



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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God's Good Earth

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The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it (Psalm 24:1).

The first chapter of Genesis tells us that God created the earth and called it good. The point of Genesis 1 is not the details of *how* God made the world, but the claim that God made it and that creation itself is good.

St. Augustine noted 1600 years ago, in a book called *On the Literal Reading of Genesis*, that not everything in the creation story was to be taken as a literal, or what we would now call a “scientific,” account of creation. The sun, for example, does not appear until the fourth day – which makes no sense literally because, of course, a day on earth, by definition, involves the apparent rising and setting of the sun. Augustine said, in effect, that Christians should leave science to the scientists, or “natural philosophers,” as they were called in his day, and rely on them to tell us the details about how nature works. What we look for mostly in the Bible are the moral and spiritual truths it contains, and the implications of those truths for the way we live.

To say that God made the world and called it good is to understand, among other things, that the world belongs ultimately not to us human beings but to God. “The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it,” the psalmist says, “the world, and those who live in it.”

The Bible implies that we are stewards of creation, not its owners. You and I are made in the image of God, in the sense that we have the capacity to create, and to love, and to make choices that have consequences, and we bear responsibility for the choices we make. If the Bible makes anything clear, it is that we are accountable to God, individually and collectively, for the way we live. Even though we are saved by the grace of God through faith, and not by

our own works, as St. Paul tells us, Jesus himself says that the only real faith in Christ is one that does the will of his Father in heaven.

So our stewardship of creation, which is a consequence of our faith in God and our duty to God, clearly includes responsibility for the environment entrusted to our care. This is a moral and spiritual obligation we have, first of all to God, but also to our fellow human beings. The most fundamental moral laws, according to Christ, are that we love our neighbors as ourselves and do to others as we would have them do to us. Everything else, Jesus says, follows from these. If we harm other people through the unnecessary environmental effects of the way we live, we violate the basic moral laws of God.

If you've ever lived on a street where lots of people walk and drive by, and some of them toss their cigarette butts or other bits of trash in your yard, you know the gut reaction we have in response to people's thoughtlessness and disregard for the tiny parcel of land we occupy on this planet. Littering may be a little thing compared to environmental degradation, but surely the moral repugnance we feel for people's selfishness in small matters ought to apply more forcefully to the callous indifference that does not care about far greater harms affecting many more people, not to mention the environment itself.

The most breathtakingly selfish expression I've heard in recent years is the one that goes by the acronym "IBG, YBG." It means "I'll be gone, you'll be gone," with the obvious implication "So why should we care?" I wonder, do the people who say that sort of thing have any children or grandchildren? Is there no one younger than themselves that they care about?

We live in a time where selfishness reigns supreme in all sorts of realms. There's nothing new about selfishness, of course. A Christian understanding of human nature takes for granted that people are inclined to think of themselves first, while psychologists describe the "primary narcissism" that every infant needs to grow out of in the course of ordinary development. But the moral education of individuals and the civilizing norms of healthy societies have always sought to curb this self-centeredness by nurturing regard for other people. "How would you like it if your brother did that to you?" we ask young children, by way of introducing them to the Golden Rule, long before they have any abstract idea of moral responsibility or ethical obligation.

Today we live in a time when some people deny almost any responsibility to look out for other human beings, let alone for nature and the environment, and many more dress up self-serving attitudes with the see-through claim that what's good for them is actually good for everybody else as well. It's a sign of our times that authors like Ayn Rand are as popular as they are, where egocentric themes in novels such as *Atlas Shrugged* are made baldly explicit in her nonfiction titles like *The Virtue of Selfishness*. Not surprisingly, this kind of literature is especially popular among those who benefit most from our large and growing disparities of income and wealth, and who feel the need to justify all that they have.

I'd like to believe that the decline of religious commitment and influence in our culture is partly responsible for such blatant self-centeredness, but after a lifetime in the church and forty-some years in the ministry, I'm not so sure. As we said a week or so ago, Christians in America showed up regularly in church for centuries while defending social arrangements like slavery and segregation. And in our own

time people still turn up in church who seem not to be troubled by the great social issues of our day, including the potentially catastrophic effects of anthropogenic climate change anticipated by most of the scientific experts if we don't start doing some things differently very soon.

I'm acutely aware that many people in this country, and in our own community, bristle at the very mention of climate change or global warming as an issue that we need to take seriously and do something about. Some people say, "Of course the climate is changing – it's always changing," by way of dismissing the whole matter. Others say things like, "Global warming is nonsense: look at this big snowball, or the cold snap with freezing temperatures outside." Still others say, "The climate may be warming a bit, but that's just a consequence of economic development, and the costs of taking action would far outweigh the benefits." And then there's the final resort to name calling, dismissing anyone who cares about climate change as just tree-hugging, big government liberals, or whatever other ad hominem attack they use in place of actually examining the evidence.

But what if they're wrong? What if those who disparage the warnings of the overwhelming majority of climate scientists and deny the ever-accumulating evidence are mistaken? What if the costs of not taking action turn out to be far greater than the costs of acting, as many economists are starting to say?

Some people say, "I just don't believe it," as if that settled the matter. But of course what any of us believe or don't believe tells us nothing at all about whether a particular scientific claim is true. Certainty is a state of mind; truth is a state of affairs. People routinely believe things that are not true and fail to believe some things that are. Claims about

the natural world are settled by examining the evidence, not by taking an opinion poll – although, as a matter of fact, a Yale survey published last August says Americans who accept that climate change is happening outnumber those who don't by 5 to 1, and 58% say they understand that global warming is caused largely by human activities.

People who cite snowballs or cold spells as evidence that global warming is a hoax either don't understand what the scientists are saying or else they disingenuously misrepresent what's being claimed. More than 190 nations signed the most recent agreements on climate change, and even if they don't entirely live up to the goals they set, at least they acknowledge the reality of the problem. The Pentagon, which is hardly a hotbed of liberalism, has long been planning to address the military conflicts they see arising from the economic and political turmoil to be generated by severe climate change and the displacement of people. Generals and admirals, of all people, have strong incentives to take reality seriously, as they deal with some of its harshest consequences. Even most of the major oil companies now openly acknowledge the effects of anthropogenic climate change, and some of them claim to support the goals of the Paris climate agreement.

Some people see the problem as a partisan issue, but that's the last thing it should be. We need the best minds of all parties to look for sensible solutions, in between denialism on the right and excessive regulation and spending on the left. There was a time a few decades ago when both of the major parties in America agreed on the need to work together on problems relating to the environment. Richard Nixon signed the Environmental Protection Act with bipartisan support, for example. And we need cooperation now more than ever before, instead of

using attitudes toward climate change as tribal identity markers that, as with so many other issues, freeze partisans in paralyzing gridlock.

I've mentioned the fact that I have a new grandson, probably more than I should have in recent months. God willing, he'll be here next Sunday with his mom and dad and his aunt from Chicago. One of the reasons I'm looking forward to retirement is the enormous sense of responsibility I feel to do whatever I can, in my own limited way, to see that the world little James and his generation inherit is as just and fair and decent, and environmentally sustainable, as we can possibly make it. I know from the ways you've kindly indulged my dotting that many of you are grandparents, too, and I know you care about the world your grandchildren will inherit.

It's a matter of faithful devotion to God that we become the best stewards we can be of the creation God has entrusted to our care. It's a matter of great moral urgency that we do what's right by all the people who are our neighbors on this beautiful little planet, and especially the poor and the vulnerable who will suffer the most from any harmful things we do. And it's a matter of simple love and devotion to our grandchildren that we do all we can to pass on to them the best and healthiest world we're able to give them.

There's no question in my mind that we need to do much better about many things, including the way we care for God's good earth, and we need to begin right now. I know that many of you already agree. I hope that all of you will, and that together we'll find ways to be faithful to God, and to our neighbors, and to all the children who come after us.



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