

“Stewardship of the Earth” Gen. 1:26-31; Psalm 19:1-4a; Psalm 24:1-2;

4/21/13

In honor of Earth Day tomorrow, I'm happy to report that there was actually some good news this week regarding the environment. Over the last seven years carbon emissions have fallen 13% in the United States! This is due primarily to state renewable energy policies, national fuel efficiency standards, and a greater reliance on natural gas instead of coal for generating electricity. Unfortunately, there was also some bad environmental news this past week. Europe, which had led the world in controlling greenhouse gasses, rolled back their environmental plan this week mostly because of the severe economic slump there. In addition, warming of the planet has led to the lowest levels of ice at the polar ice caps in over 1000 years. Air pollution in China is a serious health risk to many of its citizens. Here at home, fracking is producing huge new quantities of natural gas, but there are still questions about its impact on the environment, particularly with regard to groundwater.

Concerns about the environment are not new. They have been circulating around popular culture in the U.S. since at least the 1960's. In fact, the first Earth Day was held on April 22, 1970, over 40 years ago! Mainline denominations, including the Presbyterian Church, have long taken stands in support of environmental reform. But at the local level,

churches have not been much engaged by this issue, at least until now.

Of course, it's a good thing to care for the earth, but why should Christians care about it as a matter of their faith? Is there a biblical basis for supporting this cause? And if so, how should we respond? Let's look at a couple biblical principles regarding the creation and see where they lead us.

First, God made our world. Christians may debate exactly how God made the world and all the life in it, but we all agree that God made our world. The first verse in the Bible says, "*In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth.*" (Gen. 1:1) The universe is not here by accident. God made it for God's own purposes. The fact that God created it gives it value in and of itself.

Second, an important purpose of creation is to glorify God. From Psalm 19: "*The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth and their words to the end of the world.*" (Ps. 19:1-4a) George Washington Carver summed it up like this, "I love to think of nature as an unlimited broadcasting system, through which God speaks to us every hour, if only we will tune in." One purpose of creation is to glorify God.

A few weeks ago I mentioned that I enjoy the sport of caving. As I've explored caves, I have always been struck by their beauty. In many active caves, stalactites, stalagmites, columns, and flowstone are still being formed. It reminds me that God's work of creation is still ongoing! And there are other kinds of beautiful caves that I've never seen, for example ice caves and underwater caves, some of which go on for a hundred miles. They are filled with strange kinds of life that never leave the cave as well as gorgeous, intricate formations that no one will ever see. So why is it important to preserve these things when few, if any people will ever see them? The Psalmist reminds us that creation's wonders are not all about us! Their purpose is to glorify God. Their beauty speaks of God as artist, and their complexity speaks of God's intelligence.

Since one purpose of creation is to testify to God, it follows that when a species is destroyed, or a natural feature of nature is wiped out, a voice is silenced that was intended to praise God. We should do all that we can do to prevent that from happening.

The third biblical principle is that God owns the creation, but loans it to us. *"The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers."* (Psalm 24:1,2) The earth belongs to God. It is not ours to do with however we please. Remember these familiar words from Genesis 1, *"Then God*

*said, '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'... God blessed them (human beings) and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.' God said, 'See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.'" (Gen. 1:26, 28, 29)*

To sum up, the Bible teaches that God made our world; therefore it has value. An important purpose of creation is to glorify God. And the earth belongs to its Creator, but God has entrusted it to us to use it and care for it. We have "dominion" over it, to use the biblical phrase. We are stewards or managers of the earth.

So what are the implications of these three biblical principles regarding God's creation for how we ought to live? (BLANK)

First, God permits us to use his creation for our own benefit. We are obviously dependent upon the air to breathe, and the water to drink. And we may eat the plants, animals and fish, and use other animals, like dogs and horses, to help us. We can make use of coal, oil, minerals, and metals

that we gather from the earth for energy and manufacturing. We can use the sun and wind and water and the atom to generate energy, too. All of this use of creation is within God's original plan given to us in Genesis. We are free to make use of the resources of the earth to support and enhance our lives together. We can also get out and simply enjoy the beauty of God's creation. Spring is a wonderful time to do so!

But we are not permitted to *abuse* the creation. Instead, we must protect it, as God-appointed stewards of it. Often we have not done a very good job of this. Most of us are familiar with the serious problems caused by the pollution of our air. Smog in many of our cities causes difficulty in breathing for the elderly, for children, and for those with asthma and other respiratory diseases. Some of you remember when it used to be much worse in places like Pittsburgh. Thank God, we have made changes that have resulted in cleaner air!

In addition to the health risk that polluted air brings, there is not much question that global warming is taking place today. And the vast majority of our scientists believe that human activity is at least partially responsible for this warming. This trend may well have devastating consequences if it is not stopped. Protecting the planet from drastic and destructive climate change certainly falls under our mandate to care for and protect the creation!

Let's talk about water. Pollution in our water is another serious problem. Our water has literally poisoned our fellow citizens in some locations. It also poisons aquatic life. You may remember when the polluted Cuyahoga River caught fire in Ohio, or when Kepone pesticide poisoned the James River near Hopewell, Virginia. When I lived in Virginia, there were several rivers and streams where I fished that were marked with signs warning against eating fish caught in them due to high levels of mercury and PCB. Soil erosion, inadequate sewage treatment, chemicals from manufacturing, pesticides, erosion, and even lawn fertilizers all contribute to the pollution of our water. They have had a devastating effect on life in the Chesapeake Bay. We haven't been very good stewards of the water portion of creation.

By the way, Jesus' teaching also comes to bear on environmental issues. One of Jesus' two big commandments- to love your neighbor as yourself- surely has implications for how we care for the environment. Part of loving our neighbors around the world is making sure that we do not make the world unlivable for others as well as for ourselves!

Third, we need to conserve limited resources, like oil and gas and coal. There are scores of things we can do as individuals to conserve limited resources. We can re-cycle glass, paper, plastic, and metal products. We can cut back on our consumption of electricity and natural

gas, by being sure our homes are well-insulated, and by raising or lowering our thermostats to save energy. We can make energy efficiency a priority when we need to replace appliances. We can turn lights off when we leave a room and turn computers off when not in use. A simple thing many of us have done is to replace incandescent light bulbs with compact fluorescent bulbs. They cost 75% less to operate, produce 70% less heat, and last ten times longer! An average 60W compact florescent bulb will prevent several hundred pounds of global-warming gasses from being released into the atmosphere.

Here at church we are continuing to use some of these ways of conserving energy. We'll be replacing our 50 year-old furnace soon and the new one will use far less energy to produce the same amount of heat. I hope you'll look for ways to save energy in the places where you work as well as in your homes.

We've also got to talk about cars, which consume an enormous amount of gasoline and contribute greatly to pollution and greenhouse gasses. When you purchase your next vehicle, make fuel efficiency and low pollution a priority. Combine trips. Keep your tires inflated and your engine tuned. Use mass transportation when possible and support its development. Support measures that raise the requirements for fuel efficiency for all our vehicles.

You can see that there are lots of practical implications to this biblical mandate to be good stewards of the earth. There are implications for individuals, churches, communities, corporations, and governments. Some solutions are relatively easy and inexpensive. Others are costly and will require a great deal of public will and cooperation.

Christians are motivated to get involved in these matters for two reasons. First, God calls us to do so! The Bible tells us that the earth has been entrusted to us and we will be held accountable for how we manage it. So, we have responsibilities to be advocates for maintaining and restoring God's creation. In that sense, every Christian is an environmentalist!

Secondly, it is in our own self-interest to care for the earth; It's our home! We are already reaping some of the consequences of our failure to be good stewards of the earth. We do not want to leave a legacy of a dirty, warming planet to our children and grandchildren.

That said, these are not easy issues. Corporations, who control much of the pollution in our world, will need to be pushed to make changes. There are significant costs involved, and some changes in our own lifestyles may be demanded. Clearly, there are all kinds of balances that need to be struck here. But let's talk and work together to fulfill our mandate to be good stewards of God's earth.