

May 5, 2019
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Three Cubic Feet

Leviticus 25:1-7
26: 3-5 14, 17-20, 34-35

Scripture Introduction: In Scripture, God does not only command a Sabbath day rest for humans, but God also commands that we give the earth a rest. God commands that we should observe one day of rest each week, and then in Leviticus we also read of a Sabbath Year of rest for the land every seventh year. Leviticus also tell us of a Jubilee year – a reset and rest year 1 year out of every 50 years. All three of these Sabbath commands do two things – they provide for rest and they require human beings to obediently trust in God to provide for our needs.

For each required rest/Sabbath there are blessings and rewards for obedience, and also there are consequences for disobedience. Listen as I read the command for the Sabbath Year of rest for the land and the blessings for obedience and the consequences for disobedience.

I know that there are other church congregations who celebrate an Earth Sunday right around Earth Day, but I don't know of any that do it as well as Forest Lake. Our official celebration began last Sunday, when Dr. Madilyn Fletcher, the President of the Gills Creek Watershed Association spoke to the adult Sunday School classes about ways of caring for God's water. Then, today our church's Environmental Stewardship Team, that is directed and cheered on by Lee Pippen, arranged for exhibits and educational booths from over 20 organizations and groups. It is always fun and amazing to see what happens in the Fellowship Hall during Sunday School on Earth Sunday. The Environmental Stewardship team makes it fun to care for the earth here at Forest Lake. But I also want to focus on why it is important to pay attention, to learn and to be called and challenged to care for the earth. There is a very important method and purpose to this crazy, amazing busy day.

Friends, you and I live on the earth, but we live on the earth as renters, because "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it;" as Psalm 24:1 says. The earth belongs to God, and human beings seem to have lost sight of that foundational and life changing Biblical truth.

The knowledge that the Earth is the Lord's is everywhere in Scripture. The story of our faith begins with the creation of the earth and surrounding cosmos in Genesis, and it ends, in Revelation, with a picture of the restored creation – once again a perfect garden in the Kingdom

of God. And the passage of Scripture we read this morning traces its origins all the way back to the top of Mount Sinai when – having been led out of slavery in Egypt by Moses – God gave the people directions for how to live as God’s people. And while we always look at things from our own perspective – from a human centric point of view – God clearly sees a much larger picture than just us. God’s love, care and purpose extend beyond our needs and wishes to God’s love, care and purpose of the earth.

Here in Leviticus, God commands us to allow the earth to rest. Once a week, on our weekly Sabbath, we are to give the land a rest. Once every seven years, we are to allow the earth to lie without being cultivated or changed so that it can rest. And once every fifty years, in the Jubilee Year (which we did not read this morning), both the earth and human beings get a rest and a re-set. And these instructions are remembered as commands from God - not suggestions or just a thought or a good idea when it is convenient. These commands to rest – both for us and the earth – are commands which we ignore with arrogance and in brash disobedience. The human race has grown increasingly bold and unaware of the consequences of our disregard for the earth that belongs to God and that God has entrusted to our care. But there is a growing consensus and chorus of scientists who say that our planet is in the midst of a warming trend that is unprecedented in modern history and that we can no longer ignore the life threatening consequences of this trend.

And, as we begin to learn more about the accumulating effects of our trash, pollution and abuse of earth there are many good reasons to stop and take mindful and corrective actions that change the way you and I live on a daily basis.

One reason to change the way we live on earth is enlightened self-interest. If we don’t stop polluting the ground water and spraying pesticides with abandon, then we will no longer have clean, safe water or bees to pollinate the foods we eat. In fact, Scripture says if we do not treat the earth as God commands – allowing it to rest – then the time will come when we will sow our seed in vain. Our pride will be broken and God says, “I will make your sky like iron and your earth like copper. Your strength shall be spent to no purpose: your land shall not yield its produce, and the trees of the land shall not yield their fruit.” (Lev 26:19-20) As we look at the pictures of earth eroded and mistreated and the sun obscured by the smog and pollution of our industries, this Scripture appears to be less something that God does to us and more of something that God allows us to do to ourselves. We will receive the natural consequences of our disobedience and arrogance if we do not care for the earth.

And while it feels like there is very little that you or I can do as individuals to “fix” the damage that human beings have done, we can take small steps ourselves and advocate for bigger steps that – at the very least – allow us to live out our faith and to work towards obedience to the God whom we say we love and obey. And that really is the reason that you and I – as believers in Christ – should be paying attention and changing our day-to-day lives.

All human beings care for the earth out of enlightened self-interest because we are smart and logical – enlightened self-interest. But the reason that you and I – as Christians - care for the

earth is because we love God and we seek to be obedient to the God who made the earth and owns it. We choose to reduce our use of plastics and energy, eat more vegetables, refuse to spray our yards for mosquitos because we are inconvenienced by some itchy bits and refuse to pour chemicals down the storm drains because we love God and are obedient to God's commands out of love! We can take reusable bags for our shopping and refuse straws and plastic tops or carry a water bottle because it is a reminder to us – in small ways – that obedience to God and not our own convenience is our motivating force. Scripture calls us to “wake up” and change how we live on the earth – because the earth is the Lord's!

And, this is something that our congregation does all year long. If you don't already know about and help with the kid's garden or the habitat garden, then why not!? And, if you don't already own and use one of the small green re-usable shopping bags that would replace a plastic one, why not?! And did you know that FLPC is one of the few churches that has had an energy audit? And that energy audit has driven decisions about our buildings and property for years. We began replacing our conventional bulbs with LED bulbs a couple of years ago. LED bulbs are the technology that currently uses the least energy to provide light and does not have the environmental hazards of the compact florescent bulbs. I'd like to invite you to look up for just a moment. When we did the renovation of the sanctuary in 2017, to install our new pipe organ, we replaced many of the bulbs in the sanctuary and narthex with LED bulbs – specifically because it gave us a concrete way to reduce the amount of energy FLPC uses every Sunday and because it gives us a concrete way to live out our theological belief that “The earth belongs to the Lord”! But we had not been able to complete replacing all of the old bulbs. Then, just in the last few months, our environmental stewardship team (read Judy Timmons) wrote a grant request to South Carolina Interfaith Power and Light and FLPC was awarded a grant that allowed us to complete this project. So now, every light bulb in our sanctuary and narthex is an LED bulb. Dean Adams and Rick Joye, from SC Interfaith Power & Light are with us today. With their help, our congregation took another small step to reduce our energy use and become even better stewards of the earth that belongs to God. Our congregation is working to be faithful and loving stewards of the earth that belongs to God. My invitation to you is consider and pick a few ways you can do the same!

There is a wood-carver and sculptor who lives outside of Sumter, SC named Grainger McKoy. I have never met Mr. McKoy, but I have read about his work. He is a world renowned wood carver and sculptor of birds and a man of faith. His carvings are so realistic and vivid that once, for an exhibit of his work in the High Art Museum in Atlanta, McKoy installed a sculpture of a dead bird on the floor of the museum by a window, and it was mistaken over and over again for a real dead bird. McKoy tells of being a young sculptor and working for 2 ½ years to carve enough birds to put on a one-man art show in a New York Gallery. He sold every single sculpture he created. But McKoy said that walking away with a giant check in his pocket he felt empty. That sense of emptiness led him to seek a larger purpose for his life, and in that process he discovered God. Grainger McKoy says that at that point in his life he realized that he had been “worshipping the creation, instead of the creator.” He wrote, “I discovered I was dancing on such a small part of the stage, and when I discovered the creator I could look through the creation and see this bigger stage to dance on.”ⁱ And once McKoy got his order right -figured

out that he was one very small part of a much larger creation and purpose that served God - he found his joy and passion in celebrating the creation that belongs to the Creator.

At the end of the article about Grainger McKoy's life and work, McKoy refers to a rectangular frame that he made that is 3 cubic feet large. "I was wondering how much space I occupy in the universe,' he says, 'I have a nephew, an orthopedic surgeon down in Charleston, and I called him up and asked him to help me answer that question. He responded, 'Uncle Grainger, you're 98% water, and a cubic foot of water weights about 63 pounds. You occupy about 3 cubic feet in the universe.' So I made that frame to remind me how little space I occupy. It's a constant reminder that I'm not the center of the universe. Actually the tree next to it occupies more space than I do. That's just a reminder." ⁱⁱ

The earth is the Lord's. We are a very small part of a much larger creation that belongs to a much bigger God. And we are to worship that God and care for the creation. The earth is the Lord's. What are we going to do about that?! Pick something – today.

ⁱ *Carving Creation* article by Nancy Spitler from the magazine Clemson World, Summer 2018. p. 35

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.* p. 36