

**Living the Easter Life:
CREATION**

**Genesis 1:27-2:3
Psalm 8**

*Jesus is Lord over Creation,
so we care for his world.*

A sermon preached by
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Baptizing babies is one of the highlights of my pastoral life. They are so sweet and innocent, and the sacrament that recognizes their place in God's family is so meaningful. More often than not, even an infant will gaze at me during the baptism, as if he or she knows sometime important and wonderful is happening.

Of course, it's not always idyllic. Sometimes the babies cry. One baptism I did was memorable because just as I said the words of baptism, the precious little boy filled his diaper. Loudly. Inches from the microphone. The congregation chuckled, and I said something to the effect of how that moment reminded us that we are not in control, in baptism or in life. God is. And it also reminded us that we are very connected to creation. Even bathed and dressed in our finest, we are an earthy mess.

Baby poop aside, we belong to a faith tradition that has always been connected to creation. Baptism requires water, the basis of life. The sacrament of communion celebrates bread and wine, the fruit of the earth, as a conduit of grace. Genesis tells us that when God created the world, God said that it was very good. Human beings were formed out of the earth, and when we die we return to the earth: "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

Our high view of creation is not shared by every faith tradition. Some religions view the earth as inferior to the spiritual or even evil. The goal of the believer is to escape the physical world.

But not Christians. We believe creation is awesome, spectacular, magnificent and majestic. It is a sign of the goodness and sovereignty of God. The Psalmist says it so well: "*O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.*"¹ And, "*The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.*"²

The connection between God and creation is evident even to a child. Sofia Cavaletti is a researcher who has pioneered the study of spirituality in young children. She finds that children often have an amazing perception that far surpasses what they've already been

taught. One three-year-old girl, raised in an atheistic family with no church contact at all, no Bible in the home, asked her father, "Where did the world come from?" He answered her in strictly naturalistic, scientific terms. Then he added, "There are some people who say that all this comes from a very powerful being, and they call him God." At this, the little girl started dancing around the room with joy as she said, "I knew what you told me wasn't true—it's him, it's him!"³

It is him. The connecting principle of creation is Jesus Christ. He is the creative force of God. He is the Lord of all creation. Colossians says, "*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*"⁴ If Jesus is the Lord of Creation, then part of our life as Christians is to care for his world.

But creation is under increasing stress in our world today. Human population has accelerated ever since the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century. There are twice as many people on the planet now as there were in 1970: 7.5 billion bodies crammed on this planet. Scientists say we should reach 10 billion by 2053. That many people stretch our resources.

That many people mess up a planet. Carbon emissions have increased 60% since 1992. The Mississippi River carries millions of tons of nitrogen pollution into the Gulf of Mexico each year, creating a "dead zone" in the Gulf each summer about the size of New Jersey. Approximately 40% of the lakes in America are too polluted for fishing, aquatic life, or swimming. Each year 1.2 trillion gallons of untreated sewage, stormwater, and industrial waste are dumped into U.S. water.⁵

These are big issues, and there's not a whole lot we can do about them individually. They are beyond our scope. What are we supposed to do about climate change? Carbon dioxide in the

atmosphere is at the highest level in 650,000 years. The planet is 2 degrees warmer than it was in the late 19th century. Sea levels have risen 8 inches in the last century, accelerating in the last two decades. 16 of the 17 hottest years on record have happened in the 21st century—and it's only 17 years old!⁶ Problems that big have to be attacked on a global scale, by nations and international agreements. Which it has been, in Paris in 2015, in an accord signed by 195 nations. Let's hope it holds.

We can't do anything about natural disasters, either. Floods, earthquakes, tornadoes, and hurricanes are going to happen. We can predict them better, but we can't stop them. What are we to do? How are we to live in a creation that is a beautiful gift of God, yet a delicate balance, susceptible to our misuse and abuse? What does it mean to make Jesus Lord of our creation?

I think it means that individually and corporately, to the extent we can, we practice good creation care. We care for the world, the environment, because it belongs to Jesus, and we belong to him. This is God's world, and we are God's children. So we take care of creation.

One way to do this is simply to **ENJOY** what God has given us. This world is an incredible place. From the tallest mountain to the deepest ocean, from the ant to the elephant, from the morning sunrise to the stars at night, God has put together a show for us. The first step in caring for it is to enjoy it with a sense of wonder and awe.

Nobody understood this any better than Snowflake Bentley. Wilson "Snowflake" Bentley, a New England farmer born in 1865, couldn't get enough of snowflakes. For forty years, he ran around in the snow, catching snowflakes on chilled slides and photographing them, seeking to capture for others the beauty he saw in those one-of-a-kind masterpieces of frozen crystals. Over his lifetime, he photographed more than five thousand individual snowflakes. His notes were over the top: "No. 785 is so rarely beautiful." He wrote of the "feast of

[their] beauty." You can almost see Snowflake whirling around in the snow, giddy with delight. He enjoyed God's creation.⁷

A second way to practice creation care is to **EXERT DOMINION** over the earth. In the beginning, God gave human beings dominion over the earth and all created things. But this idea of dominion has sometimes led to the abuse of the earth—strip mining, clear-cutting forests, and the extinction of species. That's a misunderstanding of dominion.

True dominion involves stewardship, caring for property that does not belong to us. It belongs to God. When God sent Adam out of the Garden because of his sin, our English translations say, "*the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken.*"⁸ "To till" in the Hebrew actually has the meaning "to serve." We are called to serve the earth, not just to use it as consumers, but to have dominion over it for the good of the earth and the glory of God.

A third way we can practice creation care is to **DO THE LITTLE THINGS** in our own lives that make a difference when everybody else does them with us. We use the words "reduce, reuse, and recycle." Reduce the amount of disposable stuff you send to the landfill; reuse materials that are still good but not brand new any more; recycle paper, plastic, aluminum, and other stuff. Conserve water, electricity and natural gas when you can. This kind of work makes little difference if you're the only one doing it, but if everyone is doing it, it makes a big difference.

Recycling is making a difference. Almost every city of any size (except Fort Smith) recycles as public policy. In 1980, recycling in the U.S. saved 18 million tons from being disposed. In 2010, recycling saved 85 million tons of stuff. That helps.

It broke my heart when I heard that for nearly a year the city of Fort Smith has been dumping all of our recyclables into the landfill. They're working toward resolving the issue, I know, but every week my can of recyclables is being misused—or not used. I'm still putting

my recyclables in the proper container and setting it out on the street. If they put it in the wrong place, it's on them, not me.

Even if nobody else conserves or recycles, Christian people ought to live that way, because taking care of the earth is an act of stewardship. It is a way of worshipping the God who created the world. Jonathan Merritt wrote a book about the environmental efforts of Christian churches called *Green Like God*. He said, “[As followers of Christ] we have deeper reasons to go green. We serve the Creator of the planet He created the earth and took the time to tell us his plan for it. The God of the universe has given us the great task of caring for our planet We have an operating manual for our planet right in front of us in the Bible, and we must allow that manual to change our thinking and behavior.”⁹

Finally, we can practice creation care by **RESPONDING IN SMALL WAYS TO THE BIG PROBLEMS** that are beyond our control. We can't stop global warming or natural disasters, and we can't physically form our drink cans into new blocks of aluminum. But we can pray for our leaders to have wisdom and courage to do the right thing. We can pray for those who have suffered devastation in natural disasters.

We can advocate for good environmental practices. We need to tell our city officials that recycling is important to us and needs to be done well. We need to tell our congressional leaders that we want policies that protect the environment.

And we can help recover from natural disasters. Whenever there is a flood or tornado or hurricane or earthquake, United Methodists are there. The United Methodist Committee on Relief is one of the best relief organizations in the world. Even now we have teams working in Northeast Arkansas after the floods a few weeks ago. We make opportunities to give in support of those efforts. Some may even want to go and physically help out. That can happen. The point is, even with the largest problems in our world, there is a way for people of faith to respond in a way that makes a difference.

Sara Bayles has a friend named Rebecca Rutter who is a pastor in Wisconsin. Rebecca found that being a pastor and a wife and mother and finishing her last year of seminary was a little stressful. So to relieve her stress, she learned how to do carpentry and wiring, and she built a tiny house. You can see these on HG TV. They're a thing. Her tiny house is a little over 100 square feet and built out of material she recycled and reused out of her church basement and her parents' barn. But not only was it a form of relaxation (that I don't understand), but it was a statement about how we can live a simpler life and help preserve the environment.

Rebecca said: "The United Methodist Church has a lot of opportunities to be more concerned about stewardship and environmental preservation and develop a culture of that in our congregations. People are hungering for more simplicity and a focus in life that goes beyond all the material possessions that we have and they realize that in the end that is not what brings us the peace that we need. The peace comes from Christ and a relationship with him and with one another."¹⁰

There are great challenges to a healthy environment today. But Jesus is Lord of all creation. It ultimately belongs to him. There are meaningful and significant ways we can worship him by practicing good creation care: enjoying God's creation, exerting the dominion of good stewardship of the earth, reducing, reusing, and recycling our stuff, and responding in our own way to the larger challenges before us. Still, you might wonder, will it make any difference?

Let me answer that question with a story you have probably heard, but it makes the point, and good stories bear repeating. A man was walking down the beach one day. There had been a storm the night before, and he noticed that the beach was littered with starfish—hundreds of them in both directions. They had washed ashore with the high tide, and now they were stranded above the water line. Soon they would dry out in the sun and die. As he continued down the beach, the man noticed a little girl standing at the edge of the surf. She was

picking up the starfish and flinging them back into the ocean. One by one, she would pick them up and toss them back into the water.

When the man got near the girl, he said, “What are you doing?”

She replied, “I’m saving the starfish.”

The man looked up and down the beach and said, “There are thousands of starfish out here. It would take a hundred people a week to clean off this beach. You’re not going to make any difference at all.”

The little girl just picked up a starfish and tossed it in the water and said, “I made a difference to that one.”¹¹

Jesus is Lord of all creation. Whatever we do to serve the earth serves our Lord. Together, we can make a difference and change the course of history. Personally, it makes a difference in our own souls. And ultimately, it makes a difference to the Lord we serve.

¹ Psalm 8:1.

² Psalm 19:1.

³ John Ortberg, "God Is Closer than You Think," Dallas Willard Center (accessed 4-28-17).

⁴ Colossians 1:15-17.

⁵ <https://www.dosomething.org/us/facts/11-facts-about-pollution>.

⁶ <https://climate.nasa.gov/evidence/>.

⁷ Jean Fleming, *Pursue the Intentional Life* (NavPress, 2013), page 50.

⁸ Genesis 3:23.

⁹ Jonathon Merritt, *Green Like God* (FaithWords, 2010), pp. 14-22.

¹⁰ <http://www.umc.org/how-we-serve/transcript-living-sermon-pastor-builds-tiny-house>.

¹¹ <https://eventsforchange.wordpress.com/2011/06/05/the-starfish-story-one-step-towards-changing-the-world/>, adapted from Loren Eiseley, *The Star Thrower*.