

Is God Green?

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Genesis 1:25-31,
2:15

Sermons Series:
Best Spiritual
Practices

*God wrote the
book on
green....*

In Brazil, there exists a species of primates called the Golden Lion Tamarin. Although the Tamarin is called a lion, it's actually a member of a monkey family. It derives its name from its long, golden mane, which is perfectly suited for carrying its offspring.

The disappearance of rain forests along the Brazilian coast is destroying the habitat of the Tamarin. These creatures are now threatened with extinction. But thanks to the work of Dr. Stuart Pimm, Professor of Conservation Ecology at Duke University, the Tamarin is making a comeback. Dr. Pimm was awarded the Heineken Prize, the equivalent of a Nobel Prize in earth sciences, for his work with endangered species. Twelve percent of all birds and one-third of all amphibians are threatened with extinction today.

Stuart Pimm was interviewed by the New York Times for his work in conservation. At the end of the interview, he was asked, "Are you religious?" He answered, "I'm a believing Christian. 'God so loved the cosmos that he gave his only Son.' That's an injunction from St. John. To me, this says that Christians

have an obligation to look after the world, what the Bible calls stewardship. We cannot pointlessly drive species to extinction and destroy forests and oceans. When we do that, we are destroying God's creation."

I applaud Dr. Pimm for integrating his Christian convictions with his scientific pursuits. Christians haven't always led the way in environmental reform. Some Christians treat environmentalism as a liberal cause. The caricature of a tree-hugging liberal comes to mind. Christians often approach environmental issues with silence and apathy.

Is God green? God wrote the book on green, you might say. Picture your favorite outdoor setting. It may be the seashore or mountain resort, your backyard or nature trail. Creation expresses God's handiwork. John Calvin wrote, "Creation is the theater of God's glory." Creation is God's theater. I like that!

Chris and I joined 40 from our church in a Reformation and Passion Play Tour of Germany last week. We traipsed through castles in Bavaria, the most memorable of which is King Ludwig's Neuschwan-

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stein castle. When Disney went looking for a signature castle for Disney Land, Ludwig's castle fit the bill. This castle is over the top. But it doesn't hold a candle to the surrounding countryside. The soaring mountains and waterfalls are simply breathtaking. The Alps to the south are majestic beyond words. One morning, snow had fallen in the upper elevations.

The words "environment" and "nature" don't appear in Scripture. The preferred Biblical word for the natural world is creation. Creation assumes a Creator. We acknowledge ourselves to be creatures.

On the 5th day of creation, God fashions all manner of sea creatures (1:20-23). I watched a National Geographic special recently on sea creatures that live in ocean depths of total darkness. Some of these sea creatures had never previously been seen by the human eye. God could have made this world bland and sterile. Instead, God fashioned it with extraordinary variety.

On the 6th day, God creates people in His image. Verse 27 reads, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (1:27). God calls humanity to populate the earth and exercise dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air and over every animal that moves along the ground (1:28).

Image originates from the Hebrew word meaning to cut

off or chisel, much as an artisan would chisel a statue from a block of stone. We are, you might say, a chip off the old block. We are distinguished from the rest of creation by our likeness to God. We have been given the unique capacity to know and relate to God. We alone bear God's image.

As God's image bearers, we've been given a creation mandate to exercise dominion over the earth. There are two so-called creation stories in Genesis—the first in Genesis 1 and the second in Genesis 2. Actually, these are two accounts of the same story. The first account, in Genesis 1, is chronological in style. The first six days are told in sequential fashion. God creates the heavens and the earth in six days and rests on the seventh day. The second account of creation, in Genesis 2, is topical in nature and amplifies what it means to exercise dominion. According to Genesis 2:15, man is summoned to "till the earth and keep it." "To till and care" are words expressing our role as caretakers and custodians of God's creation. We are stewards of God's creation. We do not own anything. Everything we have is on loan from God. We are stewards of the earth, not consumers and exploiters. What God made is sacred, not disposable. There is nothing in this creation mandate that gives us license to exploit creation.

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Since 2008, we've been telling God's Big Story in this church using three words: creation, fall and redemption. The first word, creation, reminds us that we have been created to live in relationship with God and creation. The second word, fall, teaches that we fall out of relationship with God and creation through something called sin. This fall distorts every dimension with the created order, including our environment. Even the ground is cursed on account of our sin.

God created the heavens and earth in six days, which God pronounced good. On the 7th day, God rested. God gave us the task of caring for creation, and we have proceeded to spend the last several millennia screwing it up!

The third word, redemption, reminds us that God seeks to restore every aspect of our fallen world through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul writes that even creation itself groans for its redemption (Romans 8:22).

The Gulf of Mexico groans for its redemption in the aftermath of what President Obama called the worst ecological disaster in America's history. Half of our coastal wetlands are located along the Gulf of Mexico. These wetlands are crucial to every migratory bird along the eastern seaboard. Does God really care about migratory birds and oil-covered pelicans? Jesus said God cares about a single sparrow falling from the

sky. Creation groans for its redemption.

Okay, so what? So what difference does this sermon make in my life? I invite you to follow the lead of Clay, a ten-year-old boy in worship last Sunday. Someone accidentally dropped his iPhone into a storm drain after worship as he was getting into his car. The owner pried the manhole cover off the drain but was too big to fit through the opening. Clay volunteered to rescue the man's phone. He agreed to be lowered into the manhole, picked up the phone and was lifted out. When Clay's father asked him why he did it, he said the lady in church was talking about being nice to strangers. Some of you will remember Glenda preaching on the theme of hospitality last Sunday. Clay got it! He applied the sermon to a real life situation. Ask yourself—how can I apply this sermon to the circumstances of my life?

When I think about our role as creation stewards, three words come to mind: reduce, reuse and recycle. As followers of Jesus Christ, we must resist the allure of wastefulness and over-consumption. My visit to Europe set our conspicuous over-consumption in bold relief. Our U.S. energy use per person is twice that of Germany. In German hotels, soap is available in reusable dispensers rather than individually wrapped bars that must be discarded after use. One towel per guest is standard fare. America

...we do what we can, not what we can't.

comprises only five percent of the world's population, yet we consume 24 percent of the world's natural resources.

Why do I shave with disposable razors and drink from Styrofoam cups that will end up in landfills and will take hundreds of years to decompose? Americans disposed of 230 million tons of trash last year. That's 38 percent more trash per person than 1970. We replace rather than repair. We discard perfectly good TVs because they're not the flat screen, high definition variety. I'm in the market for a new video cam. My old one works just fine, but its 15 years old and looks outdated and old. I don't need a new camera. I just want a new one!

As stewards of creation, we take seriously driving fuel efficient cars and recycling our waste products. Take our ubiquitous plastic bags. Between 500 million and one trillion plastic bags are put into circulation each year, yet only three percent of these bags are recycled. These bags are made from petroleum products that aren't easily biodegradable. They break down into toxic debris which contaminates our lakes and waterways. Animals die from ingesting these bags.

If you doubt God's call to care for the environment, search the Scriptures to see what God says about our role as creation stewards. Once you start looking for the theme of stewardship, you'll find it everywhere. If you

want a catalogue of such passages, I direct you to the website www.earthcareonline.org.

You may be wondering, in the face of so many ecological challenges, what can one person do? I'm reminded of something scientist and poet Loren Eiseley wrote some years ago, entitled *The Star Thrower*.

Once upon a time there was a wise man who frequented the ocean to do his writing, much as Eiseley liked to do. One day, as he walked along the seashore, he saw a human figure moving like a dancer. As he came closer, he found the figure was that of a young man and what he was doing wasn't dancing after all. Instead, he was reaching down, picking up small objects and tossing them into the sea. As he came nearer, he called out to the young man. "Good morning. May I ask you what you are doing?"

The young man replied, "I'm throwing starfish into the ocean."

"Why are you throwing starfish into the ocean?" the wise man asked.

"The sun is up and the tide is going out. If I don't throw these starfish into the sea, they're going to die."

"Young man, don't you realize there are miles and miles of beach with starfish all along it. You can't possibly make a difference with so many starfish."

The young man listened politely, picked up another starfish and threw it into the ocean. "Well, it made a difference to that one."

When it comes to the environment, we do what we can, not what we can't.

