

4.25.21 Loving and Valuing Creation as God Does Psalm 104.10-34, Psalm 24.1-2

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Jill and I were blessed to spend a week in Maine and went on a lot of long walks – on the beach, in the woods, and along roads and trails. As we walked, we noticed a lot of things. How much the birds were singing. How buds were opening with tiny leaves and how those leaves were growing as we passed the same place each day. We saw two big turtles just outside of a pond, their shells at least a foot long. A broad hillside of daffodils dancing in the wind. I knelt to watch a bunch of hard-working little ants diligently bringing up one grain of sand at a time to drop it off and go right back to get another as they cleared room for their home, and I wished I were as purpose driven and diligent as an ant! We saw gulls and hawks seeming to hang suspended in the wind. One morning we went to watch the sunrise over Saco Bay and within moments of the sun coming up dozens of birds in the water all started communicating with each other and rose out of the ocean and started flying south/southwest as if on cue. Jill picked up sea glass some small shells, and a sand dollar. I kept one pretty moon snail almost the size of a tennis ball. Henry Beston wrote in his book *“The Outermost House”* about his year on the beach in Eastham, *“For the gifts of life are the earth’s and they are given to all, and they are the songs of birds at daybreak, Orion and the Bear, and the dawn seen over the ocean from the beach.”*

Psalm 24:1-2 declares, *“The earth is the LORD’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers.”* Christians must confess that for most of the last 2,000 years we have not acted as if we believed this scripture was true. We have not lived as if we truly believed the earth and all that is in it is the Lord’s. We have acted as if the world was ours to be exploited with no regard for the consequences of our behavior. But there is no plan B to God’s world. You can use up a car and trade it in. You can buy another refrigerator when yours breaks. But there is no other planet we can live on if we ruin this amazing one God has created. The Bible celebrates the wonder of God’s world in many passages, such as **Psalm 104:24-34.** ²⁴ O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom **you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.** ²⁵ Yonder is the

sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great. ²⁶ There go the ships, and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.

²⁷ These all look to you to give them their food in due season;

²⁸ when you give to them, they gather it up;

when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.

²⁹ When you hide your face, they are dismayed;

when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust.

³⁰ When you send forth your spirit, they are created; & you renew the face of the ground.

³¹ May the glory of the LORD endure forever; **may the LORD rejoice in his works—**

³² who looks on the earth and it trembles, who touches the mountains and they smoke.

³³ I will sing to the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being.

³⁴ May my meditation be pleasing to him, for I rejoice in the LORD.”

Next Sunday is Pastor Barbara Burrill’s last Sunday with us before she moves back to Billerica. Barbara and Pastor David Pranga came to BBC at the end of August in 2014 and the first sermon series I did after they arrived I called *The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss*. Barbara has said to me several times through the years how much she enjoyed that series so in her honor, I’m going to do a bonus one today on **Loving and Valuing Creation as God Does**, and the Dr. Seuss story I will reference is **The Lorax**.

The Lorax was published 50 years ago in 1971. The Lorax begins in a terrible time when there are no birds, no fish, no animals, and all the trees have been cut down. The air and the water are polluted. A character called the Once-ler tells a boy how conditions got that way. *“Way back in the days when the grass was still green and the pond was still wet and the clouds were still clean, and song of the Swomee-Swans rang out in space...one morning, I came to this glorious place, And I first saw the trees! The Truffula Trees! The bright-colored tufts of the Truffula Trees! Mile after mile in the fresh morning breeze. And under the trees, I saw Brown Bar-ba-loots frisking about in their Bar-ba-loot suits as they played in the shade and ate Truffula Fruits. From the ripplous pond came the comfortable sound of the Humming-Fish humming while splashing around.”* I can’t read you the whole story, but the Once-ler starts cutting down Truffula

Trees to make something called a Thneed which he claims “*everyone needs*” and he proceeds to cut down more and more Truffula Trees to make more and more money and the poor Bar-ba-loots have no more food or shade, the pond is polluted as is the air so the *Swomee-Swans and Humming-Fish* can no longer survive. At the beginning when the first tree is cut down, a creature called the Lorax appears and says, “*Mister! I am the Lorax, I speak for the trees. I speak for the trees. I speak for the trees, for the trees have no tongues.*” The Lorax keeps showing up and pleading with the Once-ler to think about the trees, the Brown Bar-ba-loots, the Swomee-Swans, and the Humming-Fish, but the greed and lack of empathy of the Once-ler blinds him to how his actions are impacting everyone else.

The Once-ler finally snaps at the Lorax, “*Now listen here, Dad! All you do is yap-yap and say, ‘Bad! Bad! Bad! Bad!’ Well, I have my rights, sir, and I’m telling **you** I intend to go on doing just what I do!*” And he did until there were no more Truffula trees left, just “*smoke-smuggered stars and a bad smelling sky.*” The story concludes, “*And all that the Lorax left here in this mess was a small pile of rocks, with one word... ‘UNLESS.’ Whatever **that** meant, well, I just couldn’t guess. But now,*” says the Once-ler, “*now that you’re here, the word of the Lorax seems perfectly clear. **UNLESS someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It’s not.***”

It may be hard for younger people to believe, but before 1970 in the United States, there was no Environmental Protection Agency, no Clean Air Act, and no Clean Water Act. There were no legal or regulatory mechanisms to protect our environment that we and all living creatures are a part of and depend on for life. This led to more problems that you can imagine. For example, it was national news on June 22, 1969, when an oil slick caught fire on the Cuyahoga River just southeast of downtown Cleveland, Ohio. The image that the “the river caught fire” motivated change to protect the environment. However, this was in fact the **thirteenth** recorded time that the river had caught fire since 1868. When I was a young pastor in Prospect Park, PA, the long-time church custodian told me about the local creek where he had fished when he was a boy, but now he said there were no more fish, but you could tell what color paint they were

making at the factory up stream because that's what color the creek would turn. It sounded like it was right out of the Lorax.

Any of us who considers ourselves pro-life should be pro – clean air, clean water, and for policies that protect the conditions that make life possible and sustainable, not just for human beings but for all God's creatures from as small as the bees to as big as the whales. The sad reality is that human greed and shortsightedness have led to policies and practices that are detrimental and destructive of life and the creation God has made. The Earth is God's and all that is in it. Thou shall not destroy the earth nor despoil the life on it should be the position of people of faith.

BBC member Rosiane de Oliveira sent me an email toward the end of our study of Richard Foster's book Celebration of Discipline that I asked her permission to include today. She wrote, "Dear Pastor Doug, Throughout this journey with Foster's Celebration of Discipline, I feel there is a lot to share - you know, **the small experiences of daily life that nevertheless point, or reaffirm, to the presence of God with us.** Another aspect of this reading is that I sense that God is revealing simple truths, yet vital ones, to me. I would like to share just one such experience with you.

Last week, during a lunchbreak walk near the hospital, it was so warm that I was able to take a tiny detour from my usual route and walked at the nearby beach for a few minutes. The day was magnificent - the sun was up, the wind was calm, and the ocean very still. Birds were flying low. I contemplated that scene for a little bit and thought, *"Wow, nature seems to be in perfect silence in reverence and worship to God."* At the same time, as I watched the stillness of the water, I had this thought that in the deepest 'guts' of nature, that is, in its core, there is constant movement, and praise, and birth-like noise though in the outside all seemed quiet.

That afternoon, I watched part of a BBC documentary about British actress Judy Dench and her love of trees. It was a random pick from You Tube! She loves trees so much that she purchased a piece of land near London so that she could cultivate and appreciate them. During the documentary, she met a British scientist who created a sound device that allows for the listening of trees! In fact, it is a cone-like device which he named 'the tree listening device.' Dench was in awe as she heard very clearly a

rumbling and popping sound just behind the bark. The sound is produced by the immense amount of water that runs from the roots into the leaves, through tiny tubes called the xylem tubes.

I too was in awe! I was so immensely taken by that image. I thought of Jesus saying he is the tree and we, the branches. I thought of the water running into the tree and giving us this life Jesus so much wants us to have. This image of the water running just behind the bark signifying that without this water, we cannot produce fruits. We simply cannot truly be. So, on your devotional of March 11, when you talked about trees, after reading Psalm 96, I was again very moved and decided I wanted to share it with you.

I thought maybe we can now expand on the notion of the trees praising God. I felt that not only do they praise God through their leaves bursting into life in the springtime, and the rustling of the wind running through them, **but there is also praise, loud praise at that! behind the bark.** All the best, Rosiane”

I think that’s such an insightful reflection and I appreciate Rosiane letting me share it with you. Here’s a question for you to ponder: What has most shaped your view of the earth and all the creatures, life, and all it contains? What people, experiences, teaching, and beliefs helped form the view you now hold? People have very different views from the utilitarian: *“What can I get out of it to benefit myself?”* to a view of creation as sacred as the Bible teaches. I learned when I was very young the Biblical view that the earth is the Lord’s and that it’s to be treated well, with care, and with the understanding that it doesn’t belong to us. We belong to it for a time and then we pass it on to the next generation, hopefully better than we found it. Part of what I love about moon snails and sand dollars is that even when they have died, they have left something beautiful behind. Wouldn’t it be great if you could do that? If I could? How can you leave something beautiful behind in God’s world?

It’s very unfortunate that caring for creation is something that Christians have not done as well we should. Because of our view of God as Creator and the earth belonging to the Lord, Christians have a Biblical mandate that too often has been ignored. Caring for creation is not a political issue, it’s not a conservative or liberal issue, it’s about obeying and being faithful to Biblical teaching. I’m grateful for the team of volunteers led

by Wayne Johnston who participated in Beautify Brewster by picking up litter last weekend. Well done! That's the sort of thing we should be known for as Christians.

Failing to practice caring for creation is often a reflection of ignorance, greed, selfishness, or indifference. As far back as the prophet Isaiah we hear these words from **Isaiah 24:5-6: "The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore the inhabitants of the earth dwindled, and few people are left."** The images Isaiah uses are visible in many places around the world today because our irresponsibility is harming God's creation because we have broken the covenant God established with Adam and Eve and then again with Noah and his family. The creation that God made is the "golden goose" that has allowed life and prosperity to flourish, yet we're killing the golden goose. When human beings break the covenant that God made with us to care for and nurture God's good creation, we all suffer, some more than others, depending on their resources and where they're able to live and what is the result? *"There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land. There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed. Because of this the land mourns, and all who live in it waste away; the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the fish of the sea are dying."* That wasn't said by a contemporary environmentalist or social commentator, those are the words of God spoken through the prophet Hosea (Hosea 4:1b-3).

The church confesses that God is the maker of heaven and earth and of all things within them. **1 Chronicles 29:11**, *"Yours, O Lord, is the **greatness** and the **power** and the **glory** and the **majesty** and the **splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours.**"* God says in **Job 41:11** ***"Everything under heaven belongs to me."*** It can't be stated any simpler or clearer than that. The conviction that everything belongs to God has life-altering implications for the way we view the world around us. We care for God's world, we see beauty in it, we recognize God's glory expressed in it, we aim to protect it, and we grieve when it is abused and damaged. The church also confesses that God has created all human beings in God's own image. All people carry the stamp

of God's image as moral, ethical, and spiritual beings called into a unique relationship with their Creator. This conviction leads us to view each human being as having God-given dignity and being worthy of respect, care, and honor.

At the very end of *The Lorax*, the Once-ler gives the boy the last *Truffula* seed. He says, *"It's the last one of all! You're in charge of the last of the Truffula seeds. And Truffula Trees are what everyone needs. Plant a new Truffula. Treat it with care. Give it clean water. And feed it fresh air. Grow a forest. Protect it from axes that hack. Then the Lorax and all of his friends may come back."*

A society grows great when older people plant trees whose shade they'll never sit in. That's what you're called to do. To make choices today that enable your children's children to live well on God's earth because *"We don't inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children."*

Prayer: Blessed God, Creator of earth, sea, and sky, and of all that lives, your love sustains the whole creation. We give thanks for the oxygen you breathe into our lungs through the forests, trees, and green-growing things upon which our lives depend. We lay before you our sorrow, grief, and outrage at the assault on the world's forests, these cathedrals that shelter countless creatures, clean the soil, water, and air, and reveal your glory – yet are being desecrated before our eyes. Give us the will to protect your lands and forests, your rivers and oceans, and to protect the health of human communities, particularly communities that bear the brunt of toxic pollution. Kindle the fire of your Spirit within us that we may be bold to heal and defend your earth and pour out your blessing upon all who work for the good of your planet, our common home. We pray in your Presence and in the name of all we hold dear. Amen.

Blessing: *"You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."*
Revelation 4:11

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. What has most shaped your view of the earth and all the creatures, life, and resources it contains?
2. What does the Bible teach us about the earth and the heavens and all living things? In addition to the scriptures quoted in the sermon, see Genesis 9:9-10, Psalms 8, 19, 29, 139, John 1:1-4, Romans 1:20, Colossians 1:15-17
3. What is our responsibility to the world, our fellow human beings, and other living creatures?
4. In the Bible, we're told repeatedly that we are God's stewards (managers or caretakers). We are participants in God's plan of redemption for all of creation as Paul states in Romans 8. How does our identity as God's stewards and our role in God's redemptive plan impact how we care for creation?
5. How might looking at the earth like a family farm that's passed on from one generation to the next impact our perspective?
6. What choices can you make on a daily and weekly basis to be better stewards of God's earth and to live more in harmony with God's creation?