

TO SERVE GOD AND THE LAND

What's the gospel word on environmental threats?

Genesis 1:28, 31; 2:8-10, 15; 9:8-10, 14-17; Matthew 6:25-30

When I opened this “what’s-the-gospel-word” series with the subject of global wealth and poverty, I said *that* topic was perhaps the easiest one in which to find the gospel word, because scripture had so much to say about money and how we use it, and about how God loves the poor.

This one is *just* as easy.

Scripture is *packed* with stories, psalms, and direct teachings, that all speak clearly with one voice— or in seminary-speak, “scripture is univocal” on this subject.

There is nothing ambiguous about the “gospel word” concerning God’s relationship with creation, and about how God has called *us* to relate to creation.

That’s not to say we all agree on the specifics of how *best* to take care of creation, or where, and *if*, it might be necessary to extend some grace or accept some compromise.

But there should be no doubt in anyone’s mind here that an essential—not *optional*, but *essential*— part of our lives as Christian disciples is working for the improvement of, and restoration of, this environment God has given us.

If we are seeking to please God with our lives on this earth . . . and I trust we *are* . . . there are so many aspects of our lives, for which we do well to ground ourselves in the story of Creation. If we are ever to live into our calling, to live the life we were made for, we *need* to start with Genesis 1 and 2.

You might have noticed, in this sermon series, I’ve made a direct appeal to the creation story in all but one of the sermons, and I easily *could* have in that one.

That was not accidental. I’m not just on a Genesis kick. You see, the Bible, as a whole, is not a random collection. It has a plot. The plot begins in Genesis with creation. It ends in Revelation with a *new* creation. And everything in between is a long story of God working to save and redeem and restore creation, which has suffered from the destructive forces of sin.

When we do theology, we *need* to begin with God’s sheer delight and joy and, yes, ecstasy, in the wonderful, and beautiful, and diverse creation, created to give God glory.

One problem with many evangelical Christians is that their theology begins with the cross, and often gets stuck there. “Jesus died for me, and for my sins.” “I invite Jesus into my heart.” “I am saved and redeemed.” That saving work of Christ in our lives, to redeem and transform us, is, of *course*, important and even *necessary* to affirm. It’s true that Jesus makes all the difference, in our ability to live a whole life.

But when we start with the cross, and don’t look backward or forward, we end up with a very human-centered, individualistic brand of Christian faith. A brand of Christian faith that has often been far too slow to see Creation Care as central to our walk with God. A brand of Christian faith that has sometimes even been outright hostile to the idea

that we need to treat the earth with love and respect,
because I'm saved,
and this world's all going to burn up anyway.

But happens when we start with this wonderful creation narrative?
What happens when we start with the story that
God created the world in beauty and wholeness and shalom,
and after God's human creation rebelled
God's full-time project is bringing creation back to shalom?

Well . . . what happens is that
the cross of Jesus Christ finds its rightful place.
The cross stands at the apex, the pinnacle, of this sweeping saga
of God's work to save and restore all of creation.
It was not *just* for me and my sins that Jesus died.
It was for all the brokenness in creation
that resulted, directly or indirectly, from human sin.

And the *other* thing that happens is that we see God in the right light.
We begin to grasp the intimate, loving relationship
God has with all creation,
even in its broken state.
And therefore we get a more complete picture
of how we are meant to relate to God and creation.

It's all spelled out in Genesis.
We heard part of both creation stories, Genesis 1 and 2.
In both, we saw how much God loved and valued creation,
and how God put us in charge—us *humans*—
to take care of things the way *God* would take care of it.
Genesis 1: "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed,
it was *very good*."
And, God blessed the male and female humans he just made, and said,
"Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it;
and have dominion over the fish of the sea
and over the birds of the air
and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."

Some well-meaning, environmentally-minded Christians
have tried to downplay, or re-interpret that word "dominion,"
because it's been so misused.

I won't do that.
Dominion is exactly what it sounds like.
It is a God-like power and authority.
And—just like *God's* power—*our* power is defined by love . . .
and . . . *limited* by love.
God loves this world intimately.
And God entrusted its care into our hands,
has given us both the authority
and the responsibility, to act on God's behalf.
God trusts us to use our power to love the earth and its creatures
the *same way God does*.

Then in the *second* story, Genesis 2,
God prepared the Garden for human enjoyment and use,
and Adam and Eve were put into it to "till it and keep it."
Till and *keep*.
Despite how that sounds to our modern ears,
that verse is *not* saying we have the right
to make the land do our bidding,
to dig it up and throw it around and make it serve our purposes.
It actually says it the other way around.

That's "keep" as in, the keeper of the gate,
the one who guards and protects what is precious inside.
We are earth-keepers, earth-protectors.

And when we hear the word "till" we right away think "dig."
The Hebrew word that's translated "till" . . .
occurs almost 300 times in the Old Testament.
In the vast majority, over 250, it's translated "serve."
Literally, the word that God uses,
when God tells Adam and Eve to "till" the garden,
is the very same word that God uses,
when God tells the people of Israel to "serve the Lord your God."
Exact same verb—
till the garden, serve the Lord.

It's spelled out right there in Genesis, in plain sight.
We are to treat the earth, the same way we are to treat God.
With love, respect, reverence,
We serve God and the land.
To do *otherwise*, is an insult to Creator God.
And it is sin.

And we heard in chapter 9 in Genesis, that in the days of Noah,
God made a covenant with us, and with all living creatures.
After the great flood God made a covenant with all creation
and put up a rainbow as a reminder—a reminder for *God*.
“When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it
and remember the everlasting covenant between God
and *every . . . living . . . creature of all flesh that is on the earth.*”
How often do you stop to think about the fact
that God is in covenant with all the animals and birds,
with every living creature on earth?
It should occur to us at *least* as often as we see a rainbow.

God is in love with this world. The one we *live* in.
God loves the earth and everything *in* it.
Even . . . the smallest things. Remember Matthew 6?
The tiniest sparrow, the most delicate lily, the grass of the field.
Even . . . in its broken state, God loves this world.

Having established that,
I could now build a strong case,
based on should's and ought's.
I could moralize about what we *ought* to do,
if we really *believe* God loves and cares for the earth.
I could build a spiritual lesson on this model:
If A is true, then we ought to do B.
And I could go on and on about our responsibilities.

But we don't start with our should's and ought's.
We start with seeing, with grasping, the awesome work of God.
We grasp God's intimate relationship with creation,
God's purposes for and delight in what God created.

We grasp God's all-out effort, since the day sin entered the picture,
to restore and save and redeem creation . . .
and especially to restore shalom between God and humankind.
If we see our relationship with God in that clear light of day,
we *will* see our relationship with creation in the light as well.
We will *get it*.

Getting our relationship with God right,
and getting our relationship with creation right,
are two things, that by very definition, go hand in hand.
It is *impossible* to respect God, and disrespect creation, *simultaneously*.
It cannot be done.

There are a number of good metaphors in scripture,
that describe God's relationship with creation.
One of those is found in Psalm 104, where it says,
“O LORD my God, you are very great.
You are clothed with honor and majesty,
wrapped in light as with a garment.”
Old Testament scholar John Stek expanded on this metaphor
by suggesting that all creation is like a robe God wears.
He called creation God's “glory-robe.”
Creation is a garment that enhances the glory of God.
It's not the *same* as God.
But identified closely with God.
It reveals God's beauty and personality,
in much the same way that well-chosen clothing does for *us*.
It's something that gives God joy and delight
like putting on a favorite outfit.

Clearly, we cannot say we show respect for God,
when we spit on the clothes
that God designed, made, and is wearing.

Another biblical image
is that creation is a symphony of praise.
The thunder proclaims God's power,
the birds sing God's praises,

the trees clap their hands.

The psalm we read together this morning was *full* of this imagery.

Praise him sun and moon!
Praise the Lord, you sea creatures!
Mountains and hills, fruit trees and cedars,
Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds!
Kings and all peoples, princes and all rulers
Men and women, old and young!
Let them praise the name of the LORD!

Scott Hoezee, a Christian Reformed pastor in Michigan,
said these words in an interview, and I quote,
“In the preservation of the physical cosmos
we are helping to preserve and perpetuate
what to God is a most beautiful song of praise.”

Scott said, “I [want] to turn the ecological movement
of preservation of species, habitats, and the like
in a decidedly biblical direction:
to see those efforts as not *merely* keeping alive this or that species
for our grandchildren to enjoy, though that’s a noble goal,
but also as keeping all of the members of *God’s choir* in place.”

So did you ever think about that?
When we shrug our shoulders
at the extinction of yet another little species?
That’s taking away another voice part in the choir God put together
for the express purpose of singing God’s praise
to all who will listen.
We are diminishing creation’s capacity to praise God.

I’m not here this morning
to create a laundry list of sins and virtues,
in terms of our everyday practices . . .
it’s probably not the *most helpful* to make a list
of what cars Jesus would drive,
or what soap Jesus would use,
or at what temperature Jesus would set the thermostat.

Yes, we need to keep sorting that out together,
learning as we go along.

But this morning I *do* hope and pray that what we do
is adamantly refuse to accept the argument we often hear,
that these things don’t matter.

I *do* hope and pray that we *don’t* make decisions based on
what is most convenient for us,
or what will save us money.

Buying the cheap thing,
and buying the right thing,
are often not the same thing.

I worry that what motivates so much
of the anti-environmental movement out there—
people who are looking for tiny flaws in a process,
or one weak spot in an argument,
so they can through *all* the science out the window,
and ignore the big picture—

I worry that what motivates them . . . *us* . . .
is personal, short-term impact.
The truth really *is* hard to hear.
It is not only inconvenient.
It is costly.

If there are any who have good reason
to look past the short term,
to live for the long-term,
it ought to be people of faith.

Faith is not afraid of delayed gratification.
People of faith know that commitment requires sacrifice.

Like I said, we don’t have to all agree, in the end,
on all the specifics.
But I hope I don’t *ever* hear any of us who claim to follow Jesus,
make the ridiculous argument
that it’s *not* a priority to care for the earth.

It *is* our priority.

Because it is *God's* priority.

God is working hard right now

for the redemption and restoration of creation.

We need to join God in that work.

It's our divine calling.

So let us serve God and serve the land God *made*.

The Great Creator is still creating,

There's a hymn that says,

As each far horizon beckons,

may it challenge us anew,

children of creative purpose

serving others, honoring you.

May our dreams prove rich with promise,

each endeavor well begun.

Great Creator, give us guidance

till our goals and yours are one.

Let's sing together hymn #414, God who stretched the spangled heavens

—*Phil Kniss, October 17, 2010*