

*"Let everyone regard himself as the steward of God in all things which he possesses. Then he will neither conduct himself dissolutely, nor corrupt by abusing those things which God requires to be preserved."*  
-John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*

**Texts:** Genesis 1-2:4 & Mark 10:41-45

This week I was reading an article in the New York Times, which discussed the recent United Nations Summit on Climate Change and the difficult task of finding any sort of consensus on what's going with the state of the global environment.<sup>i</sup> Surprising as it may seem, when scientist, politicians, activists, and lobbyists all start arguing over statistics it's hard to tell what's really going on, and even harder to get everyone to agree to do something. In this particular article, Dr. Mojib Latif, a leading climate and ocean scientist from Germany, spoke about how difficult it has become for him to share his findings with the public. Every year, Dr. Latif gives hundreds of talks and presentations to community and civic groups, and he says that he is often met with "confusion and even anger" from his audiences. Dr. Latif's assessment: "People understand what I'm saying, but then basically wind up saying, 'We don't believe anything,' " **We don't believe anything.**

It's certainly easy for us to get pulled into repeating these words. Isn't it? When discussions about the environment quickly become angry political debates, with each side accusing the other, it's tempting to just throw our hands in the air, give up, and say, "we don't believe anything."

In this politically charged discussion it certainly is hard to believe in much. When people turn to the church asking what to believe, it's hard to get a straight answer. Presbyterian theologian Shirley Guthrie suggests that there are two opposing viewpoints that we in the church often fall into when talking about God's creation: a human-centered view and an earth-centered view.<sup>ii</sup>

The human centered viewpoint is the one that has dominated the discussion over the last few centuries. It suggests that we, humans, are the most important part of God's creation, and thus, the rest of creation is there solely for our benefit. We were the ones created in God's image. Right? We are the ones given dominion and told to subdue the earth. Right? We are the pinnacle of God's creation and the rest is literally "given" to us. Right? So aren't we free to use creation however we see fit? Guthrie calls this the "fatal assumption that our natural environment is there to be exploited, abused, and even destroyed for the sake of" our needs. Those who hold this view often use scripture, and in particular to the first chapter of Genesis, as a biblical justification for their abuses against nature. Our greed and our pride have dominated the way we have treated the world around us. But that seems ok, because in this human-centered view, it's all about us.

The other predominate viewpoint, which has been gaining more and more adherents in the previous decades is the earth-centered view. This gathering of people has been hard at work trying to fix all the problems created by years of polluting the land, seas, and skies. This planet is our home, then say, and if we are going to survive, we have to fundamentally change the way we treat it. One bumper sticker I saw recently summed up this point of view perfectly: it had a blue and green picture of the earth, and then next to it were the words, "There isn't a Planet B." Those who adhere to the earth-centered view, remind us all that there isn't a plan B or a planet B. If life on earth is going to survive, and if we are going to leave anything to our

children, and our children's children, then we'd better get to work, changing everything about how we live. From this point of view, fear is the motivating factor: fear of the destruction we are wrecking. Fear of the end of life on earth as we know it. Fear of anything that threatens mother earth. And with fear comes guilt—guilt over every minute action that increases our carbon footprint and brings us one second closer to ecological Armageddon.

So here we are. Stuck between two points of view. Stuck between greed and pride on one side and fear and guilt on the other. Stuck between two idolatries, for both of these viewpoints seek to claim our ultimate loyalty, our worship: either we worship ourselves and our own needs or we worship the earth. So, stuck here in the middle, what do we do? Do get pulled into one camp or the other? Do we just give up, and mumble, “We don't believe anything?”

Well maybe...or maybe it's time for us in the Church to talk about what we do believe.

Maybe it's time for us to turn down the volume of the angry voices on the radio and turn to the stories of scripture, the foundational stories of our belief, to help us remember the ways that God has been and continues to work in creation and the ways that God has called us to act. In a time when the culture around us is yelling “We don't believe anything” maybe it's time for the church to confidently confess what we do believe, using some ancient words, “We believe in God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth...We believe in Jesus Christ, the new creation...We believe in the Holy Spirit, everywhere the lord and giver of life.” In a time when the far right and far left each claim to be the only source of truth in the fight over the environment, maybe it's time for the church to start listening, instead, to what God calls us to do as stewards of creation.

That's precisely what the youth group at Fourth Presbyterian Church is doing. As part of the *CALLED FOURTH* program, our year-long emphasis on vocational callings, the youth group will be studying a different calling each month.<sup>iii</sup> For the month of September, they have been engaged in examining the biblical call to be stewards of creation. They have studied what the Bible has to say about this calling, and they've heard the stories of members of this church who have answered that call in a variety of ways. This afternoon the youth groups will be engaged in following that call through their mission work, the Jr. Highs working at Roper Mountain Science Center, and the Sr. Highs helping at the Greenville Humane Society. Being stewards of God's good creation, working together to preserve the gift of life that God has given us—these youth are responding to God's call in some exciting ways, and they are empowered to do so because they've been able to focus their attention over the past month on listening to that call. Listening, then responding. In order to focus their attention on God's call, they turned to the places where God has and still does speak to us, through the reading of scripture and through the teaching of the community of faith, the church. When we focus our attention on the stories of scripture, and when we turn to them with an open mind, we may see some things that might surprise us. Let's take a look at the creation story from the first chapter of Genesis.

First of all, as you no doubt noticed while Trish and I read the story, it's a long story. It's a full story. The story of God's loving act of creation and graceful ordering of the cosmos is a story meant to open our eyes to the fact that everything is created by God. The temptation is to jump right to end and read just about us, about us humans, rather than listening with joy to the whole story unfold. It's the same temptation we have when we get our yearbooks at the end of the school year. We don't take the time to read the whole book, we just jump straight our picture and the pictures of our friends. And, truth be told, isn't that how we've learned to read the story of creation, jumping as fast as we can to the sixth day, as if it's all about us. But if we actually

slow down and read the full story, our eyes are opened to the vastness, the beauty, the order, and the grace of God's loving act of creation.

If we slow down and read we see that we are created alongside all the other animals. Our sisters and brothers on day six are "the cattle and creeping things, the wild animals of the earth of every kind." But all of us day-sixers are late on the scene. The plants in all their beauty and splendor were created long us. The birds of the air and the fish of the sea are also our elder siblings. They were given the charge to "be fruitful and multiply over all the earth" before we ever showed up, and all of them were declared good by God. They were good before we were there. Their goodness does not depend on how useful they are to our needs, but on the fact that their Creator was pleased with his creation and declared them good. And all of us, "all creatures of our God and King," are together declared "very good."

Everything that exists is graced by God's gift of blessing, and this theme is relived time and time again throughout scripture. Later in Genesis, after the flood waters subside, God makes a covenant with Noah, but as we read, the covenant is not just with Noah but also with his descendants and with "every animal of the earth" with him on the ark.<sup>iv</sup> In the psalms we read of the many and diverse ways that the creation honors its creator, even the stars in the sky seem to sing their praise, as the psalmist reminds us that "the heavens are telling the glory of God."<sup>v</sup> In the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of his letter to the Romans, Paul tells us that all of creation "waits with eager longing" for the coming of God's full redemption.<sup>vi</sup> It seems that time and time again, scripture reminds us that we are not in this alone, but that all of us, all of God's creation together receives God's covenant blessing.

Turning back to the story of Genesis, there are two more things that we need to see with open minds, and they are intricately related to one another. First, we are created "in the image of God." Second, we are given "dominion" over all of creation. We are created in the image, in the likeness, of the God who creates, sustains, and redeems. We are created in the image of the God who carefully and lovingly calls the whole universe into being. We are created in the image of the God who gives life and blessing to the diversity of creation. The story tells us that we are created in the image of God, and then it immediately follows that we are given "dominion" over the rest of the life on this earth. One of the ways that we have misread this story in the past is by pulling out the word "dominion" as justification for using creation however we see fit. Whether it's clear cutting rainforests, running dog fighting rings, or tossing trash out the car window, we use the idea of God giving us dominion as an excuse to be as irresponsible as we please.

When we read the story afresh, however, we see that this gift of dominion only comes after we are told about being made in the image of God. These two gifts are linked together; they go hand in hand, and our abuse of creation has come from separating them, from talking just about dominion and ignoring the responsibility of the image of God. When we exercise dominion, power, when we make decisions about how to treat creation, our primary question should not be, "What's in it for me?" but rather, "How does this reflect God's love?" All our power over nature should be seen in light of God's power, a power that gives and preserves the fullness of life—a power that gives blessing and is willing to suffer for the good of the other. As Christ tells his disciples, our rule—our dominion—should not be like that of tyrants, who lord their power over their subjects. No, our dominion of love should reflect the love of the Son of man, who came not to be served, but to serve. This kind of love, this Christ-like dominion, is what we are called to show to all of creation, as creatures made in the image of God.

When we take the time to slow down and read the whole story, we are often surprised by what we find there. As we discussed earlier, both the human-centered view and the earth-

centered view fall short of what we read in scripture. Instead, as Guthrie suggests, in the Bible we read about a God-centered viewpoint.<sup>vii</sup> Creation is an act of God, a gift from God, and ultimately it belongs to God. This is Our Father's world. Not for our own sake, not for the earth's sake, but for God's sake, for God's sake we are called to take care of creation, because in doing so we honor the creator who gave us the gift of life in the first place and who charged us with preserving life. In an act of covenant-making love, God calls us, the ones created in his image, to be caretakers of his creation, stewards of what does not belong to us. And when we dishonor this covenant responsibility, we dishonor the God who gave us this covenant. As T. S. Elliot bluntly puts it, "A wrong attitude toward nature implies, somewhere, a wrong attitude toward God."<sup>viii</sup>

When we look at creation with this God-centered view, this biblical view, we see life on this earth as a gift and our stewardship as our thankful response.

So, will reading the Bible with a God-centered view lower global temperatures? Will listening to Christ's teachings fix the ozone layer? Will talking about our callings keep endangered species from going extinct? Who knows. That's not really the point. Global warming or not, we are called to care for creation. Threat of extinction or not, we are called to be responsible stewards. Whether it's 2009 with worry of climate change or 1492 with the discovery of new parts of the world, the calling is still the same. God's calling to be stewards of creation has been here long before any worry about environmental problems. We don't respond out of fear of a coming ecological disaster, we respond out of a sense of joy and gratitude for the gift of God's good creation.

How we follow this calling, how we respond to God's grace, is lived out in ways both big and small. For all us, though, it begins with learning to ask questions from a God-centered point of view. What would it look like if before we bought something in the store, we asked ourselves, "**How am I responding to God's love?**" As we start getting ready for early Christmas shopping, what would it look like if we asked of each purchase, "How am I responding to God's love?" When we make plans for family vacations, "How am I responding to God's love?" When we decide what car to drive, "How am I responding to God's love?" When we wrestle with how to vote in elections, "How am I responding to God's love?" When we have to decide what to study in college, "How am I responding to God's love?" When we talk to our friends, neighbors, coworkers and family members, "How am I responding to God's love?"

What if we asked these kind of questions? What if we each saw our whole life as belonging to God and the way we live our life as a chance to respond to God with thanksgiving? Friends, it is not out of self-interest or out of fear, but out of true thankfulness for the grace of life that we devote our whole lives to our Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer—to whose name be all glory and honor, dominion and power, now and forever more. Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> "Momentum on Climate Pact Is Elusive" by Andrew C. Revkin. *New York Times*, published: 9/21/09.

<sup>ii</sup> Shirley C. Guthrie, Jr. *Christian Doctrine: Revised Edition*. p. 148-149.

<sup>iii</sup> For more information on the *CALLED FOURTH* program see <http://www.4thpres-grvl.com/called-fourth.php>

<sup>iv</sup> Genesis 9: 8-17.

<sup>v</sup> Psalm 19: 1.

<sup>vi</sup> Romans 8: 18-25.

<sup>vii</sup> Guthrie, 149.

<sup>viii</sup> Quote found in *The Green Bible*, "Teachings on Creation through the Ages," Ed. J. Matthew Sleeth, p. I-109.