

## **Ezekiel 34:1-10**

The word of the Lord came to me: Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: To the shepherds—thus says the Lord God: Woe, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat; you clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatted calves, but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak; you have not healed the sick; you have not bound up the injured; you have not brought back the strays; you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and scattered they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep were scattered; they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them.

Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: As I live, says the Lord God, because my sheep have become a prey and my sheep have become food for all the wild animals, since there was no shepherd, and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves and have not fed my sheep, therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: Thus says the Lord God: I am against the shepherds, and I will hold them accountable for my sheep and put a stop to their feeding the sheep; no longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them.\*

## **Signs of the Times: Caring for Creation?** - August 7, 2022

*Ezekiel 34:1-10*

As I am writing this, the Philadelphia area is experiencing its fourth heat wave of the summer. For 2022, we have had 25 or more days greater than 90 degrees. Of the 15 hottest summers on record, ten have them have occurred since 2010. Just a week or so ago, London, England experienced its hottest temperatures ever. Their daily high temperatures exceeded one hundred degrees for the first time in recorded history.

There have been huge forest fires in California, Oregon, Washington, Arizona, and even Idaho and Montana. The level of the Hoover Dam, a water source which residential, industrial, and agricultural customers rely on, has fallen to its lowest levels since the dam opened eighty years ago. Deforestation is increasingly cutting into the Amazon Rain Forest as people cut down trees for the purpose of raising more cows and sheep. The polar ice caps are melting and ocean levels are rising. Whole islands in the Pacific are disappearing. The state of Louisiana is losing thousands of acres of land. Swamps and wetlands are increasingly contaminated with saltwater, killing plants and wildlife of all kinds.

But you know all this already, right? If you're my age or older, you certainly remember winters that boasted of huge storms. We remember when Spring was an actual season that lasted months, not weeks. We didn't have to spend our summer nights indoors because by the time evening rolled around, the night was cooler, wasn't it?

Friends, climate change is real and it's getting worse and that, that is a sin.

It may sound strange to say it in a church setting, but to keep silent about climate change in church is wrong, terribly wrong.

Scientists may debate the extent to which human beings have contributed to global warming, but there is no question human beings have been grievously damaging our environment since the beginning of humanity.

How did the human race grow? Once we started living in groups and settling in villages, what did we do? We farmed the land — that is until the land was exhausted and could produce no more. We hunted the animals, until the animals were gone. We would strip the forests of the trees and pollute the rivers and lakes with our waste, and fish them empty.

And then we would move on. And we would repeat the cycle over and over again.

Now thousands of years ago, it wasn't a big deal. After all there was a lot of land and not many people to exploit it. So the damage inflicted in one place had time to heal. Now some civilizations

learned how to care of the land. Native Americans had and still have an innate respect for the land and creation and seek to live in harmony with the land, sea, and air.

But for most of humanity, such is not the case. A funny thing happened with the civilization process. It worked. That is it worked in terms of making more people. Just about every year, there have been more and more people on earth than the year before, which is not necessarily good or bad.

We continue our sermon series, “Signs of the Times,” discussing the relationship between our Christian faith and the social justice issues facing humanity. This week we are talking about caring for God’s creation. For Christians, this is an extremely relevant and critical distinction. I fear that we sometimes are so caught up in the spiritual or mysterious aspects of our faith — we’re so concerned about heaven — that we forget about the world around us.

Scripture begins with a very visible, very tangible action: God created the world. Genesis chapter 1 dives right into the story of the world and explains that we are here. Everything is here for one reason alone. God made it.

The beginning words of the Bible make it clear that the entire narrative of scripture will not focus on the hereafter, but instead be about people and how they interact with each other, interact with God and interact with God’s creation.

From the time God utters the words, “Let there be light!” to the narrative stating, “And God called it very good” our world, our existence is portrayed as a deliberate, systematic series of steps culminating God’s final act of creation: human beings.

Yes, the Bible asserts we humans have a special place in God’s creative plan. We are not an accident, we are not a by-product lumped with the fish of the sea and birds of the air. No, we are singled out, the only activity of God on the sixth day of creation.

It doesn’t matter whether you understand the creation of the world to have been accomplished in six literal, twenty-four hour days or happening over billions of years. The Bible is not a science textbook and never claimed to be. The point of the scriptures is not the “how” of creation but the meaning of creation. From the Christian perspective, creation is the deliberate act of a Creator God and human beings were specifically created to play a significant and critical role in God’s creation.

We humans, in short, were created to be the stewards of God’s creation. We were created in the likeness and image of God expressly for managing God’s creation for the benefit of the world as well as honoring the gift God gave to us. God gave us a job to do. Furthermore, God equipped us with the wisdom to use our talents and abilities to do the job.

The question therefore, is whether or not we choose to use our brains and use our strength and use our wisdom to care for creation as God intended. That has been the conundrum facing humanity since day one and so far, it is very difficult to say if we've done a good job being stewards of creation.

As I described earlier, human beings from the start, rather than caring for creation, frequently abused it. We repeatedly would come into a new territory, over-farm the land, over-hunt the wildlife, consume the trees and pollute the lakes and rivers. Then, we would move on.

Yet, for much of human history, this abuse did not matter very much. Until the past several hundred years, there was always plenty of land to move on to. So what if we ruined a certain place, just relocate a few miles away and do it again! No one cared much about the devastation we left in the wake of our environmental slaughtering. Moreover, as we learned more and more about how to use the many blessings of creation, we mined for minerals, not caring about the ruined soil that resulted. We invented landfills on which to stack our trash. We became proficient at finding uses for coal, choking the air with noxious fumes. Factories added their own chemical wastes to the rivers and now we can even add radioactive poisons from nuclear power plants — waste which can kill instantly and never be neutralized.

But all this was unknown in the days of the prophet Ezekiel. He was preaching in Israel around 500BC at a time when Israelites were returning to their land after spending decades in captivity in Babylon. Upon their return, they saw firsthand the devastation of their land. They were shocked at how those who occupied Israel while they were away had deliberately covered their fields with salt so crops would not grow. They tore down buildings and left rubble and garbage everywhere. The Israelites faced a massive cleanup and rebuilding job. But this time, they couldn't ignore the devastation and move elsewhere. No, they had returned to God's Promised Land where they had to stay. They had to return and rebuild it.

Yet, did they learn their lesson about being stewards of creation after being immersed in massive environmental destruction in Israel? Apparently not. In today's scripture, Ezekiel speaks metaphorically about sheep and how the Israelites failed to care for them. At one level, Ezekiel is speaking literally. The people tasked with caring for God's creation failed. They didn't care for the sheep. They were happy to harvest the wool. They were happy to consume them for food. But they couldn't be bothered to feed and tend the sheep properly so they would be around in the future. In short, the Israelites abused their livestock like they abused their land and water.

Moreover Ezekiel is talking about more than just actual sheep. The entire culture was abusive, not just abusive of creation, but abusive of each other. The prophet said, "You have not strengthened the

weak; you have not healed the sick; you have not bound up the injured; you have not brought back the strays; you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them.”

These words apply equally to the environment God created as they simultaneously apply to how humans treat each other.

Friends, this is the point of the creation story. This is the point of God’s creating humans to be in God’s image. This is the point of God’s blessing us with brains and strength and wisdom: We are here to care for all aspects of God’s physical creation. We, we, and no one else is responsible for insuring God’s world survives and is worthy of being bequeathed to the next generation.

Until fairly recently, it has been easy, too easy, for human beings to ignore God’s charge to us: Care for creation. In fact, there are some Christians who dare to mindlessly declare that human beings are here to rule the earth and conquer it — as if the created world was somehow an enemy to be defeated and dismembered at will.

Friends, there are many organizations that advocate on behalf the environment. There are scientific organizations who regularly report how the foolish actions of human beings are making the world suffer disastrous consequences from which we may not ever recover. All these groups are good, serious, and must be encouraged to continue sounding the alarm.

However, the environmental movement is missing a vital component if the Church of Jesus Christ is also not shouting its full-throated support for their efforts. There is not just a physical aspect to caring for the world. There is not just an ecological aspect to caring for the world. There is fundamentally a spiritual component to caring for our world that undergirds the entire pro-environmental, pro-creation movement.

Down to the depths of our souls, friends. Down to the core of what makes us human, we are utterly, intimately, totally bonded to the world around us. Forget about the sweet by-and-by. Forget about angels and clouds of glory. God created us for the here and now and we ignore what is happening around us at our peril and the peril of every creature on this earth. This is genuine spirituality.

Every week in our Prayers of the People, I offer the following petition: Restore among us a love of the earth you created for our home. Help us put an end to ravishing its land, air, and waters, and give us respect for all your creatures, that, living in harmony with everything you have made, your whole creation may resound in an anthem of praise to your glorious name.

That’s what Christians bring to the environmental table. We are here, earth is here, everything God made is here to bring glory to God and therefore resound in a wonderful anthem of praise.

Now what we have to do is act in this world, right here and right now. Act like we really do care about preserving, healing, and rebuilding God's glorious creation.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.