

“If... Then... But...” *Creation Care Series #5*

Leviticus 26, selected verses

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This morning we continue our series on Creation Care, turning to the Book of Leviticus, chapter 26. While last week we were in Genesis with the story of Noah and the ark, the rainbow and all of those animals, the Book of Leviticus may not be on your radar when it comes to the topic of creation care. If you ever tried to read the whole Bible from cover to cover, beginning with Genesis and then Exodus, you might remember Leviticus as being the place where things really slow down. After the exciting drama of God's people being formed in Genesis, and the stories of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob and so many others, and then the drama of Exodus with God rescuing the people from the evil Pharaoh in Egypt, and leading them into the wilderness on the way to the promised land, we then get to the Book of Leviticus. No more exciting action or story telling! Instead, Leviticus outlines instructions and laws for the people who have just started their wilderness wanderings, preparing them for when God will give them a new home. While it's easy to get bogged down in all the legal details, there's much more in Leviticus than may meet the eye. Leviticus lays down the framework for how the people are to live in relationship to a Holy God who calls the people to be holy, too - and as we shall see, a lot of this has to do with the people's relationship with the land. So let's turn now to God's word in chapter 26, selected verses that you can find in your bulletin insert. Through the voice of Moses, we hear God's Word to the people of Israel:

Leviticus 26.3-22, 34-35, 40-45 *Common English Bible*

If you live according to my rules, keep my commands, and do them, I will give you rain at the proper time, the land will produce its yield, and the trees of the field will produce their fruit. Your threshing season will last until the grape harvest, and the grape harvest will last until planting time. You will eat your fill of food and live securely in your land. I will grant peace in the land so that you can lie down without anyone frightening you. I will remove dangerous animals from the land, and no sword will pass through it. You will chase your enemies, and they will fall before you in battle. Five of you will chase away a hundred, and a hundred of you will chase away ten thousand, and your enemies will fall before you in battle. I will turn my face to you, will make you fruitful and numerous, and will keep my covenant with you. You will still be eating the previous year's harvest when the time will come to clear it out to make room for the new! I will place my dwelling among you, and I will not despise you. I will walk around among you; I will be your God, and you will be my people. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt's land—who brought you out from being Egypt's slaves. I broke your bonds and made you stand up straight.

But if you do not obey me and do not carry out all these commands— if you reject my rules and despise my regulations, not doing all my commands and breaking my covenant— then I will do the following to you:

I will bring horrific things: wasting diseases and fevers that make the eyes fail and drain life away. You will plant seed for no reason because your enemies will eat the food. I will turn my face against you: you will be defeated by your enemies; those who hate you will rule over you; and you will run away

even when no one is chasing you. If, despite all that, you still do not obey me, I will punish you for your sins seven more times: I will destroy your prideful power. I will turn your sky to iron and your land to bronze so that your strength will be spent for no reason: your land will not produce its yield, and the trees of the land won't produce their fruit. At that time, while it is devastated and you are in enemy territory, the land will enjoy its sabbaths. At that time, the land will rest and enjoy its sabbaths. During the whole time it is devastated, it will have the rest it didn't have during the sabbaths you lived in it.

But if they confess their and their ancestors' guilt for the wrongdoing they did to me, and for their continued opposition to me... then I will remember my covenant with Jacob. I will also remember my covenant with Isaac. And my covenant with Abraham. And I will remember the land. The land will be absent of them and will be enjoying its sabbaths while it lies devastated, free of them. They will be making up for their guilty deeds for no other reason than the fact that they rejected my regulations and despised my rules. But despite all that, when they are in enemy territory, I will not reject them or despise them to the point of totally destroying them, breaking my covenant with them by doing so, because I am the LORD their God. But for their sake I will remember the covenant with the first generation, the ones I brought out of Egypt's land in the sight of all the nations, in order to be their God; I am the LORD.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

As I may have told you before, one of the things I really love to do is going to see a good movie. Growing up, my Uncle Mike was the one most likely to initiate going to the theater - he wrote a movie review column for the local paper and so he shared his love of movies with me and my sister. To save money he would often sneak in some candy or even a can of soda in his briefcase, something that I occasionally have done myself! So when I became a parent, I loved to take my kids to the movies, too. One of the summer movies I remember my whole family enjoying on the big screen was [The Simpsons Movie](#). This 2007 animated movie was a big hit for both kids and adults, and it did not require you to be a fan of the TV show to appreciate the humor and the message it had about the environment. The plot centers around the city of Springfield's rampant pollution, causing Lake Springfield to become dangerously toxic. While young Lisa attempts to help by raising awareness of the problem, Homer unintentionally makes the situation worse, so much so that the Environmental Protection Agency quarantines Springfield under a giant dome to contain the disaster.

This was not the first animated production to address the climate crisis. All the way back in 1972 Dr. Seuss' children's book [The Lorax](#) was adapted as an animated musical television special. It tells the story of the Once-ler, a greedy businessman who chops down Truffula trees to make Thneeds, a fluffy and unnecessary product. The Lorax, a grumpy but caring creature who speaks for the trees, tries to warn the Once-ler of the environmental consequences of his actions. But the Once-ler ignores the Lorax's warnings and continues to chop down trees until there are none left. As a result, the environment is polluted, the animals are gone, and the Once-ler is left alone with nothing but a pile of worthless Thneeds.

Now, I share these two animated stories with you as a reminder that we have known for quite some time the negative impact we humans are making on the environment. We have known there are real-world consequences of deforestation, such as habitat loss, air and water pollution, too. And for a long time prophetic voices like the Lorax have been calling on us humans

to change our ways - the Lorax ends with a simple warning that UNLESS somebody cares, the situation will not improve. But while we may be aware of the modern environmental movement that dates back to [the first Earth Day](#) in 1970, I think some of us may not be aware of what the Bible says about environmental decline. You see, the relationship between human activity and the natural world is a key focus in the Hebrew scriptures - a relationship that was critical thousands of years ago, and a relationship that remains just as critical to us today.

Our Leviticus passage reflects a dynamic we see throughout the Old Testament, the belief that IF the people obey God's commandment THEN there will be blessings. Rain will come at the proper time, the land will produce its yield, and the trees of the field will produce their fruit, the people will eat their fill of food and live securely in the land. BUT if God's people choose to disobey God's commandment, then the negative consequences, the so-called curses, will follow. Blessing or curse - the choice is ours - but exactly what commandment are we talking about here? While the Book of Leviticus lays out many commandments, it's important to note that in verse 2 (the verse right before our passage) we hear this command: "You must keep my sabbaths and respect my sanctuary; I am the Lord" (26.2). Keep my sabbaths? What exactly does that command mean? Well, if we just turn back one chapter, God speaks clearly to Moses on the mountaintop about sabbath rest: "Once you enter the land that I am giving you, the land must celebrate a sabbath rest to the Lord. You will plant your fields... and gather crops for six years. But in the seventh year the land will have a special sabbath rest, a Sabbath to the Lord. For that year you must not plant your fields or prune your vineyards" (Leviticus 25.2-4). *You see, it's not so much that we are to take a sabbath every seven years but it's the land that deserves a break!* The land needs to rest. Unlike the time the Hebrews lived as slaves in Egypt, forced to labor 24x7 and depend on the Egyptians to give them their bread, God is preparing them to live in a completely new way. No longer are they to trust in the economy of excessive work & over production, but rather they are to trust in the abundance that God will provide. **While we may think the land belongs to us, and it's up to us to work it so we can produce enough to survive, the biblical witness is much different. The Bible makes the radical claim that the land and all of the creation belongs to God and God alone!**

After the long list of blessings we come to a longer list of curses, starting with the key word BUT. "But if you do not obey me and do not carry out all these commands— if you reject my rules and despise my regulations... — then I will do the following to you..." (26.14-16) There will be diseases and fevers that drain life away. There will be no peace as our enemies will defeat us, and we will be so scared that we will run away even when no one is chasing us. The sky will turn to iron and the land to bronze - with these hard surfaces the land will not produce its yield, and the trees won't produce their fruit. Instead of a homecoming there will be exile, and the only good thing about exile is that when humans are away the land will finally rest and enjoy its sabbaths! In many ways we got a glimpse of this the first year of COVID - when we worked from home and stopped traveling, carbon emissions dropped, reducing the pollution of the air and water.

So many of the negative consequences listed after the word BUT have to do with the land, illustrating how our sins directly impact the creation. *In other words, when we are unfaithful, when we do not trust in God's provision but instead see creation as a thing to exploit - something God gave us to use and abuse - when we act unfaithfully in these ways, all of creation groans!* Clearly, our sins have a direct impact on creation - the droughts and fires, the floods and the melting polar caps, the change in weather patterns - all these are results of our impact on God's good earth. The [Brief Statement of Faith](#) we

will say in worship today puts it like this: “Ignoring God’s commandments, we violate the image of God in others and ourselves, accept lies as truth, exploit neighbor and nature, and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care. We deserve God’s condemnation.”

But the story does not stop there! There’s another BUT that comes and it’s the one that has the last word! God says, “But if they confess their sins and their ancestors’ guilt for the wrongdoing they did to me, and for their continued opposition to me... THEN I will remember my covenant with Jacob. And with Isaac. And with Abraham... (Leviticus 26.40-42)... a covenant God made back in Genesis 12, that God would make a great nation of their descendants and through them, all the nations of the world would be blessed! Yes, with God judgment is never the last word - it’s always forgiveness. But notice that forgiveness is never cheap - forgiveness is a gift we can receive when we confess not only our wrongdoing but also the wrongdoing of our ancestors. In a hyper-individualistic world this idea of corporate forgiveness may not sit well with us. I’m just responsible for my own actions, not the actions of others and certainly not the people who have come before me, right?? *But sin is not just an action we do by ourselves - sin has to do with our bad behavior as well as the sinful institutions and values we have inherited from the generations before us.* One of the reasons we have a public prayer of confession each Sunday in worship is because Presbyterians have always taken the power of societal sin very seriously. So when it comes to creation care, the damage that I may do as an individual is more than the excess gas I may burn in my car, or the amount of unnecessary plastic I may waste - it also has to do with the attitude and lifestyle I have inherited from the generations before, and the likelihood I may be passing down the selfish belief that the earth and its resources are at my disposal.

A couple of weeks ago when we looked at the passage from Romans 8 we discovered the good news that God wants to redeem all of creation, not just us humans. Too often we imagine humans and animals (maybe insects, too) as living and the rest of creation, including the land as an “it.” But theologian Ellen Davis says that’s not what the Bible teaches us. Instead of an “it” we should imagine the land as being a partner with us and with God. In Genesis 2 the land comes first - the humans are then formed from dirt, and so that makes us kin! And towards the end of our passage God says, “*Yes, I will remember my covenant with Isaac, with Jacob, and with Abraham. And yes, I will remember the land, too*” And what that suggests is that land is a covenant partner. And so our relationship with God is not a two-way relationship. It’s a three-way relationship” - God, Humans, and the Land ([The Weight Podcast: Creation Care - “Hope for Creation” with Ellen Davis](#))

So when we think about loving God with our whole hearts, that means we need to think of loving the earth, too. And when we think about walking humbly with God that means walking humbly with each other and with the earth entrusted to our care. And when we think about loving our neighbors as ourselves, we need to think of all of creation as being part of God’s family.

Thanks be to God - the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of us all! Amen.