

Finding Ourselves In Creation Sunday, 5/10/20

[OFF] Over the last two weeks we've remembered that Easter isn't just something that's celebrated once a year. We are Easter People, people of the resurrection, and as springtime unfolds around us, we're reminded that God continues to bring new life into this world.

We've been reminded that God's creation is good, just as God is fundamentally good, and that God continues to reveal the divine in creation all around us. That revelation, in fact, is the basic purpose of creation- to bear witness to the glory and goodness of God. We can always find God in creation around us, if we take the time to stop, wait, and carefully listen.

Today, we'll consider how we might find clues in creation about who we are and what our purpose is. Spoiler alert! Since Genesis describes us as the pinnacle of God's creation, our purpose must necessarily be consistent with God's purpose for the whole of creation: to bear witness to the goodness and glory of God.

[SHARE: Handful of Dirt Picture] One of my very favorite images in Genesis comes in chapter 2, verse 7, where we read "GOD formed Man out of dirt from the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life." Sometimes I think that if we read that verse every morning it could have a powerful influence on our attitudes toward the rest of creation. From the very beginning, Genesis makes it abundantly clear what we are: one part of an organic whole. Not the masters of creation with the right to use and abuse it, but rather part of creation itself, down to the very oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, calcium, and phosphorus atoms that make up 99% of our bodies.¹ We really are Adam, the word in Hebrew meaning "dirt people." Our search for our identity and purpose in creation should start at this level, humbly acknowledging that we were created by God, just like the birds we hear singing and the soil we stand on and farm.

[OFF] More typically, we focus on Genesis 2:15, because it seems to stroke our egos by elevating our position in creation. Remember that passage? "GOD took the Man and set him down in the Garden of Eden to work the ground and keep it in order."

The truth is, for most of us, the idea of "working the ground" is an increasingly

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Composition_of_the_human_body

foreign concept. I know we still have some good folks in our congregation who are planting and harvesting corn, soybeans, wheat, and even garlic, and I know that there are so many steps that go before, in between, and after the planting and the harvesting. Not everyone has forgotten what it means to work the land. But for most of, we work the cash register or the keyboard, and in this time of pandemic, some of us aren't even able to work the grocery store aisle!

There's a misconception in the Christian world that working the ground is all an outcome of the curse brought about by sin. The truth is that we were made to work the land from the very beginning. What do you suppose that might mean? People of good conscience might disagree as to particular practices regarding such things as soil and water conservation or the genetic modification of crops, but it's pretty obvious that in the context of Genesis 2, working the land means interacting with the land in ways that are consistent with God's goodness, the goodness and value of all of God's creation, and the fundamental purpose of creation of witnessing to God's glory and goodness. The Scriptures do, in fact, go on to give us ample examples of what that might look like. Let's take a look at two such passages. I'm reading from Genesis 2:2-3 and Exodus 23:10-12 in The Message.

[SHARE: Genesis 2:2-3; Exodus 23:10-12 Slide] {Read Scripture}

[OFF] Did you hear how God's instructions for working the land in Exodus actually mirror the same pattern demonstrated by God in Genesis 1 and 2? God created time and within that framework ordained seasons, including consecrating a season of rest. The Scriptures tell us in verse 3 that "God blessed the seventh day. He made it a Holy Day." What's interesting to me is how quickly we make the mental jump from God's calling the seventh day holy to our modern practice of worshipping on Sundays. That's a relatively modern invention in the history of creation. What did God mean by calling the seventh day holy at the beginning of creation? We find a clue in Exodus 23, where we find not only the command that we give the land and all who work the land a season of rest, but also another reason that is fundamental to God's purpose in how we work the land. In verse 11 we read, "so that your poor may eat from it." And also, "What they leave, let the wildlife have." In other words, we are to work the land, or refrain from working the land, in ways that not only

provide for a season of rest for all creation, but also in ways that provide for the poor and the wildlife that shares the land.

[SHARE: Sandhill Cranes picture] I thought of these Sandhill cranes when I read that verse. I photographed these in a farm field near the Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge in 2016. The managers of the refuge carefully regulate the water levels through a series of sluices to create the right environment for the safe nesting of cranes and other birds. That's one way that the land is being worked for the benefit of wildlife. But the cranes also depend on gleaning the unharvested grain from the fields surrounding the refuge, where they spend their days feeding prior to their annual migration.

[OFF] Let's circle back to where most of us live, more likely to be working keyboards and cell phones than land. We were created from the dirt, sharing the same atomic makeup of the earth and the sun that heats it. We were also created with a purpose, not only to work the land, but to keep it in order. How can we, humble "dirt-people," do that if we don't even own a rake or a shovel?

There are actually many ways for us to live out our purpose of ordering creation without ever stepping foot on a farm, although I have to say that if you've never been on a farm, you really ought to do that after it's safe to do so again. Our economy and culture mean that fewer and fewer people are raising the food we depend on, but just as reminding ourselves that we were created out of the dirt resets our understanding of our place in creation, there's something about getting our hands in the dirt that reminds us of our calling to care for the land.

[SHARE: People Holding Garlic picture] Back in 2014, Jana and I had the fun of participating in the garlic harvest at Living Song Farm with Willard, Marianne, and Jerry, pulling the plants from the ground, bundling them together and hanging them in the barn. I grew up in the suburbs, so this was an entirely new thing for me. There was something about getting up close and personal with the garlic plants that I will always remember whenever I eat garlic. It reminded me of that intimate connection we have with all of creation, something that gets lost in translation when I simply scoop the garlic out of a bin at the grocery store.

[OFF] The painting behind me by Ashley Dull Lindeman is entitled “walk in peace.” Hidden somewhere in the painting is the Scriptural reference to Luke 1:79, which reads “Guide our feet into the path of peace.” The context of that quote is Zechariah’s prophecy upon the birth of his son, John, who was to become the herald of the coming Christ. I love the path in this picture that seems to invite us to walk on a journey of peace with Christ, not into a church building, but into the beauty of creation in the outdoors.

I think we can all agree that we’d like to be travelling on a path to peace, especially in these turbulent and worry-filled times. But here’s the thing- to walk on the path of peace with Christ means that we have to follow Christ. To follow Christ means that we have to live in peace with Christ’s creation, working the land and ordering it according to the good will and purpose of God. Are we willing to do that, so that all creation continues to testify to God’s goodness and glory?

Peace isn’t just something we receive from Jesus, it’s something we chose. It’s a way of life, and it truly is a path. We know that’s the path we were created to walk, living at peace with all of God’s creation. In the coming weeks we’ll begin to explore the choices we might make to travel that path of peace with Jesus. Until then, consider this hopeful image of what that kind of life might look like, given by the prophet Isaiah:

You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands. Instead of the thornbush will grow the juniper, and instead of briers the myrtle will grow. This will be for the LORD’S renown, for an everlasting sign, that will endure forever.²

[SHARE: Reflection Slide] Please take some time now to reflect on how you will find and live out your identity and purpose in creation. If you like, you can share a comment or a prayer on Facebook.

² Isaiah 55:12-13. New International Version (2011)



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