

Covenant with Creation

Genesis 9.8-17, Psalm 24.1-2, Romans 8.18-23, Luke 12.22-30

My favorite cartoon strip is *The Wizard of Id*. My all-time favorite episode is the one in which the Wizard has climbed up into his observatory and is peering through his telescope into the deep vastness of the heavens. The King walks into the observatory and asks, “What are you looking for?” The Wizard answers, “I’m searching for the center of the universe.” And the King says simply, “Speaking.” In other words, “*If you are looking for the center around which the whole world is supposed to revolve, that would be ME.*”

According to the Bible, the original sin—the first and most basic distortion in our relationship to God, to the world, and to each other—is the sin of pride. From the cradle to the grave, we humans are prone to exaggerate our self-importance, to assume that we are the most important reality of the whole world, that everything has to revolve around us—to assume that it is, indeed, *all about me*.

And that is true of us not only on an individual level, but also as a species; not just you and I personally but the entire human race has a powerful tendency to overestimate our own importance in the scheme of things, to think that “*we’re number one.*” That is the root of what separates us from God, from each other, and from the rest of God’s creation. And it’s the source of most, if

not all, of the loneliness and heartache that we have brought upon ourselves, individually and as a human family. That is what lies at the heart of the ecological crisis—mass extinctions, global warming, poisoned water and toxic air—a crisis that threatens to make this planet uninhabitable. The destruction of the Amazon rain forests threatens the existence of hundreds of species and clearly contributes to the global warming that is looming as a potential catastrophe for life itself on planet Earth...but we tolerate it because, you know, if the forests are turned into grazing land for cattle, that will mean that we can go on importing cheap beef for McDonalds, *and how could anyone be against that?!* The forests of Alaska provide the last refuge for some of the most endangered species on the planet, but they say there's oil beneath the land on which those forests stand, and we just have to get at the oil so that we can provide cheap fuel for our SUV's—and the forests just can't be allowed to stand in the way of what we call *progress*.

Most of us had never heard of the snail darter until the mid-1970s, when a case that made it all the way to the U. S. Supreme Court stopped construction on a dam in the Little Tennessee River, because the dam would have destroyed the last known habitat of a small fish, related to the perch, that was on the list of endangered species. Lots of Americans expressed outrage at the thought that the dam and all its hydroelectric energy could be held hostage to the needs of a

little fish that no one had ever heard of. I remember seeing a bumper sticker that asked, “*What has the snail darter ever done for me?*” Our assumption seems to be that unless animal life is beneficial to us, it’s really of no value in itself. And if it gets in the way of our plans and projects, then it’s o.k. with us if it goes extinct. That’s just the price the snail darter will have to pay for getting in the way of our progress. Didn’t God create the world for the sake of human beings? Weren’t the other animals put here just for our benefit? So if they don’t serve our purposes, or if they get in the way of what we want to do, why should we care if they go into extinction?

But that way of looking at our relation to the rest of the animal kingdom rests on a flawed reading of the creation story. According to the account in Genesis, human beings emerged late in God’s creative work. God created the world and all the plants and animals in it, and then He created Adam and Eve. We’ve often read the story as if the Creator saved the best for the last, starting with the lower forms of life and culminating the creative process with God’s masterpiece—*ourselves*, naturally. But a close analysis of the story strongly supports an alternative reading. Long before humans appeared on the scene, God looked at all he had made—the heavens, the earth, the seas, the plants, the trees, the animals—and said, “*Behold, it is good.*” And then, almost as an afterthought, God realized that he needed a custodian, a caretaker, someone to

look after this good creation. Listen to the words of Genesis 2:15: “Then the Lord took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to tend it and guard it and keep it”—not to *plunder it* or *exploit it* or *destroy it*. That defines our God-ordained relationship to the earth. We are called to be its guardians, not to abuse or destroy it.

In our text from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus compares our Lord to a master who, before leaving on a journey, instructs his servants to take care of his house while he is away. And the master says to the servants, in effect, “If while I am gone, vandals break in and ransack my house, or if thieves break in and steal my belongings, it will not be a good enough excuse to say that you were fast asleep when it happened.”

The earth is the Lord’s house, where God himself is pleased to dwell, but our generation has witnessed the vandalizing of God’s house on a massive scale. The abuse of the natural environment is finally a *religious* issue for those who believe, as we do, that *the earth is the Lord’s*. The earth doesn’t belong to the devil. It doesn’t belong to us. The earth is the Lord’s—so an assault on the earth is not just a bad thing to do; it’s an act of blasphemy and rebellion against the loving will of the Creator.

The earth is the Lord's. But today forests are being destroyed at the rate of 1 ½ acres per second, and with them thousands of species that can never be replaced. *The earth is the Lord's.* But every day 40,000 children under the age of 5 die from famine and poverty caused in large part by the fact that we have abused the land and lost billions of tons of topsoil and in the process destroyed much of the fertility of the earth. *The earth is the Lord's.* But every day we *generate* billions of tons of waste and garbage through our greedy, extravagant over-consumption of precious, limited resources. *The earth is the Lord's.* But every day, dead or dying dolphins, their immune systems overwhelmed by massive pollution, wash up on the shores of the Mediterranean, and dead seals wash up on the shores of the North Sea. *The earth is the Lord's.* But when we go to the beach, our own children sometimes have to dodge the contamination that washes ashore from the medical waste that we dump into the oceans.

God has called us to be stewards of the earth, and we can't escape our responsibility by claiming that we are asleep to what's happening. With the kind of global communications that are available today, there's no reason why anyone should be unaware of what we are doing to God's creation. Being asleep to the danger is no excuse. It is time—no,

it is past time—for you and me to wake up and get on with the work of preserving and protecting God’s good creation. That’s our calling, and if we fail, no excuse will be good enough.

Where is God? Doubtless, many would answer that question by pointing to the sky: God is in heaven—out there, far away from us, far away from the earth. But Jesus taught that God is right here in our midst—not *out there* but *in here*, not far away but close at hand, not just in heaven, not just in our hearts, but deeply, lovingly in the world that he made as a good home to share with us. If God dwells in us by the Holy Spirit, how can we doubt that God is present in all other living things as well? If God loves you and me, how can we doubt that his compassion extends to everything else that he created in love? What sinful pride—what arrogance—to think that we alone are important to God, that we alone are loved by God!

After the flood, God entered into covenant not just with Noah and his descendants but with “every living creature on earth” (Genesis 9.9-10). God entered into covenant not just with human beings but also with the animals, the birds, the cats, the dogs, the horses, the snail darters, the spotted owls. The God of the Bible is a tree-hugger! The God of the Bible is an environmentalist!

Early in the history of Christianity, the danger of idolatry was so great that Christians got into the habit of denying God's presence in trees and rocks and babbling brooks that pagans wanted to worship as divine. And sometimes, over-emphasizing God's otherness and separateness from all created things, Christians ended up pushing God out of the natural world and turning the earth from a center of awe and reverence into a mere thing, an object, something to be manipulated and exploited for purposes dictated by human selfishness and greed. Little by little, we Christians lost our sense of the dignity of all creation, and that's how we set ourselves up for the environmental crisis that now threatens all of life on this planet. If we believe that only human beings have dignity and value in the eyes of God—if everything else (trees, fish, birds, air, water, animals) is here just for our use and exploitation—then it's hard to keep from falling into an abusive attitude toward the natural world. The earth becomes not our stewardship, our solemn responsibility, but simply our plaything, to be exploited and abused as we see fit. And the inevitable result is the self-destructive environmental nightmare that threatens to engulf the whole planet in our generation. Surely God expects more and better of us than that. Surely we can do better than that.

It would be easy to fall into despair about the possibility of reversing these trends before it's too late. But we Christians believe in the God whose unlimited power is made available to us, so that in faithfulness we can move whatever mountains may stand between us and the fulfillment of the calling that we have received from him. We believe in a God of hope, a God of miracles, a God who created and is still creating, a God who never runs out of possibilities, a God who preserves the goodness of the world and shares his creativity and guardianship with those who are created in God's own image. That is our calling from the One who is not only the Lord of the Church but also the Lord of all the world. The earth is the Lord's, and God has commissioned you and me to be stewards of the earth, in covenant with creation. When the Master returns and we are called to give an account of our stewardship, then, says Jesus, "Blessed are those servants whom the master will find awake when he comes." Where the stewardship of the natural environment is concerned, this is no time for sleepwalking. For God's sake, but also for the earth's sake, for our own sake, for the sake of our children and their children, it's time—no, *it's way past time*—for you and me to wake up.

In the name of the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sustainer: Amen.