup> Scott, *Removing Mountains*, 211.

statements seem to be misguided at best and ignorant at worst. But as Rebecca Scott has observed, they are neither misguided nor ignorant. In fact, they are representative of the dominant narrative and identity of people in Appalachia. Scott explains:

In the economic and cultural context of the coalfields, it is easy to oppose environmentalism. Nature, objectified, is reduced to a single tree. The environmental justice movement's holistic view of the human-nature relation contradicts ideals of independent American citizenship and stands in the way of economic progress.<sup>18</sup>

In order to respond in a manner that is not offensive, glib, or ineffective, Christians must weigh the concerns of coal miners, their families, and the communities in Appalachia. Christians must create a response that adequately addresses the ecological and environmental harms of coal mining, while also taking seriously the very real anxieties and uncertainties that surround a vision of Appalachia without the economic security and stability of coal mining.

After a careful and lengthy study of the multiplicity of issues caused by the crisis and paradox of coal mining in Appalachia, it is my conviction that any faithful and effective Christian ethical response must be rooted in hope. Not a sweet and saccharin hope that amounts to nothing more than bromides and trite optimism, but a distinctively Christian hope. As Philip Muntzel put it, "Christians hope for God and in God. Such hope can enhance life, sustain it in the face of unavoidable tragedy, and foster the courage to face the many challenges life presents."<sup>19</sup> Christian hope does not set out to provide an antidote to chaos, violence, oppression, and tragedy. Christian hope embraces these experiences, working in constant communion with faith and love to transform and reconcile our horrors and, in turn, the world.

Much can be gleaned from Wendell Berry's observation that hopefulness is embedded in nature and the land.<sup>20</sup> For Berry, our experience of hope in and for God is inextricably bound up in our tangi-

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<sup>18</sup> Scott, *Removing Mountains*, 212.

<sup>19</sup> Philip A. Muntzel, "Embedded Hopefulness: Wendell Berry and Saint Thomas Aquinas on Christian Hope," in *Wendell Berry and Religion: Heaven's Earthly Life*, ed. Joel James Shuman and L. Roger Owens (Lexington, Ky. The University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 190.

<sup>20</sup> Muntzel, "Embedded Hopefulness," 193.

ble experiences of love and loving relationships. However, Berry aptly points out this hopefulness is not bound singularly to the religious or spiritual component of the divine. For Berry and for Christians who are attentive to the value of the narrative, memory, and identity of people in Appalachia, nature and the land constitute a profound hope unlike any other. This hope is a “wheel of life” that is constantly and rhythmically cycling toward the love of God.<sup>21</sup>

However, nature and the land—this “wheel of life”—must be attended to with care and discipline. Without this attentiveness, the goodness of nature and the land become exploited and abused. What once was a source of great and sacred hope can quickly become a source of despair and emptiness.<sup>22</sup> The line between the two is often thin and unclear.

As is the case among the coal mines in Appalachia, the hopefulness that the land offers us—this invitation to a different kind of relationship in and with God—can be overlooked or ignored in favor of more tangible and profane benefits. Over time, this “ignorance” of the hope that literally exists in and among the roots of Appalachia has eroded the imaginative possibility that hope may exist in places other than tangible and profane benefits. As Christians who are called not only to respond to injustice, but also to reconcile injustice, healing this vast wound will take time—perhaps even lifetimes. But our enduring hope comes in this “wheel of life” that is nature and the land. This unexpected and underestimated gift is the wellspring from which reconciliation and healing can begin.

My best answer, therefore, is to say that there is no answer. There is no quick solution or salve that will erase the crisis and paradox of coal mining. There is only hope. Hope that is born in the very place where so many thought it had gasped its last breath. Christians who wish for a faithful and effective ethical response to the crisis and paradox of coal mining must endeavor to work through the tangled webs of meaning that confound our notions of “good” and “profit” and “environment.” The hope that Appalachia so desperately needs cannot be brought from outside. It must be cultivated from within. Instead of attempting to transplant sterile and futile solutions to Appalachia, Christians must respond to this crisis by taking off their shoes and digging their feet into the soil. Our great—and perhaps our last—hope

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<sup>21</sup> Muntzel, “Embedded Hopefulness,” 193–194.

<sup>22</sup> Muntzel, “Embedded Hopefulness,” 194.



is in nature and the land, because nature and the land point beyond themselves; nature and the land are the place of God.<sup>23</sup> Hope in and for God, like nature, possesses the miraculous promise of bringing forth the sublime reconciliation that is the kingdom of God.

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<sup>23</sup> Muntzel, "Embedded Hopefulness," 196.

