

**“THE GUARDING OF CREATION”**  
**Season of Creation Sermon #4 – Sept. 27, 2020 – SELC**  
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In these last three weeks of “Season of Creation” sermons, we have reflected together upon the GOODNESS of Creation, the GODLINESS of Creation, and the GROANING of Creation. We have remembered and celebrated how the innate goodness and beauty that was part of God’s original act of creating the universe still inheres in that creation today, and we are called to enjoy, cherish and share it with all. We marveled at the mystery of God’s presence and very divine nature that can be experienced and known through the things of nature and our world, and how we are called to remove any obstacles that keep people from experiencing those divine qualities. And we have heard the cry of creation at the crucifixion of Jesus and how that suffering is now part of the natural world itself to which we all are and need to see ourselves as inextricably connected.

Today, we focus on how we have been given the privilege and divine call to be those we are GUARDING the creation. Enjoying the wonder and awe of our world and feeling grief over the loss of that beauty isn’t enough. We aren’t simply to stay in those places of feeling both awe and lament. Both the pleasure and the pain we experience in seeing all that is around us and what is happening to it can and should provide an ENERGY to do what we must to preserve and take care of it.

It is also our biblical calling, our divine duty, to do so. This is made clear right from the very beginning of the holy scriptures. When humans are made in the image of God and given dominion, it also says that we were given a holy task, a sacred work. Genesis 2:15 says that Adam was placed in the Garden of Eden “to till it and keep it.” Now, three translations I read (Good News, among them), say, “to cultivate and *guard* it.” We are meant to be the guardians of creation.

In Genesis 2:15 the human beings are to cultivate (*abad*) and care (*shamar*) for the garden. The language is clearly agricultural in context. The verb *abad* means “to serve” and it implies respect and even reverence for the landscape. On the other hand, *shamar*, meaning to keep or care, is an act of protection. The stewardship of creation, interpreted through the view of the writer, implies that we should be earth keepers who care for and protect the only home we share with all life. (*Russell Butkus*).

Lest we think that calling was for the Garden of Eden only, recall also that, when the first humans were turned out of that Garden, it still says, in Gen. 3:23, “Therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, *to till (abad) the ground from which he was taken.*”

Made in God’s image, we are to serve Him by serving or caring for the land for which God also cares. We are to treat it as God would treat it. And Genesis 9, the famous passage of the rainbow after the Flood, when Noah leaves the ark, says six times in ten verses that the rainbow is a “sign of the *covenant* that I make between me and you (talking to Noah) AND *every living creature...*” Did you hear that? God’s covenant isn’t simply with human beings but with ALL THINGS, even the earth itself (Genesis 9:13)!

Leviticus is a book about the specific ways that covenant is to be observed and obeyed. One of them, found in Leviticus 25, speaks of a “sabbath for the land.” It ordains a sabbath year, one in every seven ([Lev. 25:1-7](#)), and a jubilee year, one in every fifty ([Lev. 25:8-17](#)), to sanctify Israel’s internal economy. In the sabbath year, each field was to lie fallow, which appears to be a sound agricultural practice. The year of jubilee was much more radical. Every fiftieth year, all leased or mortgaged lands were to be returned to their original owners, and all slaves and bonded laborers were to be freed.

Whether or not the Jewish people regularly or ever actually practiced the return of property and cancelling of debts of the Jubilee year, this passage is a powerful example of how the people of the bible believed God wanted them to live in relationship with the land that God also loves and cares for. They are also the bible verses that serve as the theme for this year’s global ecumenical “Season of Creation.”

Jesus was one who, like the prophets before him, pointed and called people back to the original, deeper meaning of God’s covenants. We see this especially in this passage that concludes a series of controversies with the religious leaders. Here, in the gospel for the day, he sums up what all the laws of the covenant are about. Simply put, “Love God. Love people.” Not a matter of *feeling* love towards others so much as *deciding* to love others as a choice to *serve* God by serving people. Another echo of the *abad* of Genesis 2.

In Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, by Kittel, it has this commentary about the word for “neighbor” (in Greek, *pleision*): “[Neighbor] carries with it the element of encounter...” “One cannot say in advance who the neighbor is, but that the course of life will make this plain enough.” (TDNT, Vol. VI, p. 317). The Gospel of Luke tells the story of how the Good Samaritan demonstrated that neighbor love the course of life made plain to him as he traveled the road to Jericho in saving the life of the man robbed, beaten and left for dead.

And, now, right in front of us today, on the Jericho road of our existence together, is the victim lying beaten and bruised that is the natural world itself. The course of life has made plain enough that the definition of *neighbor*\_now applies to the creation God also loves.

When twenty or so of your fellow members and friends read Rev. Jim Antal’s book, Climate Church, Climate World, we read:

“...we must recognize that future generations are no less our neighbors than those who live next door today... No longer is it morally adequate to expand our understanding of justice to include in the circle of neighborly treatment more distant neighbors. We must recognize that all people, indeed *all creatures alive and all those yet to be born, are our neighbors*. As MLK Jr. said, (in *Letter from A Birmingham Jail*), ‘We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.’” (p. 58, Climate Church, Climate World).

It may seem obvious that our *children* are our neighbors we are commanded to love. Our twin granddaughters are our neighbors. Our great-grandchildren, and theirs and theirs, and hundreds of generations coming behind us are also our neighbors. It is for their sake we obey the Genesis’ call “to till and keep,” to “cultivate and guard.”

But... the hummingbird, the rattlesnake, the ant, the polar bear, the elephant, the pangolin, the orca, the panda, the shark, the sea, the Huachucas, the San Pedro, the wheat fields of Kansas, the Mississippi delta, the forests of California, Oregon and Washington... they too are our neighbors. And Christ love and the facts of their lack of protection and care compels us to serve them as well.

As our series of Climate Change presentations have demonstrated, this precious Earth with which God has a loving covenant that we are also to share, is in perhaps in greatest danger it has ever faced. As we heard from five scientists in the climate and related fields and the Nature Conservancy, there is absolutely no question that global climate disruption is taking place, is primarily human caused, is already harming and jeopardizing not only plants and animals but vulnerable human populations around the world, that it is inevitably getting worse, no matter what we do, but that if we don't act more aggressively and widely, it will be even more devastating. As Dr. Gregg Garfin, the chief climatologist facilitating our weekly series said this past Wednesday, it's mostly a message of "gloom and doom."

In Antal's book, he lifts up a mind-blowing example of what I'm talking about:

Climate scientist Jim Hanson: the current use of fossil fuel adding energy (heat) to planet's oceans, atmosphere and earth equivalent "to exploding 400,000 Hiroshima atomic bombs per day, 365 days per year. That's how much extra energy Earth is gaining each day." ("Why I must Speak Out about Climate Change," TED talk, 2/2012)

That's 3 Hiroshima-sized bombs every second.

"ordinary human activity, if it continues unchanged for another decade or two- will sentence future generations to lives that never experience nature in the way that people have for thousands of generations." (p. 59)

Now, I get it. That's really, really hard to wrap our minds around. We want to just ignore it or deny it. Many, including some of our leaders, choose to do that. I don't want to believe it. And there are so many other pressing issues to address, access to health care, or the millions of babies aborted. And my heart cries out for them, too and they, too, should be addressed. Yet if we were to save them all, what good is it if they don't have a healthy world to grow up in? And then I hear fire ecologist Lara Marshall share with me a study that, from 1985-2015, there were 9,884,000 acres or 15, 444 square miles of land burned by wildfires directly attributable to climate change. It feels too overwhelming. Like it's impossible. How can we even begin to address something so massive?

Two answers:

God calls us to do so.

God's love compels us to do so.

I suggest that when Jesus says, "love the Lord your God with all of your heart, your soul and your mind... and your neighbor as yourself," it's just as- no, even more- impossible sounding. How can I love like that? How can I serve the needs of someone I don't even like? How can I pour all of who I am- heart, mind and soul- into loving Someone I can't

even see? How can I possibly come to fully obey this 'Great Commandment'? It's beyond me.

And you're absolutely correct. It IS beyond us. Beyond our human, self-centered, "what's in it for me?" attitudes. BUT... it is NOT beyond God. We remember that, in John 15, Jesus says, "love one another AS I HAVE LOVED YOU." As former Intern Pastor Paul Benz liked to point out, WE love others ONLY because JESUS loves us. It's all only possible if we open ourselves up to that love, accept it as truly FOR us, allow it to fill our very beings, and then- and only then- can we turn around and truly "love our neighbors." It flows through us.

In the same way, we can "love" our expanded neighborhood- the very earth and all its beings- only as we open ourselves up to the fact that GOD loves ALL of it, accept that love as truly FOR all of this, allow it to fill our very beings, and then- and only then- can we take on this tremendous task and fully answer the call to be God's guardians of this good Earth.

We love because God first loved us. With "us" now meaning all of this splendid, vast, mysterious, vibrant, energetic, interconnected, pulsating universe. That's the power, motivation, inspiration and call we have to do this.

Yes, it can feel daunting. Yes, it can feel hopeless. Yes, it is extremely complicated with all kinds of unforeseen consequences we have to work through. Yes, it is opposed by powerful political and social forces around the world. BUT, it is what it means to live into and live out of the Divine Covenant that is our mission as the People of God. And we have Christ Jesus our Lord who provides the Hope beyond hope that we need to move forward. For, ultimately, He is the GOAL of Creation towards which we're reaching and who draws us towards Himself, a joyful truth to which we'll turn to next week. Amen.