

## LOVING GOD THROUGH FAITHFUL GIVING—

### Loving God's Creation

Genesis 1:1-26; 2:15; Jeremiah 2:7

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One of the most memorable sermons I ever heard was by Dr. Ernest T. Campbell, once pastor of the famed Riverside Church in New York City. The sermon title was, "Where Does Your Bible Begin?" His premise was that most of our Bibles begin with Genesis 3, "the Fall," our sin and failure. But the Bible really begins with creation and the repeated phrase, "it is good...it is good...it is very good." I once had a friend who said that God never made a mistake but came close when he created the mosquito! From the 1970's, one of the earliest astronaut photos of earth from a spacecraft reminds us: "It was good!" Where does your Bible begin?

In Gen. 1:1, 21, scripture declares that God creates. That word, Hebrew *bara*, is used only of God in the Book of Genesis. Only God creates; the rest of us just rearrange and move parts around! Creation is God's gift to us, an outpouring of God's generosity and love. But notice also how quickly the Bible moves from the grandeur of creation to warnings about abusing it. I believe that whenever we talk about careful management of our money, time and talents, we should also discuss our care of the earth. Our "stewardship" habits cross over from one area of our lives to another.

Years ago, when I was pastoring a church while commuting each day to seminary, Janet cleaned out my little puddle jumper of a car. Cardboard cups, candy wrappers, trash and dust were everywhere. When I thanked her, she looked at me and said, "Now, keep it clean!" That's God's word to us: now keep it clean and take care of it! Read Genesis 2:15: "The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it."

Here is an obscure verse I had never pondered. "When you are attacking a town, don't chop down its fruit trees," says God's Word (Deut. 20:19-20). Trees take a long time to grow and very little time to destroy. Don't think immediate satisfaction; think long term consequences. In the dry, arid Middle East, trees mattered. And they do to us, too [see the *Poverty and Justice Bible*, American Bible Society, p. 15 in the commentary section].

Sadly, there is a close connection between forgetting God and forgetting God's creation: "I brought you into a plentiful land to eat its fruits and its good things. But when you entered you defiled my land and made my heritage an abomination" (Jer. 2:7).

Wendell Berry, a scholar, preacher, prophet, poet and farmer, wrote in a thoughtful essay that our despoiling of the earth is a deeper problem than technical, political or even economic. The deeper question is what has happened to our souls? ["The Presence of Nature in the Natural World: A Long Conversation," in *A Small Porch*, p. 79]. He also says instead of being faithful

husbandmen or caretakers, we have become parasites, sucking life out and giving nothing back [p. 77].

Since this sermon is not standard fare for many of us, I'd like to distill it down to a take-home assignment in three parts:

1. Learn to see your stewardship of creation as a part of following Jesus, the Co-Creator. One of the joys of my work is connecting with global Baptists through Baptist World Alliance. Some of our pastor sisters and brothers in the Pacific Rim are shocked that American pastors don't preach on the environment and caring for God's earth. They live with the extremes of climate change and the importance of earth care.
2. Live more simply, with generosity toward the earth and others. Could it be that our disregard for creation has a correlation with our disregard of others and of God?
3. Become God's partner in growing beautiful spaces—inside you and around you. When we plant things, we are "practicing resurrection" [a phrase from one of Wendell Berry's poems, "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front"].

Someone recently blogged that his eight-year-old daughter asked him if they could begin recycling. He replied yes, but why did she ask? She answered, "So you can help save the planet. Because that's where I keep all my stuff." Yes, this is where we keep all our stuff. And it's God's stuff! And God calls us to take care of it.

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Here are some selected passages which address caring for God's creation in both the New Revised Standard Version translation and The Message paraphrase, except where indicated:

- [Genesis 1:1-26](#)
- [Genesis 2:15](#)
- [Leviticus 25](#)
- [Deuteronomy 20:19-20](#)
- [Psalm 8](#)
- [Psalm 19](#)
- [Psalm 85:12](#) (The Message)
- [Psalm 104](#)
- [Psalm 115:16](#) (The Message)
- [Jeremiah 2:7](#)
- [Hosea 4:1-3](#)
- [John 1:1-12](#)
- [John 3:16](#)
- [Romans 8:21-25](#)
- [Hebrews 1:1-3](#)
- [Revelation 21:1-3; 22:2-5](#)