

Eco Faithfulness 1:
Created as Earthling

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Genesis 1:26-2:3

²⁶Then 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.” ²⁷So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. ²⁸God blessed them, and God 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.”

²⁹God 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. ³⁰And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so.

³¹God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

²Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. ²And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. ³So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that God had done in creation.

It has been fifty years since Rachel Carson wrote these words in her seminal work, *Silent Spring* about the perilous pathway human beings were traveling toward an environmental crisis: “We stand now where two roads diverge. But unlike the roads in Robert Frost’s familiar poem, they are not equally fair. The road we have long been traveling is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies disaster. The other fork of the road – the one less traveled by – offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of the earth.”¹

Utilizing sources from the federal scientific community and private research, the marine biologist spent six years documenting how pesticides, including DDT, were damaging wildlife, birds, bees, domestic animals, pets and human beings. Rachel Carson’s “environmental text” was published in the summer of 1962. At the time, it became one of the most talked about books published in decades; it launched the modern environmental justice movement, and Carson was both applauded and vilified for her introduction to a scientifically complicated and controversial subject.²

That was 50 years ago. Now, if we pay any attention to credible sources who are currently documenting climate change, the extinction of species and the pollution of air, earth and water, you could argue we have continued down the wrong road, that smooth super-highway that leads to disaster. Reading *Silent Spring* now is akin to discovering those pearls of wisdom we find everywhere in the prophetic texts of scripture. Carson’s work stands as an old reminder that within the goodness of creation, human creatures have a job to do. She said that when humankind wages war with nature, it is akin to waging war with

¹ Carson quote from Patricia Tull, *Inhabiting Eden: Christians, the Bible, and the Ecological Crisis*, p. 149.

² Rachelcarson.org.

ourselves. What she meant by that, of course, is that we human creatures are inseparable from the good earth God created to be our habitat.

Today I am beginning a three-week series on our call to cultivate ecological faithfulness. Wherever we look, we see the need for our consideration of this important topic – from the war in Europe that is reducing Ukrainian cities and towns to large dump heaps of waste as well as the tragic loss of human life to the famine in Yemen and South Sudan; from the current record setting heat wave in India to the wildfires in the southwestern United States; from the Great Pacific Ocean garbage patch that is now twice the size of Texas – to the news in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* this week that less than six percent of the plastic we put in the recycle bin is actually recycled.³

In this season fraught with all manner of environmental degradation – we have a Biblical vision summoning us to a new way of inhabiting the earth. In this season fraught with all manner of environmental degradation including the ways women and men, youth and children are being demeaned and having rights taken away from them in our increasingly regressive national culture; we have opportunity to nurture a better communal understanding of eco-faithfulness. Because scripture itself provides models for finding guidance in these, our unprecedented times. Says Biblical scholar Patricia Tull: “Western religious tradition has long been characterized by a human self-centeredness that has taken the rest of the earth for granted. But scripture tells a different story, one in which human culture finds itself embedded within, and dependent upon, a larger cosmos that invites our respect and gratitude.”⁴

So my focus for this series is not scientific lecture and finger wagging, but rather to remind us and reclaim for us our own biblical,

³ *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 5, 2022.

⁴ Patricia Tull, *Inhabiting Eden: Christians, the Bible, and the Ecological Crisis*.

moral and ecological significance. For theologically speaking, human beings are first and foremost creatures in a habitat created, sustained, and loved by God. What is needed in this moment to help us get on that other road toward preservation, with a brighter future in view, is not a paralyzing bombardment of scientific facts alone, but rather a vision, a web of connection, a summons to reverence and responsibility.

A professor at Yale University's Forum on Religion and Ecology, Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, have noted: "We are discovering that the human heart is not changed by facts alone but by engaging visions and empowering values. Humans need to see the large picture and feel they can act to make a difference."⁵

To engage our vision and empower better values, there is no better place to start the discovery than at the very beginning of Genesis. While Genesis opens the Bible, the first eleven chapters are actually later writings than the historical accounts of the first family of faith of Abraham and Sarah and their descendants, whose story begins in chapter 12.

The very beginning of the Bible is a theological prologue that was written when the people of ancient Israel were coming out of the Babylonian Exile. It is a post-exilic text written for people who had endured great suffering. We do not have to stretch our imaginations very far these days to picture them. They had lost their homeland; their cities and towns had been destroyed; they were forced to migrate to a foreign country and were indentured into service as an oppressed lower class.

It was the time in which Psalm 137 was written: *By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, "Sing us*

⁵ Quoted by Tull.

one of the songs of Zion. How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?

These covenant people of God were displaced, oppressed and impoverished when the Persians conquered the Babylonians and let those ancient Israelites return to Palestine. That's when Genesis One was written as a hymn, as a theological witness to the power and goodness of God. The Bible's opening verses break into all that historical horror and trauma saying: "God creates order out of chaos. God made the earth and everything in it for abundant life for all – for every living creature.

We human creatures are given a job to do – to care for the good earth. Made in the very image and likeness of God for a covenant relationship with God we are called to care for God's creation. This is the strong theological statement intended to ground all of the scripture that follows. And speaking of ground, the Hebrew word for the earth, *adamah* is the source for the word human creature, *adam*. So when we get to the second chapter of Genesis and God names Adam and Eve, these are not names in the way we understand names, Adam means Earthling and Eve means Life.

We human creatures are Living Earthlings! We are created out of the earth, out of the soil, out of the dirt and are given the breath of life by a good and gracious God. And our primary vocation is to honor and care for the vast web of creation that God makes our habitat. We are given *dominion* – which for far too long has been misunderstood as exploitation, but in reality, means creaturely kinship, human shepherding, protection, nurture and care. Because, after all, that is what it means to be made in the image and likeness of God. We care for creation as God does; we care for creation as God cares for us in love.

Now, we know that the climate crisis we face can feel absolutely overwhelming. I remember how I felt not long ago when I read about that juvenile sperm whale that had washed ashore in Spain, having died of a ruptured digestive system. It was found to have ingested sixty-four pounds of garbage as it floated on the surface of the water in between

deep dives for its prey. A little story like that one which speaks volumes about environmental degradation can indeed feel overwhelming to the point of paralysis. I could not have protected that whale in the waters off the coast of Spain!!⁶ Or maybe I could have done my part! Because we have this biblical vision that still summons us to action. So what can we do to be more ecologically faithful?

My longtime friend, Jennifer Ayers, who teaches religious education at Emory University's Candler School of Theology, has helpful suggestions. When we survey the vast complexity of the global issues related to environmental justice, we can feel really small and think our small actions inconsequential. Jen Ayers writes that our contemplation of the vastness of the universe, can both inspire us to humility and wonder, and threaten to diffuse our human moral vision.

So we should begin to focus our attention closer to home. We should begin growing our eco-faithfulness by claiming our role as an Earthling in our local habitat. We should intentionally claim our belonging to a small piece of the earth, a particular place we call home – the place where we know we belong. That may be our own yard, the window box or birdfeeder outside the window, our favorite walk in the neighborhood, or along the shore, or hike up a mountain path.

She expands on this concept of claiming our Earthling status at home writing: “The entire material universe speaks of God’s love, God’s boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is a caress of God. The history of our friendship with God is always linked to particular places which take on an intensely personal meaning... Calling a place “home” inspires desire to know it and leads human beings to love the specific in order to love the whole. It requires placing their bodies in a particular place, smelling, hearing, feeling, tasting, and yes, seeing it as God sees goodness in Genesis One.

⁶ Jennifer Ayers, *Inhabitanace: Ecological Religious Education*

We Earthlings cannot truly care for the earth in a global sense until we care for the particular place in which we find ourselves in the immediate sense. Jen Ayers goes on to say: It is only attending to the unique contours of a slice of landscape that one can begin to understand oneself to be in a place, to inhabit it, to belong to it.”⁷

Earthling friends, according to the scripture the earth, the planet, the land is the place where we most belong. The God who creates and sees the creation is good is the same God who is beckoning us now to care for our vulnerable habitat. Made in the image of God, we begin close to home, exercising eco-faithful dominion: creaturely kinship, human shepherding, protection, nurture and care.

Because we ourselves are of the earth – we are one with all of creation and God has given us a vital job to do. It is our time to get on that other road, the road less traveled by, to preserve the goodness of the earth, its very goodness.

AMEN.

⁷ Ayers, p. 11-12. Quote begins using words of Pope Francis in italics.

