



## Genesis 2: 15-17, 3: 1-7 (Season of Lent)

### Sermon Exegesis

#### Stewardship for a Thriving Planet: Recovering the Full Meaning of the Human Vocation in Biblical Perspective

By Dr. Carol Frances Johnston

Connecting stewardship to more than fundraising can be tricky for churches, yet vitality in congregations is greatly enhanced when it is done effectively. Recovering and energizing stewardship can be aided by the meaning of stewardship that we find in Genesis. Here we can see that exercising stewardship in a distinctive way, and in the context of God's abundant creation, is entrusted by God to human beings from the outset as their vocation. It is a kind of partnership with God in seeing and enabling the potential in all creatures to be developed and also, in and with other creatures, contributing to the thriving of all life. In other words, stewardship is about the long-term cultivation of "right relationships" between God, human beings, and the rest of creation, for the sake of a thriving world. The healthier each aspect of this set of relationships, the healthier we all can be.

Genesis 1 and 2 establish this understanding, and chapters 3-11 provide wisdom as to how God's intention for mutual thriving has been distorted. Throughout the rest of the Bible we see how God acts consistently to overcome the distortions. Accordingly, this piece will focus mostly on the Genesis accounts, and conclude with some comments pointing to the ways that God acts throughout the rest of Scripture, and to this day, to restore human beings to partner with God to "know", to see and understand God's creatures (including each other and ourselves!) and work to help all to shine in their unique ways.

#### The Human Vocation as Stewardship In and With the Creation: Genesis 1 and 2

At each stage of creating in Genesis 1, God "saw that it was good." When human beings were created last, "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good." There are two crucial aspects of this to notice here: First, not only that everything created is "good", but also that it is the whole *together* that is "very good". Second, it is crucial to consider the importance of God *seeing* that it is good. One of my students once asked about this, and together our class unpacked it. We soon realized that God "seeing" and so noticing (and knowing) God's creatures, and how the whole is greater than the sum of the parts ("very good") is a crucial element of life. Everyone needs to be seen and understood by others, and learning that God "sees" and understands them as individuals and how they are connected to everything else can be transformative.



Another crucial aspect of Genesis 1 is that God blessed all the creatures and charged them *all* to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.” Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion ... ” (1:27). God blessed them and charged them also to “be fruitful and multiply” but also to “subdue” the earth (1:28). To be in “the image” of God and according to God’s “likeness” means being entrusted to do what God would do and to act “like” God in imitation of God’s ways – to be a partner in the work of tending to the creation in accord with God’s intentions. How do we know what God is like? Tradition gives us two ways to know: the Books of Bible and Nature. In both we can see that God creates a world teeming with a wild diversity of interdependent and thriving life and tends it lovingly, with care for all creatures, and gives all creatures roles to play that contribute in unique ways to the making of the dynamic whole – much of it wholly apart from human affairs yet crucial to human life.

Consequently, “dominion” is certainly not “domination” and there is no justification for using the creation solely for human desire, let alone abuse. Absent human distortion, God clearly has created a world of fabulous abundance, teeming with a wonderful diversity of life all interacting in ways that give and take life in a dance that leads to dynamic harmony and mutual thriving. Even the charge to “subdue the earth” is not about domination but about imitating the way God “subdues” the kind of chaos that makes life impossible into the creation patterns in which life thrives. Notice that when God creates, it is not depicted as a battle (as in so many ancient mythologies) but as a process in which God calls on various aspects of what is created to play roles in furthering the creative process.

We learn more about what God intends for the human vocation in the second creation story, in Genesis 2. God has created the first human, the *adam* or “earth creature,” from the *adamah*, or living soil, and put *Adam* into Eden, the garden of abundant life. God charges *Adam* to “till and to keep” the garden, gives *Adam* complete freedom of the abundance there, except for the one tree, and then forms the animals and brings “them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.” Naming was a very sacred event, and could not be done properly unless the namer could *see* truly and *know* that which was named – in other words, was in a relationship with the one named that went much deeper than superficial acquaintance. According to scholar Terence Fretheim, “Naming, which involves knowledge of and relationship to the creature, *continues the creative process ...*”

As for tending the garden, a closer look at the Hebrew words usually translated, “till” or *‘abad*, and “keep”, or *šāmar*, reveals that *‘abad* is closely connected to service that works for the wellbeing of another, and *šāmar* means to watch over, preserve. Thus a better translation for this human charge would be “to serve and to preserve” all the life in the garden. Clearly then,



human beings were created from the beginning to play a special role within the rest of created life. Earth creatures too, are charged to live in right relationship with both God and creation, with the added dimension of consciously tending to the long-term wellbeing of the whole in imitation of God and in dynamic harmony with all.

### **Distortion and Diminishment of Life: The Fall from Abundance in Genesis 3**

The world we know today is still one full of an abundance of diverse life, but it is no longer thriving, even though we know that it once did, and when we look we can still see how healthy ecosystems teem with diversity and dynamic creativity. Yet there is in humanity a powerful tendency to see the world in terms of scarcity, with a great deal of anxiety about having enough to live, and a strong drive in our economic systems to gain greater and greater control over the rest of life on earth solely for human benefit. This situation is not new at all, and in Genesis 3 the story of the Fall offers insight into this problem. John Calvin remarks in his Genesis Commentary that the fall happens *before* the forbidden fruit of the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” is even touched. What he means is that when Adam and Eve believed the serpent instead of God, the one who created and cares for them, they broke trust with God. When they did eat, “their eyes were opened, and they knew they were naked.” It doesn’t say that they knew good and evil, but describes instead how they were immediately ashamed and tried to cover themselves both with leaves and by hiding from God. Even when God confronts them, they blame each other and the serpent and never confess and ask for forgiveness. In other words, they behaved like toddlers who try to hide when they know they’ve gone wrong. And as with toddlers, the relationship of trust cannot be fully restored absent confession.

The consequences of this breaking of the trusting relationship between God and humans has terrible consequences that amount to this: Humans have indeed moved beyond innocent trust, but instead of gaining a more mature form of trust, they find themselves out of “right relationship” not only with God, but with each other and with the rest of creation. This is what sin is all about – this separation from and inability to trust God and therefore anything else. The expulsion from Eden means living in a world now perceived as one of scarcity and peril. Unable to trust God they are also unable to trust other humans or other creatures, and find themselves on their own, forced to rely on themselves to secure their own lives. Too often this means either trying to dominate, or on the other hand accepting domination by someone perceived as providing security. They have gained “knowledge of good and evil” but it is a knowledge distorted by this anxiety and it is difficult to discern what is actually “good” and what is “evil”. In the biblical accounts this leads very quickly to the violence that begins with Cain slaying Abel and continues with Cain founding cities (like the historical Ur and the biblical Babel) filled with violence (including enslavement) against people and land. This “scarcity trap”



continues to this day, and we see it manifested in all aspects of our lives in a myriad of ways and to varying degrees.

### **Restoration of Right Relationships and Regeneration of Life**

God does not leave human beings alone in this condition of alienation and insecurity. If we read Scripture with attention to the ways God acts to bring people back, to restore trust in God, each other, and the rest of creation, we soon discover that this occurs over and over again throughout both the Hebrew and Christian accounts. The Exodus and giving of *Torah* and creating of covenant community is the liberation of the people from slavery and their restoration to a community living in right relationships. Much of the Torah law is about how to live an abundant life by tending to the land with care and to other people with fairness by practicing trust in God via willing obedience to the law, especially keeping the Sabbath and making provision for both vulnerable people and creatures. Leviticus 25, the account of the Jubilee Year, is an acknowledgment that even so, all communities fall into unjust ways so that periodic attention to the restoration of right relationships must be attended to – including freeing those enslaved and allowing the land to rest and regenerate.

The Wisdom Literature celebrates the beauty of the creation and how to appreciate it and play a proper human role, even while acknowledging that the creation exists for God's own pleasure, not for our sole use. Even the Prophets are about what happens when human beings fall out of right relationships and into abusing each other and the land – and consequences for the land and other creatures are integral to their message. Everywhere is the understanding that those who try to secure their lives by trying to control others and nature for their own benefit end up doing great damage to the whole community, including the ecosystems they live in and depend on. Those who instead learn to trust God and God's ways, by following the laws of life in Torah, are given the promise that "you" [always plural!] will thrive along with the whole community.

The biblical accounts of Jesus and the early Christian movement are fully in continuity with this witness to God acting to restore human beings to right relationships of trust in God that include integrally restoring trust in God's creation, so that Jesus redeems us from the "scarcity trap" of sin and restores us to live in consonance with the world of abundance that God has created. Jesus proclaims that his ministry is that proclaimed in Isaiah ... "to proclaim the Year of the Lord's Favor" – the Jubilee Year of restoration to right relationships. Jesus asserts that he has come "that you may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). It is important here to underscore that Jesus does *not* promise an abundance of "wealth", but rather abundant *life* – a very different matter! The Gospel accounts testify that Jesus himself lives in such harmony with God and God's creation that he is able, often in consonance with nature, to heal sufferers in both mind and body and do even more astonishing things, and continually interacts with people



in a way that helps them be restored not only to bodily health, but to the love and trust of and in God and their communities.

The writings of Paul and the rest of the accounts continue, describing a creation in which the forces of domination and destruction have been overcome and a “new creation” arisen that has been restored to develop in accord with God’s original intent. Human beings are also restored to their original vocation of “seeing” the potential of all creatures and working in consonance with the Spirit for the unfolding of the fullness of a thriving world. Even the uniquely human project, the city, is redeemed and becomes integrated in the new creation, with all peoples now living in harmony (yet as themselves, in contrast to the Tower of Babel: Rev. 21:26), and with nature’s healing power through the “leaves of the tree” now growing in the midst of the New Jerusalem. As Paul writes in II Corinthians 5, in Christ “God was reconciling the world [*cosmos*] to” Godself and is “entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.” Paul describes us as adopted “children of God” and “heirs”. In this context, human stewardship in and with the creation is not only restored, but it is underscored that being “ambassadors for reconciliation” of the whole world is how God’s beloved children are honored to participate in God’s own creative, life-giving work.

### **Moving from Scarcity to Abundance of Life in the Context of Congregational Life: Stewardship grounded in Our Identity as God’s Beloved Children**

One of the challenges congregations commonly have, especially in the context of the larger social challenges we all face, is that times are more anxious than ever, and the scarcity mentality and its consequences seem to be stronger than ever. In this situation, stewardship understandably becomes narrowed to fundraising to keep churches afloat, and people have a great deal of anxiety about money – and perhaps even more important, about their security in a society that is increasingly fragmented and uncertain. Recovering the deeper meaning of stewardship can help.

A few years ago I interviewed about 75 faithful, creative, and generous church and community leaders across the U.S. Gradually I noticed that they shared an experience that comes before gratitude, generosity, and learning how to practice stewardship, and makes them possible. What I saw in those congregations was attention and care to helping people – often very wounded, anxious, and fearful people – to **receive** God’s love into their lives in a variety of tangible ways through the preaching, worship, teaching, and above all the sharing of that love in the practice of a form of hospitality that included *seeing* and accepting each person as a beloved child of God and valued member of God’s family. This hospitality, grounded in the experience of God’s love through Christ, was far more than friendliness – it was intentional about affirming each person as one with needed gifts to bring as well as needs to be met, so that the life of the church became one of mutuality that extended far beyond into effective



mission. I heard many stories about how the church leaders, especially the pastors, saw potential in each person that they themselves had not realized they had, and invited them to bring it to share with others: the very kind of stewardship we have seen in the Genesis accounts.

This way of inviting people in and grounding them has proven to be transformative, and frees up potential that exists in every person and every community in remarkable ways.

So a suggestion for how to teach about stewardship to help people move from the scarcity mentality to one that genuinely sees and trusts that there is “enough” for all, is to focus on inviting people into practices that strengthen those relationships across the board, and also to practice trusting that there will be “enough” for whatever needs doing and so trying some things people want to do but feel is risky. These congregations all testified that when this is done, all the resources needed, including money, follows.

Any activity that focuses on strengthening healthier relationships with God, other people (with families, communities, and “strangers”, and with God’s creation), contributes to this transformative process. Encouraging people to do more to reconnect with the creation is especially healing and can go far beyond trying to do recycling. Gardening, exploring ways to make the church property more energy efficient and beautiful with natural plantings that also sequester water and cut maintenance costs, classes to learn how to participate in stewardship in and with the creation through the work they already do for a living – everything that helps people shift from lives that work against the creation to lives that learn from and work *with* the creative and sustainable processes God designed into nature – will go a long way to fostering greater health and often real joy in life. In the process of moving out of the narrowness of the scarcity mindset, some attention to helping people think about what is “enough” materially for them to live in healthier ways can be very helpful, especially if there is a tendency to think of “abundance” in solely material terms. Insofar as people begin to move this way, they just might discover that more attention to healthier relationships with God, each other, and the creation, in which receiving and giving become mutually enriching, does indeed lead to experiencing life as “abundant” in the way Jesus meant.

Attention to how worship explains and enacts these kinds of relationships is also important. For example, showing how the Lord’s Supper relies on a series of transformations that are a complex cooperation between human labor, nature’s transformative creativity of seed to wheat and grape and then to bread and wine, and God’s presence in all of it. In experiencing communion we are experiencing our unity through Christ with God, all the company of heaven, and all the faithful across the world, and the whole creation, all at once. The eucharist then becomes experienced as far more than my individual relationship with Christ (yet is still intensely personal), and the whole becomes far more than the sum of the



parts. Consciously *seeing* this can help ground the people in a larger, more expansive sense of self and in the security of knowing they *belong* forever in God's great family.

Central to this understanding of stewardship is the idea that *everyone*, created in the image of God, can participate in learning to better *know* others by listening and *seeing* them as the unique beings they all are, and work to help them to develop the potential that is in them. Everyone remembers the teacher who *saw* something in them and encouraged them in a way that was transformative. Many of those I interviewed told of how their pastor *saw* them and called out their potential to contribute in ways that surprised and energized them for ministry. There are a myriad of ways to practice this kind of stewardship in daily life, and everyone can find ways to do this that contribute to mutual thriving.

It can take a long time (years!) for these approaches to take hold. Patience and moving step by step is essential. So is crafting ways to engage people that are sensitive to their own potential, readiness, and the context. Yet as transformation is experienced, practicing stewardship, including of money, no longer induces anxiety about misusing the money or not having enough, and instead can become a joyous adventure in joining with the rest of God's family in witnessing to and participating in God's transformative creativity for the mutual thriving of all life.

### **Some Suggestions for Preaching: Questions to ponder**

One way to engage this approach to stewardship is to engage the Bible texts asking questions such as:

- What are the relationships here and what is happening to them? Too often we read the texts individualistically, and so miss the relational dimensions that can be crucial. Jesus frequently interacts with people in a way that leads to their restoration not just to individual physical health, but to right relationship with God and their community, including nature.
- Where do you see this kind of stewardship taking place among the people in your own congregation? Can you find stories of how people's lives are transformed by way others see and encourage them, and encourage members to do this with each other and with everyone, including non-human creatures?
- Look for ways *seeing* and *listening* appear in the texts and in people's lives, and consider how highlighting these can be illuminating. This should open up fresh insights.



## **Voices of People of African Descent**

Selected by the Editors

“There is an urgent need to consider a model for the transformation of society which will take seriously the relationship between people and nature. The African model has much to recommend it. Africa knows too well what happens when people no longer feel they are part of nature or take it for granted that nature will continue to support human life no matter what they do to it. When people do not take care of nature they interrupt the patterns and rhythms responsible for maintaining an ecological balance. The result of tampering and reversing these rhythms and patterns is that the ecological balance may be changed permanently or destroyed, with a very devastating impact on all life. Greed is perhaps the main reason for tampering with nature's flow. Greed is the opposite of responsibility. The way people use natural resources reveals how much they care or do not care about nature. Unless people cultivate a sense of bondedness to nature they cannot care about nature. If nature is objectified as the other, not part of the self by origin, that is the beginning of the end. For the destiny of nature is the destiny of all people. Any model of transformation that does not take into account the value of nature does not stand a chance.” - Rev. Dr. Harvey Sindima, “Community of Life,” The Ecumenical Review, 41 no 4 Oct. 1989, p. 537-551.





## **Worship Resources**

**By Rev. Stacy Emerson**

### **Call to Worship**

Bring praise to our Creator  
who kissed life into our mortal bodies.

**We bring praise to our Creator  
who trusts us to preserve God's most precious things.**

Bring praise to our Creator  
who invites us into sacred partnership  
to tend to each other and all of creation.

**We bring praise to our Creator  
seeing the beauty around us  
and sensing our sacred responsibility.**

### **Gathering Prayer**

Creator God, we gather here billions of years from the beginning, still in awe of your continually unfolding creation. Stars and centipedes and still mornings such as this inspire our gratitude to you for this life, abundant and rich. Make us aware of the sacred connections begun in creation but broken now. And having been formed in your likeness, equip us with the desire to serve, and the willingness to guard, and the hope to heal until creation's wholeness is restored. Amen.

### **Prayer of Transformation**

Creator God, even while we give thanks for life and breath and bodies and the goodness of the earth, we are aware of the ways we have betrayed your gifts and have caused brokenness in your precious creation. We have taken your gifts for granted and we confess our carelessness. Remind us then of the responsibilities we bear because of the likeness of your image, and let your Spirit brood over us, re-shaping us, and empowering our choices to care more deeply for each other and to faithfully tend the earth. Amen.

### **Time for Gratitude & Generosity**

Generosity is rooted in love. That's what this is all about—sharing the love of God we feel and making sure it flows through us into the places the world needs it most. From the beginning when God created us in God's likeness God has trusted us with God's most precious things—people and earth, messages of peace and hope—and God depends on us for their flourishing. That's what gratitude and generosity are all about—this wonderful dance between God's blessing and God's dependence on us to bless others and to bless the earth. Today we give thanks for these things and for each other



who make this mission and ministry possible simply because we do not do it alone, but together in beloved community.

Let us join our hearts and minds in the spirit of prayer:

**Creator God, for blessing us with many gifts, we thank you. For walking with us in our fear, we praise you. Take our gifts and with your love, help us to make our world whole. Amen.**

### **Invitation to the Table**

Come to the table where we give thanks for the unfolding of creation from the very beginning until now. The stuff of stars exists within us each, bits of atoms and matter wrought from God's generative power. God has gifted us generously and God's abundance sustains us. Sharing a broken bread and a poured cup, we receive God's blessing alongside the call to share that which we have been given. So come to the feast, and having been filled, we pledge ourselves to bear witness to our Creator's loving presence throughout the whole wide earth.

### **Benediction**

The God who spoke the world into being  
Forming humans in God's likeness  
Sends us out to be channels of love and hope and justice:  
Go then to bring the gifts of such blessings to all the earth!

### **Additional Suggestions from the Editors**

#### **Music**

"The Earth is the Lord's" by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, available online at [www.carolynshymns.com](http://www.carolynshymns.com)

"Canticle of the Sun" by Marty Haugen, Gather #578