

Sermon 9-29-19
Paul Purdue preaching

In retirement, my notoriously frugal parents went on vacation for many years with equally frugal friends. On their first morning in Florida, the condo's clock radio began blaring AC-DC at 4:30am. Jarred awake, in unfamiliar terrain, Dad struggled for his glasses, detangled his c-pap and fumbled for the mute button. You should know, my Dad listened to the Metropolitan Opera and watched Hee-Haw with Mom, but hated rock music. In the struggle to disarm the classic rock racket, Dad somehow sent a mauve lamp tumbling to the floor as collateral damage. The music ended just before the lamp hit the floor with a loud shattering crash. Mom, who had somehow slept through the guitar solo, sat straight up and demanded, "Bob, what on earth?" With a dejected, "Joanne, go back to bed," Dad dropped to all fours and proceeded to fish ceramic shards from the carpet until he found his glasses. Mom shared the story at breakfast. After the laughter died down, Barb said, "You know, they will charge you \$100 for that \$10 lamp." With those ominous words the great St. Petersburg lamp search began. On Monday they hit Walmart, Tuesday Kmart, Wednesday Value-City and Lowes, no luck! Thursday, there it sat on the top of a Big Lot's shelf, shining like the Lord Stanley's Cup: model number 271466 in mauve! They high fived, back slapped, and took a victory lap around the home goods aisle. When I chided my parents for wasting so much beach time searching for a lamp, my Mom shot back, "Well, it's like those scavenger hunts you take the youth on! It was kinda fun." Now why did four adults hit eight stores to find a cheap lamp? Well, they did not own the condo. In fact, they had entered a covenant to leave the place just like they found it!

The Earth is the Lord's. If God has given us this planet, will we leave it better than we found it? Do we understand care for the Earth as a Christian duty? Our Field Guide has talked about: 1) stopping and spotting the Creator's beauty within and around us; 2) Rejecting a lifestyle that craves, consumes, and competes, and creating beauty within the world. Today, we ask, will we leave God's creation better than we found it?

God's creation holds a deep restorative power. You find that humbling power, peering over into Grand Canyon, wading out into incoming surf, watching a bluejay swoop onto a branch, hearing a toddler laugh, or staring up into a cloudless night sky. That beauty heals the soul. Nature's grandeur reminds us to walk humbly with God and each other. Creation comes as a sacred gift.

When I look up at your skies, at what your fingers made—the moon and the stars
what are human beings that God thinks about us?

Lord, You have made us just a little less than divine,

You let us rule over your handiwork, putting everything under our feet—
all sheep and cattle, the wild animals too, the birds in the sky, the fish of the ocean,
everything that travels the pathways of the sea.

Stop, see the beauty. Create beauty. Leave it better than you found it. How will our consumption impact future generations? What do we owe to the tigers, turtles, and toddlers that God entrusts to us? Some Christian's quip that God made us to be the rulers of the animals, kings of the jungle, queens of the river. That may be, but rulers in Bible are judged by how they care for others, how they bring justice for the most vulnerable. Jesus sets the example as our servant king, laying aside the comfort of palaces, thrones, and crowns in order to save the world. The devil preaches selfish consumption, staves to bread, miracles for show, and the pursuit of earthly treasures. The market gods tell us we own the planet. We do not. We draw lines on maps and stick up walls, but if we do "own" anything, we will not keep it for long, at least if we think

about galactic time. What does our care for snail darters, tree frogs, and spotted owls say about our love for God? What does our use of resources say about our love for our children's children or our neighbors' grandchildren? Do we love the people in the Maldives islands as much as we love ourselves? Will we leave this planet better than we found it? Is it a sin if we do not?

In the Sermon on the Mount passage about consumption, Jesus says to us, "Don't worry about your life, what you'll eat, drink, or wear. Isn't life about more than consumer goods? Look at the birds in the sky, Earth's engineer designed a system to feed them. Why worry about clothes? Notice how the lilies in the field grow. They don't wear themselves out with work, and they don't spin cloth. But I say to you that even Solomon in all of his splendor wasn't dressed like one of these." The Creator dresses grass in the field so beautifully ...

I have this anthropomorphic image of God with scissors and crayons putting paper dresses on the wildflowers, coloring a unique pattern, slipping frilly skirts over buttercups, adding some orange fringe and a splash of perfume to make the bees swoon. In Matthew 6, Jesus is preaching that we will not find fulfillment through consumption, but Jesus' foundational theology tells us God delights in and cares for the creation. Not even one sparrow falls to the ground apart from God's care and concern (Matthew 10). Will we love the creation as tenderly as does our Creator?

Perhaps today's prophets come in the form of 16 year old girls who ride on sailboats to speak to the UN. Do Greta Thunberg's symbolic acts speak like Jeremiah's baskets of figs or Joseph's seven starving Egyptian cows? I imagine God is alarmed at the way we treat God's earth. I imagine the Creator, who cares when one sparrow falls to the ground, weeps to know that some 3 billion fewer wild birds fly over North America than did in 1970. I was shocked to read the NY Times article about the effects of climate change on trees. Many fruit, nut, and bean trees need a good winter chill. Pat J. Brown, an agriculture professor at the University of California-Davis said, "For the most part, the world gets fed by row crops, but a lot of the stuff that makes life really worth living comes from trees. Think of the world without chocolate or wine or coffee." Do we hear the prophetic calls to change our lifestyle?

Do we remember that the sin in Genesis 3 was a misuse of God's holy trees? In the Eden parable, human suffering came as we crossed boundaries linked to the environment. Literally our eating forbidden fruit unbalanced God's perfect garden. Now, Eden is not a science or history lesson, but art, and a second-generation Pauline writer adds to bad theology by getting Eden's details wrong (1 Timothy 2:8-15). Indeed, when Christian people mistake scripture for a science book, they compound our environmental sinfulness. Our modern prophets are likely hoisting weather balloons and checking the Arctic ice cores. The Psalmist says that we are a little less than angels. Thinking and loving is the divine gift. God gave us minds to use to care for each other and the planetary home God gave us. In 2019, it breaks my heart that the church has not learned the lessons of Galileo. I love how Psalm 104 offers a love song to God, "Lord, you make the clouds your chariot...the winds your messengers... You established the earth on its foundations." Friends, that is poetry not science. When Yuri Gagarin and then John Glen circled the earth in 1961, they did not see a big metal base down under the south pole holding up our globe.

Fifty years ago, Dr. King warned, "Religion has all too often closed its eyes to new discoveries of truth. Through edicts and bulls, inquisitions and excommunications, the church has attempted to prorogue truth and place an impenetrable stone wall in the path of the truth-seeker. So, many new truths, from the findings of Galileo to the Darwinian theory of evolution, have been rejected by the church with dogmatic passion.

The historical criticism of the Bible is looked upon by the soft minded as a blasphemous act, and reason is often looked upon as the exercise of a corrupt faculty which has no place in religion. The soft minds have re-written the Beatitudes to read: "Blessed are the pure in ignorance for they shall see God."

"All of this has led to the widespread belief that there is a conflict between science and religion. But this isn't true. There may be a conflict between soft minded religionists and tough minded scientists, but not between science and religion. Their respective worlds are different and their methods are dissimilar. Science investigates. Religion interprets. Science gives humanity knowledge which is power. Religion gives humanity wisdom which is control. Science deals mainly with facts. Religion deals mainly with values. The two are not rivals. They are each other's complement. Science keeps religion from sinking into the mores of crippling irrationalism and paralyzing obscurantism. Religion prevents science from falling into the marsh of obsolete materialism and moral nihilism." (MLK Strength to Love)

Somehow parts of the church are actively attacking science in the name of creationism and biblical truth. That misguided devotion is perhaps not a trespass, but it is surely a sin for it "misses" the mark of loving God with "all of our mind". The Earth is not set on a foundation! God does ride about the heavens in a cloudy chariot. The engineer, artist, and architect of the universe designed something way more amazing than that! The Earth spins at about 1,000mph, while rotating around the sun at 67,000 mph, while the whole universe is moving at 490,000mph and none of us fly off. Let the preachers confess with the Apostle Paul that "we see in a mirror dimly" and our knowledge is incomplete. God is creating new things through the good gift of science. Let us confess our sins against Galileo and not lock science up inside 2,000 year old understandings of physics, medicine, genetics, or environmental science.

Stop, spot the beauty. See God's amazing collection of dresses all around you. Stop and worship! Catch the grandeur. Know the Creator created you to create beauty. Resist the market gods who tell you you will find joy as you consume and compete to resources. Conserve, create, reduce, recycle, preserve, plant, listen to the scientists. Finally, Remember, the Earth is the Lord's. Let us resolve to leave this sacred sphere better than we found it. Amen.