

## Stewards of Life

Sermon by John Strommen on Genesis 2:4-17, Leviticus 25:1-7 April 22, 2018

In Greek mythology, Sisyphus is punished for his self-aggrandizing craftiness and deceitfulness, and forced to roll an immense boulder up a hill. Then thing is, when it gets to the top, it only rolls down the other side, at which time Sisyphus must roll it up the hill again, and it rolls down. this is repeated for an eternity. Albert Camus in his novel, "The Myth of Sisyphus", argues that the plight of Sisyphus is a symbol of modern human existence. Our lives are meaningless because all we do is put a lot of effort into many and various tasks, but for what? We might as well be rolling a boulder up a hill over and over again. But what's the point? Do you ever feel like this guy in the cartoon on the screen? "Hey, Sisyphus, when you've got a moment, I'd like to discuss this progress report with you."

In the GPS course on Wednesday nights, we've been exploring our purpose and callings in this life. It's an important topic, because without purpose or direction in life, human beings despair over the lack of meaning and feel like Sisyphus. From a biblical point of view, we may feel like Sisyphus sometimes, but the purpose and meaning that is baked into our very existence means we are nothing like Sisyphus. And we know this in the very first two chapters of Genesis, where we are given a clear and meaningful role: God says, "Be stewards of life, life all around you. You have been entrusted this task."

Let's take a look. It says In Genesis chapter 2 that God made the heavens and the earth but then called a "time out" before any plant was yet planted or any rain had been sent to nourish the earth. Now, I realize that in Genesis 1, it says day one, day two and day three, let there be light, let there be oceans and seas, let there be plants and living things. In Genesis 1, everything in creation is made before humans. But in Genesis 2, there is a different writer and a different creation account. Much more earthy and told like a story, less like stanzas to a hymn. And it says that God made the heavens and the earth, but paused before he made any plant or herb. Why the time out? It says right there is verse 5: *There was no one to till the ground!* It's as though God said, "Wait a minute, wait a minute. I need someone down there. Someone who will help the earth produce life, who will appreciate the sacredness of living things, take care of them, and help them to grow. *I need a gardener. A steward of the life I will create.*"

Then God forms a human from the dust in the ground, by breathing into the dust...*and now he has a gardener.* Then, *and only then*, did God plant the Garden we know as Eden, when he had someone there to till it and care for it.

Interesting that human purpose and calling is established even before his identity. Who is the human? Someone God created to take care of the garden. You. We've been deputized by God to care for his assets. We have the whole world in our hands! We were called to be the gardener, to protect and nurture God's garden of life. Or choose your metaphor: gardeners in God's garden of life, managers of God's assets, stewards of God's blessings, curators of life.

In all these scenarios, God is the one in charge whose purpose is being served, namely, the flourishing of life for all. How do we see to it that life on this planet, in all its forms, is cared for? I've been watching the BBC series, "Planet Earth," and it has shown how our increasing urbanization has decreased habitat

for many species. In some cases though, plants and animals can co-exist quite easily if cities are designed with not only human life in mind, but all life. Here are some pictures from Singapore, where they have set out to co-exist with the natural world and create habitats right in the city that can support plant and animal life. If we consider God's point of view, how do we see to it that all of life is nurtured, not just ours as humans, or just the people with means.

However, as we learned with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, we humans often prefer to be God—to be the owners. Trouble is, we don't do so well when we are owners, because paramount for the human owner is not how all life can flourish (God's perspective), but how *my life* can flourish, sometimes at the expense of other lives. We don't think we need God, and we then begin using creation and other people for our own purposes, not God's. Our trust with God is broken, our human natures are distorted, and the brokenness is extended to creation. We turn away from loving our neighbor as subject – as ends in themselves, and rather turn to using our neighbor as object, a means to an end. The extreme form of this is of course slavery, but there are so many lesser ways we seek to control others to advance our interests. Or we conclude our neighbor is a threat to my interests and we seek to diminish him/her.

But something that is living is not an object, but a subject, including non-human life: plants and animals. So we are the stewards of all forms of life – in all of its rich and varied forms. When we are the owners, or think we are, we often forget that life on our planet is something to be nurtured and cared for as sacred, and rather, we all too easily view the earth like a supermarket, while we are the consumer.

And so it was that the Lord commanded Moses and the Israelites to give a Sabbath to their fields and vineyards. Every seventh year they were to refrain from sowing in their fields and pruning their vineyards. Furthermore, “you shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your unpruned vine: it shall be a year of complete rest for the land.” Why? Because life needs to be cared for, living things need to rest. We need to rest. Why wouldn't all living things? When we enslave the land, when we force it to overwork, we abuse it to extract from it for our purposes. In an effort to extract as much as possible from it, we overfarm and the result is a dustbowl – the great depression. We hunt and kill species to the point of extinction. We burn fossil fuels to the point that the earth cannot absorb its impact.

So what does it mean to live as steward and manager for someone else's resources?

Well, it means you want accurate information about how we're doing, what's happening with the planet, so we take appropriate actions. On this point, it saddens me that so many people bury their heads in the sand about the current state of our planet. A reasonable Christian must invite information from those who study and monitor the planet's physical health, namely scientists. Science tells us the planet is hurting, it's going through changes far too dramatic for good to come of it. We already know that many species are losing their habitat because of climate change. We know that climate change endangers people, too, and especially those at the margins. When seas rise or droughts occur, it is always the poor who are the most vulnerable. We are called to be their advocates.

Climate change is real and if we take seriously our role and purpose as stewards and managers, we must act decisively to slow down the warming of earth's atmosphere. We all know that many around us deny the validity of climate change, choosing to believe it's a hoax. These people are not worth debating because their position is careless and contrary to biblical values. We cannot take our roles seriously as stewards of life while at the same time ignoring or choosing to distrust the overwhelming data on climate change.

So I encourage you to ask what you can do in your neck of the woods to be a curator of life – with people, plants and animals. I encourage you to be advocates for life on the planet with our elected officials. In our own congregation, a “green team” has stepped up. They will lead the education/faith formation hour after worship in some awareness building. Maybe you feel called to take a special interest in managing our resources. The green team needs more team members.

This is the original role God had in mind for us: stewards of life. Nothing we do is more important. Amen.