

“Caring for the Works of a Creator”

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I. Introduction

As the sermon begins, I want to take a moment to say hello and welcome back to many of you. During the summer months, several of you are gone for a variety of reasons (visiting family, traveling for work, or just at “the lake”). In any case, I am glad to see you all here this morning and I am delighted to heartily welcome you back on this our Homecoming Sunday (or Rally Day).

Today is the day when our Sunday School resumes and our adult choir has returned to form. Our children’s choirs begin practicing again this week, and our youth ministry kicks back into high gear. As the chill in the air returns, our church is ramping up once again from the lazy days of summer to an exciting fall.

Over the course of this school year, two of our committees – the Mission and Christian Education Boards – have selected a theme to help them focus in their work in the coming months. During the past two years, they focused on the topic of “hunger”. Now, as we enter a new year, their theme changes to the topic of “environmental justice.” I think this is a topic well worth considering, and I hope that each of us in our own way will be able to delve into this issue.

II. The gaps between ecology and theology

But what is environmental justice? And does it have a place in church? Many of us, conservationists and environmentalists and just reasonable people, understand the

value of caring for nature. Many of us, conservatives and liberals and moderates alike, understand the value of believing in God and living life accordingly.

But for many of us, these two issues remain categorically split off in our minds. For many of us who value both care for the environment and belief in God as revealed in Christ, these two issues are both important and yet fundamentally disconnected. This gap has been reinforced in many ways by folks on both sides of this argument – i.e. by an environmental science that takes a neutral or even hostile view of faith and by traditional Christian theology that takes a neutral or even hostile view of nature (including humanity). Given these gaps, can we find any bridges between ecology and theology? Do any connections between the two exist? And if not, should we bother building new connections?

III. Examining our Scriptures: Genesis and Revelation

When examining these questions, I always go back to our scriptures first to see if they can shed any light on the question. And what I found there was quite interesting. Most of the texts we focus on in contemporary Christianity are from somewhere in the middle of the Bible. But if you go to the very first chapter of the Bible, and if you go to the very last chapter of the Bible, there are some interesting texts that deal directly with God's work in and through creation.

Our Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament) reading for this morning highlights God's work in creation. The story is familiar: this is the telling of the creation story through the first seven days. On each of the first six days, God adds a new layer to creation, leading to a day of rest on the seventh day. The peak of creation, the pinnacle (according to this chapter), happens on Day 6. This is the day on which

humans were created. In the text as we have it, we the readers are told that humans were created in the image of God, male and female.

After we were created male and female, though, something interesting happens in the text: God gives humans a species-wide responsibility. “Be fruitful and increase in number,” God says to these early humans. “Fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” God then tells the early humans that they can eat from any seed-bearing plant on the face of the entire planet.

Now, we can argue about whether or not God literally just wants us to eat fruit (and not vegetables or cheese or meats or anything), but for today, I’m more interested in another topic. Humans, according to the text, are given authority to watch over the earth and all within it. We are told to “subdue” and “rule” over various aspects of nature. One commentator I read suggested of this passage that “(Humanity) is not to exploit, waste, or despoil (God’s creatures), but to care for them and use them in the service of God and man.”¹ So here we are as humans, in the first chapter of the Bible, being given a charge: to be in connection to creation, tending it and being caretakers of it.

Before we are given the Ten Commandments; before we hear prophets crying out for justice; before Jesus is revealed as the Messiah; before we are asked to believe any of that, we are given this call from the first chapter of Genesis: rule responsibly over nature and take care of it. In our zeal for justice and relationship with Christ, we sometimes gloss over

¹ Footnote for Genesis 1:28. The NIV Study bible. Zondervan Publishing House: Grand Rapids, MI, 1995. p.8.

this first call to humanity in the Bible. And yet, there it is, in the first chapter of the first book of the Bible.

In our New Testament scripture for this morning, we jump all the way to the very last chapter of the Bible. There, in the often-confusing book of Revelation, we find the fulfillment of the vision that John is receiving. In the New Jerusalem envisioned by the author, we find a city made entirely from gold with walls of jasper.² We find a city without a temple, for God and Christ are the temple.³ We are deep in the author's metaphorical vision of Ultimate Reality.

As this metaphor comes careening to a conclusion, we find the author speaking of a river of water, clear as crystal. The river flows from the throne of God and Christ down into the middle of the main street in the city. On each side of this river stands the Tree of Life, bearing fruit every month. And the leaves of this tree, we are told, are for the healing of the nations.

The book of Revelation is a source of great confusion for many of us. It's metaphorical; it's abstract; it's difficult. But I think that our passage for this morning is a real source of wisdom for us because its picture of the way things should be presupposes an experience of the natural world. The text expects that human beings will be engaged in creation.

To fully understand our foundational scriptures, and to understand our scriptures' vision of heaven (and, perhaps, the end of time or Jesus' second coming), we must first have at least some foundational understanding of nature. Without a

² Revelation 21:18.

³ Revelation 21:22.

river, clear as crystal, and without a life-giving tree, our vision of ultimate union with God is incomplete.

IV. Bridging the gaps through God-as-Creator

Our gospels speak of Christ as the Alpha and Omega (i.e. the beginning and the ending). But when we look at the beginning and ending of our sacred scriptures, what do we find? A consistent image of God-as-Creator.

Liberals, conservatives, and moderates don't always agree about the interpretation of the first few chapters of Genesis, but regardless of our perspective, we cannot avoid the image of God as creating (in some sense) the heavens, the earth, and all things on the earth.

Liberals, conservatives, and moderates also disagree about the interpretation of the book of Revelation. And yet, regardless of our perspective, we cannot escape the image of God in the book of Revelation as being, at heart, a Creator God, creating (in some sense) a new heaven, a new earth, a New Jerusalem.

So whether we are liberal, conservative, or moderate, we all share scriptures that begin and end with an image of God as the Creator. The world, therefore, is at heart created by the hand of God (either literally or metaphorically), according to our scriptural tradition. We can debate the process of creation until we run out of breath, but we cannot escape the idea that from a Christian point of view, the world and all therein is somehow created and set in motion by a foundationally creative God.

If our scriptures are in any sense true – if God is a Creator who fashioned the cosmos, and the earth, and all creatures on

the earth, and will one day create a new heaven, a new earth, and a new Jerusalem – then we are made by God and we are living in a world that was made by God and we are destined for a final home that is fashioned by God. We are, therefore, the work of a creative God; we are living within the work of a creative God; and we are destined for ultimate rest in the work of a creative God. Now, I don't know about you, but in my world, when I encounter someone who's that creative, there is only one word to describe such a person: artist. We might speak of God, then, as the Ultimate Artist.

So what, then, are we doing to protect God's artwork? We humans go to great lengths to protect famous sculptures in museums; we are universally outraged when someone defaces a well-known painting. And yet we do not go to such lengths to protect our environment and we are not consistently outraged when nature is similarly damaged.

If someone walked into this sanctuary tomorrow and chopped our piano or our organ in half, we would be stunned and shocked and saddened by the loss. And yet when we run half the animals in an ecosystem out of a natural habitat, we consider it an inevitable byproduct of progress.

If we all woke up tomorrow and all the bold and brilliant variations of the color red no longer existed anywhere on earth, we couldn't even get our heads around it. Could you imagine it? The carpet in our sanctuary would be ... well, I don't even know what it would be. And yet when we an entire species goes extinct, we might feel momentarily bad about it. But most of our actions (mine included) don't reflect the reality that our world will be fundamentally and forever altered, made more narrow and less rich, as a result.

When we desecrate creation, we desecrate the handiwork of God. We fail to live up to our most basic ethical call in the Bible. And yet we are so deeply mired in these particular sins as individuals, communities, and societies that we commit them blithely every single day through our actions and our lack of actions.

V. Finding hope in a (seemingly) hopeless situation

Amid all this devastation, we might feel overwhelmed. We might feel that the problem is so big that we can't create any real change. Our economy and our politics and our very way of life here in America are all so intertwined with environmental devastation that most of us add to pollution and global warming even when we make our way to church to worship God (I know I did this morning). But is there another way? Do we have alternatives? Are there different choices that we could make that would pull us up from this deep hole of sin that we have dug for ourselves?

Well, that's what we're going to be exploring this year. These are huge questions, and I cannot possibly address them in full this morning. But if we've created the mess that we're in ecologically, then I'm confident that we can begin undoing these things, as well. Some species are gone forever, but we can still halt the destruction and begin to undo some of the damage we have done.

First, we will have to educate ourselves about the issues. Using the metaphor of creation as God's artwork, we will have to learn about God's art by understanding how nature works more fully. We can learn what helps and hurts God's artwork by understanding more fully how our choices affect the environment. And we can even rethink our approach to

handling God's artwork by rethinking our personal choices and our choices as communities (including churches).

As we begin to learn more about the issues and our role in them, we can then begin to be empowered to take action. We can start making different personal choices in order to help preserve God's artwork by making choices that respect creation. We can also begin calling for action from the "heads of the museum" where God's artwork is housed – i.e. our political, economic, cultural, academic and religious leaders. In a free society like ours, we can hold leadership to accountability in the voting booth, at the store counter, and the like.

Having created greater understanding and begun to take action, I think our work is incomplete if we do not remember to celebrate the good work that we are doing. Let us celebrate with God as we make positive changes. Let us rejoice that we have scripture to call us back to responsibility when we lose our way. Let us praise God for the gifts of creation and for having a cause and a call that, though daunting in this era, can nevertheless give meaning and purpose to our work and our days.

VI. Conclusion: a poem

In closing, I would like to share with you a poem entitled "The Writing on the Rock" from Luci Shaw, a professor at Regent College in Vancouver:

The morning opens, blue as innocence over
A lake between granite shores, the old rocks
Ribbioned with intrusions of quartz.
For eons you northern stones
Have spread your ancient pages for

A vermilion scribble of spores,
Lichens illegible as lace, a murmur
Of olive mosses spelling out
Their microscopic struggles for foothold.

But where acid rain gnaws at the boulders
Disease spreads its scabs, brittle as dust
Under our fingers. Our gift to you – a silver rain
With a bitter bite. You give back what you can –
This delicate embroidery in black. I write
My journal notes; you draft your own slow chronicle
In a dialect of ruin. Tell me, has it healed anything
That some zealot has scrawled across your cliff face,
In white letters large and stark as death, “Jesus Saves?”

For too long, the church has remained silent in the face of ecological devastation. As Christians of every stripe – liberal, moderate, and conservative – we have been so focused on human justice and human relationship to Christ that we have neglected a larger, global justice and a deeper vision in which all of creation rests in the hands of a loving Creator.

For the sake of our world, including ourselves, we can no longer continue on this path. I believe that we must change course. As Christians, we are called to a vision of this world and the next that is shaped through the artistry of a God who cares so deeply for this divine handiwork that we call home.

What we have done, let us begin to undo. With a better understanding of our scriptures and our world, we can make smarter, more loving choices. As we make gains, however, small, let us also remember to celebrate.

The world God made is hurting, friends. Let’s do something about it. AMEN.