

29 March 2009

This Land is Your Land

(This is the fifth message in our Lenten series 'Together *Again: The Meaning of the Atonement.*')

Genesis 1:26-31 and Romans 8:18-23

26 Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

28 God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

29 Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. 30 And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food." And it was so.

31 God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.

At our house in California we had the only swimming pool in the family, and so summers became a long string of barbecues and swim parties for the kids. It started before Memorial Day in May, and lasted until after school started. In the summer, maybe 3 or 4 times a week our extended family would come over, swim, eat and tell stories together. It was great.

There was always a point in the summer when the bees in our neighborhood would breed and go out looking for food to take back to the hive. Nothing makes a person move more quickly or in a funnier way than the sight of a bee—you know what I'm talking about.

But bees play a crucial role in our lives. It's not just honey, though I'll bet you didn't know that a 16-ounce bottle of honey represents the work of tens of thousands of bees who flew a total of 112,000 miles to gather nectar from 4.5 million flowers. That's for 16 ounces of honey.

Do you know how bees make honey? The gathering bees take their loads back to receiver bees, who eat it and expel it 200 times, which kills any dangerous microbes it may have. The whole time they do this they fan it with their wings—more than 25,000 times each. When it's done another wax specialist bee comes along and seals it in the comb.

That's how every ounce of honey that exists in the world is made.

Even if you don't like honey, there's one essential truth about bees that you can't escape: without bees there would be no flowers of any kind. Now you might be thinking that you

might be able to get along just fine without flowers—they're just there for decoration anyway, right?

Think about this: About a third of the world's food supply is dependent on the pollinating services of honeybees.

The point of this series as we reflect and prepare for Easter is that Christ's sacrifice offers us healing for our relationships with God, with ourselves, with each other, and with the earth.

The Bible describes how our relationships are supposed to be with the word Shalom. We were created to live in a constant, blissful state of perfect Shalom. One writer defines Shalom as 'the webbing together of God, humans and creation in justice, fulfillment and delight.'

Today we're looking at what Christ's redeeming work means for our relationship to the earth. You've heard a part of the creation story already. Here's the second text for us today.

18I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. 19The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. 20For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. 22We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. 23Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

That's one of those typically complicated passages of Paul's in his letter to the Romans. The point is that Christ's sacrifice sets into motion a reshaping of the world into what God designed it to be in the first place. 'Creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay.'

And then there's the groaning of creation, followed by this statement. 'We wait eagerly for the redemption of our bodies.' The word that translates to 'bodies' there is *Soma*, and it can also translate to 'existence.' We are eagerly waiting, the text tells us, for the groaning to stop—for the redemption of all existence.

Christ's sacrifice sets that redemption in motion—not just for our personal forgiveness or salvation—but for the restoration of everything—including the earth—back to the Shalom God created.

James Watt was the Secretary of the Interior under Ronald Reagan back in the early 80s. He was known for saying some fairly uninformed things. He once banned the Beach Boys from playing a concert in Washington DC because they attracted an 'undesirable element.' Who? Middle-aged surfers? Those are the happiest, most harmless people I know.

Watt was in favor of opening up just about every acre of public land for drilling, mining and other industrial use. In a lot of ways he was the worst nightmare of the environmentalist movement.

To be fair, though, he never said the one thing that most people will remember about his environmental views. He never said that since Jesus might return tomorrow, we might as well use everything up. When that was pointed out, a handful of prominent journalists—including Bill Moyers—ended up apologizing to him.

What Watt actually said was this: “I do not know how many future generations we can count on before the Lord returns, whatever it is we have to manage with skill to leave the resources needed for future generations.”

Now even that might make some of you uncomfortable, but we have to agree that it’s not nearly as crazy sounding as how it was reported. As much as it pains me to say it, that statement is at the moderate core of Christian teaching about the earth and how we should manage it.

James Watt makes a pretty easy target. He represents a certain kind of fundamentalism that didn’t offer much in the way of help in understanding what God wants from us—what Christ on the Cross made possible for us—in our relationship to the earth. Watt’s easy, but he’s not alone.

Lately, on the other side of the issue, there is another fundamentalism that seems to be dominating the discussion about the environment—one that may actually drive more people away from healthy discussion about the environment than James Watt ever did.

You know what I’m talking about. It’s a sort of Green Fundamentalism—The ‘gotcha’ mentality that has people looking over their neighbors’ walls to measure their carbon footprint. It’s an attitude that spends more time trying to catch people doing it wrong than it spends teaching people how to do it better.

The point here—what we’ve seen in our two texts of Scripture this morning—is this: God made the world as an integral part of his Shalom—of the web of relationships we were meant to thrive in and enjoy. Seeing our relationship to the earth as separate from the relationships we have with God, with ourselves and with each other—seeing our link to the earth separately from the rest is a part of the brokenness Christ died to restore.

That brokenness shows up in different ways. On the one side you have people who use and waste resources in a way that disregards the most basic principles of management for the long haul. The Industrial Revolution in Britain and America is a prime example of this—from mowing down old forests to strip mining to the way we use energy sources. As other countries try to develop they all seem to pass through this phase of abusive use and waste.

But on the other side some have come to worship nature to the point of forgetting why it’s here. Dennis Prager, the commentator and author that I’ve mentioned before, used to

pose this question to his radio listeners: "If you saw a dog and a person drowning, and you could only rescue one of them, which would you choose?" The question cut closer to home when he asked it this way: "If the dog was your dog, and the person was a stranger, then which would you choose?"

I happen to think there's only one right answer to these questions, but that might get us sidetracked.

Worshipping creation—putting it in a place that is out-of-kilter with the rest of our relationships—is just as much a sign of brokenness as the abuse of nature. Both miss the point about the Shalom that God created for us.

In the Genesis passage we heard about ruling over 'the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.' God creates this amazing planet, filled with all kinds of plants and creatures, and gives it to his human creation to use and to take care of. That's what rule means. We're so trained to think of 'ruling' as a bad thing, that we forget that at its heart it represents the responsibility to make Shalom possible for everyone and everything.

In some older translations we see it differently—it talks about having 'dominion over the earth.' Uh-oh. That doesn't sound any better than ruling over everything. But the point is that we were given the earth and all that is in so that we could thrive in it, take care of it, be nourished by it, share it together, and pass it on to our kids and grandkids.

Clearly that's not the way it's working out. Climate change, pollution of land and air and water, even the impact of our Western diet on the environment. All of these are in crisis. That's not to mention the political problems we've managed to create through our dependence on oil—the partnerships we never would have entertained if they didn't help feed our thirst for fossil fuels.

How do we solve this? It's crucial for us to see the earth in terms of the Shalom we've been talking about over the last month. . Biblical Shalom is 'The webbing together of God, humans, and creation in justice, fulfillment and delight.'

What does that mean for us to treat the world with Justice? Justice describes a situation where people get what they're entitled to. You've heard me say before that I don't believe God made a single person without providing what they need to live and thrive on. Our problem isn't production—it's distribution. Paying attention to justice is being an agent of Shalom in the world.

What about Fulfillment? The dictionary defines this word as, "to put into effect—to measure up to—to convert into reality." To take good care of the earth is to convert God's promise of Shalom into reality—literally to make it real for ourselves and our neighbors.

And that leaves Delight. This might be the easiest one to forget, and the hardest one to define. In our rush to earn and spend and acquire and consume—do we take enough time to delight in God's creation? Do we take the time to help others to see God's hand in the

world around us. Do we remember, often enough, to enjoy the pleasures of the nature God left for us?

But what can we do? This is where the culture is helping to lead us in the small things. There are all kinds of books and pamphlets describing what we can do to save the earth. If you haven't already, get one—use it—try some of the things in there.

Don't feel pressured to do it all, but let me make this part clear: Feel pressured to do something. Feel challenged to take some time this Easter to think about how Christ's redemptive work adds to what you understand about your relationship to the earth. Do something—that's plenty.

We're not supposed to hear this and just go back to nature—that's not what we were meant to do. There's a reason the Bible begins in a Garden and ends in a holy city—we were created to participate in the shaping of the culture of this world. As people who manage God's creation on his behalf, part of our lives as called, loved, forgiven and redeemed people—our lives make the most sense when we pay attention to our relationship to the earth. When we take responsibility for what we make and what we use—what we share and even what we waste.

We don't need another fundamentalism to force us to count our carbons and drive electric cars and even to separate our trash. Those are all great tactics for accomplishing the strategy of taking better care of the earth. But they're not the point.

The point is that we were made to have contented, joy-filled lives of wholeness and contentment—in healthy relationships with God, with ourselves, with each other and also with the earth. Connecting with the earth in a healthy way is a part of connecting with God and each other in healthy ways.

The big picture is, well, frankly a lot bigger than we give it credit for sometimes. That groaning we hear is the earth telling us that it's ready for its share of Christ's redeeming work. As God's representatives it's our job to extend the Shalom God made for the world—to extend that Shalom to the whole world and everything in it.

Understanding how honeybees help sustain our food supplies is a start—taking the time to understand more is how we begin the long process of restoring balance to how God made the world to work.

That's a part of the gift we receive through Christ's sacrifice, and sharing it is a part of the Easter miracle.

Amen.