

Creation Care: Called to Stewardship Deuteronomy 10:12-14; Psalm 24:1-2

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“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”

They are the first words of the Bible, the opening sentence of Genesis, and the start of the first Judeo-Christian creation story. As humans, we are endlessly curious about ourselves and the world around us. Where did we come from? How was the world created? Why was the world created? And so, long before science began to help us, we used our own creativity to try to understand our origins. Virtually, every culture has its own creation story. In some, creation emerged from under the earth or from a cosmic egg. Others tell of a pair of primordial parents as in the Babylonian myth of the *enuma elish*. And in many cultures, like ours, creation was the work of a supreme divine being.

What is interesting about the Judeo-Christian tradition, though, is that we actually have two creation stories. One tells of God creating the world and everything in it in six days. And each day, God says the creation is good. The second tells of God creating man from the earth and breathing life into him. The two stories came from two different sources in two different time periods. Yet, they have one thing in common. Each says that when God created life and all that is in the world, God called on humanity to care for it.

Unfortunately, as we know, humans have been reckless and destructive of creation, and we are now in an environmental crisis of epic proportions. This week, we are starting a three-week sermon series on Creation Care in which we'll explore our role as stewards of God's creation, how humanity has impacted creation, and what steps we might take to mitigate the harm that's been done. You'll hear from me today, Rev. Shonagh next week, and the third week from James Pauer, a member of our congregation and an environmental engineer with the EPA.

But, before we get to God's call on humanity to care for creation, let's start with what scripture tells us about God's purpose for creation and why we should honor and respect the natural world. First of all, God reveals God's self through creation just as God reveals God's self through scripture. What do we learn about God from creation? In creation, we see beauty in everything from a full moon to the tiniest of wildflowers. We see diversity in an incredibly vast array of living things in all shapes and sizes, colors and patterns. We see intricacy in the complex inner workings of each living being as well as the functioning of whole ecosystems. We see majesty in mountains that rise up over the plains and power in the waves crashing against the ocean shore. All of this reflects back to us the nature and character of God.

Yet, God's purpose for creation isn't only to reveal God's self to us but also to provide for us. In fact, God provides for all of God's creatures, human and non-human alike. And God's provision is not just for us or for the living beings that occupy the earth today but for all future generations, as well. Of course, we see that most easily when we look at how God provides for us. In creation, we find food to eat, the means to make shelter and clothing for ourselves, fresh water to drink, and sources of energy we can harness to help us in our work. In both creation stories, God says these are God's gifts to us for our own sustenance.

That said, as we heard in our scripture readings this morning, scripture also reveals that all of creation, everything we have including our own lives, belongs to God. As humans, this is easy for us to forget. We like to think and act as though everything on the earth belongs to us. That because we have the means and desire to use up earth's resources or destroy God's creation, we have a right to do so.

Yet, God's call on us is just the opposite. At the end of the first of our creation stories, God says, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." The Hebrew word translated as "dominion" is *radah*, and its meaning is closer to care-giving or nurturing than to dominating or exploiting. Again, in the second creation story, God places Adam in the Garden of Eden "to work it and take care of it". In fact, these are the very first words God speaks to a human and they are directions for how we should relate to the natural world. The Hebrew word for "care" is *shamar* and means to watch, guard, and protect.

God's intention is for humanity to be caretakers of creation. This is why the environmental crisis we find ourselves in today is a matter for us as people of faith. We show our gratitude and love for God by how we nurture and protect God's creation. This is both our privilege and our responsibility.

Yet, when Jesus was asked what is the greatest commandment, he answered to love God and to love our neighbor. How we interact with Creation not only reflects our love for God but our love for neighbor as well. The decisions we make about how we use the world's resources can either support our neighbor or hurt them. When climate change leads to droughts, and food supplies run low. When hurricanes and typhoons destroy whole communities. When greenhouse gas emissions destroy the ozone layer. These are all signs that we are not loving our global neighbors. And we know that all of the impacts of human misuse of creation most profoundly affect those Jesus would call "the least of these".

So, the idea that as Christ-followers, we are called to be stewards of Creation is not new. It has been woven into our faith tradition from the earliest days of Judaism, and it is part of our Methodist tradition as well. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, preached a number of sermons on the subject saying, "[God] entrusts us with [this world's goods] on this express condition, that we use them only as our Master's goods, and according to the particular directions which he has given us in his Word."

Stewardship of Creation is one of our United Methodist social principles as well. Our Book of Discipline reads, "All creation is the Lord's, and we are responsible for the ways in which we use and abuse it. Water, air, soil, minerals, energy resources, plants, animal life, and space are to be valued and conserved because they are God's creation and not solely because they are useful to human beings. God has granted us stewardship of creation. We should meet these stewardship duties through acts of loving care and respect."

So, if we are called by God to be stewards of Creation, what exactly does that mean? A steward is someone who cares for the property of its owner. In their biblical study "Why Are We Stewards of Creation?", World Vision International looks at stewardship as paying attention to four aspects of caretaking. First is to be attentive to what the owner's intentions are for their

property. In this case, we bring ourselves back over and over again to God's intention that the earth's resources be used to provide for all the creatures who live here. God's intention was not that humans destroy the lives of some creatures in order to better their own. Related to this is that good stewards pay attention to those things that are close to the owner's heart. We know through both Old and New Testament writings that God stands particularly with the poor and the oppressed. So, we have a responsibility to make sure that resources are cultivated and distributed fairly so that all of God's people have access to what they need.

To do that well, as stewards we are attentive to the needs of Creation. We make sure to let the land rest between plantings and provide the soils with nutrients. We treat domesticated animals kindly, and provide them with adequate food, water, and space. We protect ecosystems by making sure no one part of the system is destroyed causing others to suffer.

Finally, good stewards of creation think not only of the present but of the future. It is our responsibility to ensure that creation will thrive and provide for generations to come.

All of this really comes down to interacting with creation with the same love that God does and with a reverence for God's handiwork. To view its beauty with awe and wonder. To delight in the playfulness of monkeys or the silliness of a male peacock strutting his stuff. To be stunned by the delicate patterns of a spider's web. To give thanks for corn right off the cob, ripe tomatoes, and the roughly 400 different kinds of beans we have to choose from. To look at the world and see, as Richard Rohr puts it, "Each and every creature is a unique word of God, with its own message, its own metaphor, its own energetic style, its own way of showing forth goodness, beauty, and participation in the Great Mystery. Each creature has its own glow and its own unique glory. To be a contemplative is to be able to see each epiphany, to enjoy it, protect it, and draw upon it for the common good."

And above all, to recognize that our lives and the lives of our children and grandchildren and generations after are indelibly interwoven with the lives of every other human being and every other living creature on this planet. And their care lies in our hands.

May it be so. Amen.