

Be The Church: Protect Creation
Don Lincoln
Psalm 104

It was back when I was in high school. We had just lost an important soccer game – and we were a very competitive team. All of us on the team had contributed to the loss, including my less than stellar playing at left halfback– as we called it then – midfielder now.

Disappointed and frustrated by the loss, I took my disappointment out on the car. Adjacent to the soccer field - where the main road met the soccer field – was a mini-mart – the forerunner of 7-Eleven or Wawa, where I was going to get a soda. I came down the drive in the family's Volkswagen Beetle at full tilt in second gear, pedal on the floor. I threw the wheel hard to the left, and power slid sideways into a parking space, as you could easily do in a Volkswagen with bias ply tires. I shut the engine off, got out of the car, slammed the door, and.....looked up into the face of my father across the parking lot. Leaning out of the window of his Plymouth sedan. My father had attended the game, to cheer me on, as he tried to do as often as he could. I just never, ever imagined he would also stop at the mini-mart.

"Don't EVER let me catch you driving MY CAR that way again!" That was all he said. And then he drove off. No taking away the keys. No being grounded. But when I walked in the door when I got home I saw the look on his face, and I knew I should never, ever, ever, ever again feel free to drive his car in any way different than he would drive it.

You know, sometimes I wonder if God doesn't feel the same about the way we use creation. A creation God made to the majesty and glory of God's name – full of life; full of abundance; full of wonder. Scripture – from beginning to end – gives us these glorious images of what God created. In the very beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And regardless of how you understand the science of the unfolding of creation – our biblical story begins with God's creative work.

And over and over the Hebrew word "Tov" – GOOD – is said. God created Light and it was Tov – Good. God created Water and it was Tov – Good. God created land and it was Tov, Good. God created birds, and fishes, and beasts – Tov, Tov, Tov, Good, Good, Good. God created human beings and they were very good. One of my favorite phrases in today's lingo is that sing-song-y: "**It's all good.**" The Book of Genesis said it was all good, very, very good – and all God's.

"The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof," Scripture tells us. Our text, Psalm 104, shows such an understanding of God's creation, the way in which the air, soil, water, plants and animals including human beings are all tied together in this intricate wonderful, beautiful cosmos – woven and interconnected – and the Psalmist celebrates that. He ends up just being able to say, "Bless the Lord! Praise the Lord!"

I read that text this week and thought – How does God feel about how we are driving God's car?

Somebody spoke to me last Sunday after worship, because he knew the sermon series, and knew the text and topic that was coming up this week. He said to me “You better be careful next Sunday, Don. It’s one thing to talk about gun violence and racism. (the previous two weeks’ sermons). But mention global warming, and you may generate some real heat in the congregation!” And my colleagues said, “Remember, it’s **Climate Change**, Don. **NOT** Global warming. Just don’t use those terms.”

Well.....I read a Christian Century magazine article this week that says this: “By century’s end, Miami will have disappeared. Think about that for a few minutes. Along with tens of millions of people around the world, Miami’s residents will have joined the ranks of climate refugees who have been either flooded or burned out of their homes. Rising ocean levels will be just the beginning. If current trends continue, societies will face massive starvation, plagues and disease, perpetual war and economic collapse. AND, the pain and suffering will not be justly distributed. For we now live in the most destructive economy the world has ever known.”¹

After that first paragraph, I wasn’t sure I wanted to read anymore.

Now when I read things like that, I can have a tendency to get a little cynical; skeptical of “the sky is falling, the sky is falling,” syndrome. And then what I tend to do is to delegitimize those who describe the problems with such broad sweeping statements. Because, of course, I say to myself they just don’t understand, the problems are never that simple – and the solutions are even less simple. God’s world is very complex; life is complicated.

Like the protestor I saw holding the sign at our General Assembly in Portland in 2016, holding a sign that said “PCUSA: Stop Investing In Fossil Fuels.” I went up to him and asked where he was from. He said “Topeka, KS.” I asked him how he got to Portland, OR. He said “I flew.” I said, “Oh... Oh.” I was tempted to say, “Show me your sign when you walk or ride a bike.”

But such cynicism isn’t helpful. It’s clear that you and I have to pay attention. I talked with my father on the phone this week. My father noticed my sermon title in Thursday’s email – and when I talked to him on Friday he said, “Don, you may not have seen the news report that came out Thursday from the Lancet Commission on Pollution and Health, a two-year project that has involved more than 40 international health and environmental authors.” Uh.....no....dad.....but I’m sure you’re going to tell me about it. Sure enough, he went on and started to read the summary. It starts:

Pollution is linked to nine million deaths worldwide in 2015, equivalent to one in six deaths. He proceeded to read through the summary, which if you’re interested in, you can look up. It’s pretty fascinating material.

So after that conversation, I decided to dig in a little bit. So I took a quick tour through NASA’s website. You know – NASA – who got us to the moon. And there I found this information:

“The evidence for rapid climate change is compelling:

Global temperature rise

The planet's average surface temperature has risen about 2.0 degrees Fahrenheit since the late 19th century, a change driven largely by increased carbon dioxide and other human-made emissions into the atmosphere. Most of the warming occurred in the past 35 years, with 16 of the 17 warmest years on record occurring since 2001. Not only was 2016 the warmest year on record, but eight of the 12 months that make up the year — from January through September, with the exception of June — were the warmest on record for those respective months.

Sea level rise. Global sea level rose 8 inches in the last century. The rate in the last two decades, however, is nearly double that of the last century.

Extreme events – the number of record high temperature events in the United States has been increasing, while the number of record low temperature events has been decreasing, since 1950. The U.S. has also witnessed increasing numbers of intense rainfall events.

Warming oceans; Shrinking ice sheets; Glacial retreat; Decreased snow cover; declining Arctic sea ice.”² Category, after category, after category. Regardless of what science you and I read, the real question is, do you and I care? Would we care?

"The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof; the world and those who dwell therein."

You know, if you're a landlord – if you have a rental property – the last thing you want is renters who could care less about the property. But you know how it goes sometimes. After all, it's not theirs – not their investment, not their long-term asset. They are users. Short timers. They're not worried about who follows them. That's your problem. You know the tenants you want. The ones who leave the place in BETTER shape. People who will treat your property the way you would treat it. Ha!! Pure fantasy!

Don't you think God wants tenants who treat the property the way God would?

The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. And, the psalmist would add, humanity has a unique status in the order of creation. Men and women stand BETWEEN God and God's created order. Again, the Psalmist's writes – and our choir sang it: "When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars suspended in space which You have made; what is WOMAN that You are mindful of her, what is MAN that You care for him? Yet, You have made humanity little less than God – or a little lower than the angels. You have put them in charge of all creation. As Genesis says, God has given humankind dominion over the earth.

Dominion is not the same as destruction. We are to work the land; care for it; be stewards of it. Not to use it as we please and darn the effects.

I know, you and I cannot imagine our little efforts making a difference. I thought about it this morning while brushing my teeth. Oh yeah, Don, turn the water off. There's an extra gallon. But the fact is, it **IS** all our little destructive habits added up that continue to wreak havoc on clean water, sustainable agriculture, healthy air. If millions upon millions of tiny habits can destroy, than isn't it possible that millions upon millions of changed tiny, daily habits can

renew? Why should we think it's not possible that changing those tiny little habits might make a difference? How you use water; how you recycle; whether you use LED's.

Our church administrator told me our September electric bill decreased from 49,000 Kwh to 42,000 Kwh – this year against last year. What did we do differently? Installed LED's in the preschool. HUGE difference!

But unless everyone's attitude toward the earth changes, it seems there is little hope. And that is where the church comes in. Protect Creation.

Our best hope may be found in the growing involvement of religious leaders and theologians in the climate conversation. I know some folks get concerned when we talk about things political, or current issues in the congregation, but our political, economic and financial institutions get their values from us. It's theology that underlies the structures of our country, our nation, our relationships; it's theology that gives the moral and spiritual roots to whatever it is we do.³ They don't have the moral depth to do so. I believe being a steward of God's creation is a moral and spiritual issue, and we are the ones who can understand and tell that. You and I know, when at their best, religious traditions call people out of their interior, myopic, self-centeredness, and into service for the common good.

(Walk out of pulpit to in front of Communion table – hands in container of soil).

Go back to the beginning of Creation... It says God created man – *adam* from the *adamah*. It's the Hebrew word *adamah* – fertile soil – not just the dust of the earth, it's literally fertile soil. And God breathed into it and it became a man, a living being. (holding handfuls of dirt up to nose). Do you know who else gets close to dirt? The farmer. Smells to see how good it is, what needs to be planted, what needs to be done to this *adamah*.⁴

In the very opening of Genesis it tells we are intricately woven in with the earth. It's God's good gift and we know that. Others may not know that, they might not think that, they might not believe it. You and I know it, and our work to be stewards of creation will help the rest of the world see God did a good thing with good stuff and wants us to keep it so.

May it be so.

Amen.

1. Norman Wirzba, "Waking up to the Anthropocene;" *The Christian Century*, Sept. 27, 2017
2. From the NASA.gov website article on climate change.
3. Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, University of Chicago.
4. Dr. Nate Stuckey, Princeton Theological "Farminary" – Hebrew-English mash-up from Genesis 2.