

## “LOVING THE GOOD EARTH”

Psalm 148; Genesis 1:1 -2:3

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Most of you know that I grew up in a church that understood Christianity as primarily about personal salvation, and taught that the job of every Christian was to convince as many of the “unsaved” as possible to believe in Jesus so as not to go to hell. Of course, people tried to live good, caring lives along the way (and mostly succeeded). We appreciated and enjoyed God’s blessings. But ultimately, the theology held that, in the end, the only thing that really mattered was whether our individual souls were right with God. Everything else was impermanent and of much lesser significance.

Eventually I discovered that there were many things about that particular expression of Christianity I couldn’t live with. But probably the thing that felt most wrong to me, on an instinctive level, was the implication that the breath-taking and intricate beauty of creation is not important in and of itself. It’s not that we didn’t appreciate nature or agree that God’s handiwork was wonderful. But it had practical value mainly as provision for human needs, and spiritual value only in its ability to inspire awe and fear of the Creator that might lead one to believe or repent. I just couldn’t believe that a coral reef, or a field of wildflowers, or a starry sky, or flock of ducks, or a snowcapped mountain didn’t have intrinsic worth, in itself, or that those things are less valuable than human beings.

Only later did I come to understand that the Judeo-Christian tradition and the Bible itself do offer other perspectives.

You know, I think, that Genesis includes two different creation stories, and that they’re quite different. The one in Genesis 2 is the older, but it’s not accidental that our scriptures begin with this more poetic and structured story we read today. It’s at the beginning not so much to *explain what happened* when God created the world as to tell us some fundamental things about the nature of the creation. Religion scholar Steven Bouma-Prediger says that these verses answer the question “where are we?”

These verses tell us that we live in a God-created world. God’s word and Spirit are the source of everything.

These verses also tell us that this world is a responsive world. God creates, but then the earth brings forth vegetation and the plants feed the animals and the animals flourish and multiply.

This world we live in is ordered and interconnected... everything has a place in the living systems that make up the whole. There’s wildness, to be sure, but each part of the creation also functions and relates to other parts according to its own particular rhythms. There’s beauty in this. And the structured pattern of the text itself reinforces that sense of order and beauty.

This world we live in was made by God as a home... for human beings and for all the other creatures we share it with.

And of course, there's one thing we hear repeated over and over throughout: it is good. All of it, and each and every part. The repetition tells us something: in Hebrew, repeating something two or three times is the way to intensify the meaning. So when we hear seven times over that what God made was good, we know that's important, and we have to pay attention to it. God thought the created world was really, really good. God loves the earth; I don't know how you can draw any other conclusion.

This good world in which we live is a world we human beings are meant to take care of, protect, be responsible for. Lots of people have seized on the idea that humans are meant to "rule" or "have dominion" over the earth as an excuse to use, dominate, and destroy... but that's a poor way to interpret this text. Human beings are meant to be reflections of God, and we've already seen God making and giving life to the world, causing it to flourish, loving it, calling it good. That is the way creatures made in the image of God will relate to the world, too.

Sometimes we think of that part of the story, the creation of the human beings, as the culmination of the story, the high point, but in fact there is more: the seventh day, day of holy completeness and rest and rejoicing in the wonder of creation. Sabbath. God's gift that invites us to remember that it's *all* gift, that calls us back again and again to clarity about who we really are and what we are about in this world,

There's a line in one of Mary Oliver's poems that I just love: "My work is loving the world." How simple, and how profound that is. And how can that not be our work, if we are mirrors of God, since God loves the world?

In a practice sense, how might we go about "loving the world," loving this good earth God gave us as our home?

I'm sure there are an infinite number of ways, so I'm going to just suggest a couple of simple places to start:

The first thing is to pay attention. Really pay attention to the earth. Some of us did this great exercise at the women's retreat yesterday: we were asked to go outside, find some object in nature, and make 20 observations about it. Yes, 20 things seems like a lot of things to say about anything, but you'd be surprised how much there is to notice about a forsythia bush, when you really spend some time and use your sense to discover as much as you can about it. The world is full of wonders, and they feed our souls, show us something about the One who created them, and call us to protect them. Did you know there are 135 species of butterflies that are found in Michigan? That trees in the forest communicate through their roots? That octopuses are extremely intelligent? There is so much to know, and plenty of resources to help us foster a love for our earth.

This is related, but a somewhat different path: there are also plenty of resource to help us have a better understanding of the ways our earth is hurting. And, yes, there are a lot of them. Probably most of us can't aspire to expert knowledge of all of the environmental threats and challenges there are. But everybody can pick one or two things and really make an effort to understand what's going on. Why have wild bird populations in the U.S. and Canada declined by nearly 30 percent in the past 50 years? Why is it so important to protect wetlands? Glaciers are melting much faster than previously thought – what does that mean? Who's most affected by pollution, or rising sea levels,

or toxic waste? What's the connection between climate change and hurricanes? Fisheries, forests, endangered species, the effects of pesticides, die-off of bees, land conservation,... whatever it is that calls to you: pick something, and learn about it. We learn about what we care about, and we care about what we come to know.

And as we learn, we can listen to what the earth and its creatures and ecosystems – and through them, its Creator – ask of us. To change something we are doing, perhaps. To give up something. To act. To advocate. To join with others to make some difference in some specific way, for some particular place or creature or system with which we share the earth. That's what love is: not always, or maybe not ever, some general, lofty good intentions, but specific, lived, heartfelt attention, cherishing, and actions.

Let me close by reading you that Mary Oliver poem. It's called "Messenger."

My work is loving the world.  
Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird -  
equal seekers of sweetness.  
Here the quickening yeast; there the blue plums.  
Here the clam deep in the speckled sand.

Are my boots old? Is my coat torn?  
Am I no longer young and still not half-perfect? Let me  
keep my mind on what matters,  
which is my work,

which is mostly standing still and learning to be astonished.  
The phoebe, the delphinium.  
The sheep in the pasture, and the pasture.  
Which is mostly rejoicing, since all ingredients are here,

Which is gratitude, to be given a mind and a heart  
and these body-clothes,  
a mouth with which to give shouts of joy  
to the moth and the wren, to the sleepy dug-up clam,  
telling them all, over and over, how it is  
that we live forever.

Amen.

Resources:

*For the Beauty of the Earth* by Steven Bouma-Prediger

*Thirst* by Mary Oliver