



Bible Study DAY #1

Ready to Care for Creation

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Key Concept

Our faith, scripture and the current state of the environment calls us to careful and responsible management of God's creative works -- the land, sea, air and all creatures that dwell within. God has commanded human beings to fulfill a unique role in creation to help sustain all life.

Introduction

The greatest hurdle in attempting to teach or discuss a Christian approach to environmentalism is the well-publicized battle between the Christians who reject scientific research and environmentalists who reject the role of God in creation. It is important to point out that not all Christians reject modern scientific research and the basic theories of evolution. And, not all environmentalists are godless. But, these two groups gather the most attention in the media when this topic is discussed. Their battle over the past 150 years has been so intense and polarized so many people that it has left little room for genuine debate.

We will have campers who do not believe in evolution and/or dinosaurs simply because they are not in the Bible. Most campers coming with a public school education will have been taught that God is not a participant in the sustaining of the environment.

I believe we are at a critical point in the environmental debate where faith needs a voice in the scientific arena and science must have a voice in the Church. As a Bible study leader you will need to be careful to help nurture an open discussion in the reality of these two opposing views.

Shortly after I moved to Cleveland, Ohio the Cuyahoga River caught on fire. The environmental disaster drew national attention, not only to poor environmental conditions in Cleveland, but in our nation. Throughout my childhood large tanker boats trolled Lake Erie. They were armed with cranes to reach down and scrape off the garbage from the bottom of the lake. The day camp I attended had to plan swimming outings based on what beaches were open and safe for humans. The pollution mostly came from large factories that employed hundreds of thousands of Christians. Mainline Christian Churches defended a corporation's right to pollute based on God giving us *dominion* over the earth. It was our God-given right to use all natural resources for our own selfish desires. Today, all Christians inherit years of poor environmental practice and teaching endorsed by Church leaders.

As the 1970's came to a close nuclear power started gaining prominence. By the time I graduated from high school the cooling tower of the Perry Nuclear Power Plant was visible from my home. The environmentalist movement was up in arms. They protested nuclear plants all over the world citing nuclear power's potential to destroy the earth. Nuclear accidents at Three-Mile Island, PA and Chernobyl, Russia fortified their point. In Perry, OH, though, the nuclear power plant sucked in scum filled water from Lake Erie ran it through a series of filters and dumped clean water back into the lake. Within five years, Lake Erie was the cleanest of all the Great Lakes. In addition, the process to produce nuclear power does not produce any greenhouse gases that contribute to global warming. My point is

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scientists and the environmental movement are not always right in their predictions and theories.

I am a Christian and an environmentalist. This means that I believe God has created, continues to create and sustain the world we live in and its creatures, including humans. Blessed with these gifts, I am called to be a good caretaker of the earth, its resources, and its life.

Some of you may have met Jo Drechsler at some point during your time at Camp Shalom. He has been coming up and volunteering for the past 30 years. Once when I was visiting Jo handed me a piece of wood. The wood had obviously been chewed by a beaver, but was weightless. The story behind this object was that Jo's son had found it below the surface of tundra in northern Alaska. It was discovered in a place where there had not been trees for over 5,000 years. Basically, 5,000 years ago the cold tundra region of northern Alaska looked a lot like Wisconsin – wooded and seasonally warm.

The point that is important to understand is the world has gone through dramatic climate changes that have no direct connection to human behavior. A Christian approach to environmentalism embraces that the world is bigger than human behavior can control. This is what it means to believe in a God that creates and sustains life. At the same time, human behavior has a dramatic influence on the environment that should drive us to see our role in preserving the resources entrusted to our care. I often think about the balance between these two statements when considering North America during the Great Depression. No human being could have prevented a sustained drought. But, it was poor farming and land management practices that nearly starved the nation to death.

A critical point in discussing a Christian approach to the environment is the definition of “caretaker.” Historically, the Christian Church used the word *dominion* in a disastrous way to define the human role of caretaker. The danger now exists that the word caretaker is being interpreted to give humans more power than they possess. Human beings cannot control the environment or the weather. We are part of a greater system. To be a caretaker is to embrace our responsibility and role within the greater system.

Aldo Leopold wrote a book, *The Sand County Almanac*, published shortly after he died of a heart attack in 1949. He is often seen as the father of modern environmentalism. In the book he presents a “land ethic” that I think accurately describes a view of stewardship for creation that we should all embrace.

"All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. His instincts prompt him to compete for his place in that community, but his ethics prompt him to cooperate. 'A land ethic, then, reflects - a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the land.'"

Bible Text: Genesis 1:1 – 2:25

Emphasis on Genesis 1:26 and 2:15



Biblical Interpretation:

Genesis 1: 28-31 / 2: 15

(English Standard Version)

²⁸And God blessed them. And God said to them, ^(A) "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have **dominion** over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." ²⁹And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. ^(B) You shall have them for food. ³⁰And ^(C) to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. ³¹^(D) And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

(The Message)

²⁶⁻²⁸ God spoke: "Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature
So they can **be responsible for** the fish in the sea,
the birds in the air, the cattle,
And, yes, Earth itself,
and every animal that moves on the face of Earth."
God created human beings;
he created them godlike,
Reflecting God's nature.
He created them male and female.
God blessed them:
"Prosper! Reproduce! Fill Earth! Take charge!
Be responsible for fish in the sea and birds in the air,
for every living thing that moves on the face of Earth."

(The Message)

¹⁵ GOD took the Man and set him down in the Garden of Eden **to work the ground and keep it in order.**

(New Living Translation)

¹⁵ The LORD God placed the man in the Garden of Eden **to tend and watch over it.**



Biblical Interpretation:

The foundation for the Church's understanding of the environment is the story of Creation. Actually, there are two different creation stories in Genesis. The first story, which biblical scholars call the **[P] Priestly** account, is focused on order and structure. In this account the story is told in a pattern. Each day of creation has a uniform beginning and end. The number of verses in each day grows to emphasize importance concluding with the creation of human beings. Humans are the last and most important part of creation.

The second version, the **[J] Yahwist** version, tells stories more closely associated with folk traditions. The **[J]** source is probably telling condensed versions of traditional folk stories passed down from previous generations and includes remnants of folk stories from non-Jewish sources. These stories are oral traditions that use imagery that help the human mind remember and understand. Eve was not literally created from Adam's rib. The imagery helps drive home the fact that Adam and Eve are created from the same matter and are intimately connected, but they are different.

We need to remember that neither story is written like a modern science book. One cannot superimpose on these stories thousands of years of scientific research. They are stories whose main purpose is to name God, or Yahweh, as the source of all creation. And, in creating the world, God has formed a series of interdependent relationships – Creator to creature; creature to creature; and creature to creation. Cattle are dependent upon the plants and other cattle, fish are dependent upon the sea and sea life, male is dependent upon female and vice versa. All of creation is dependent upon the Creator. It is grotesque distortion of the text to interpret them as explaining an actual process.

However, do not discount the scientific implications of these stories. To me, the first verses of chapter one read like a poem describing the Big Bang. God creates man (the Hebrew word for man is Adam) out of the dust from the earth. Modern research is verifying that life did spring forth from the ground. DNA and Human Genome research are discovering that it is actually possible to trace life to a primordial Adam and Eve. While these points are interesting they are superimposed onto the text. The Creation story is a story where responsibility, not process, is named.

There are three points that we can faithfully and concretely say about the creation stories.

1. God is the source of all life.
2. God puts forth a system of regeneration and interdependence.
3. Humans are given a unique role in this system of regeneration.

The unique role of humans is the critical issue in teaching an approach to stewardship of creation. Key to defining this role can be found in two Hebrew words: *Radah* and *Shamar*.

Above, I included two different translations of Genesis 1:28. The word that is being interpreted here is ***radah***. In Hebrew this word means to subjugate, to reign or rule over. The word "dominion" is a valid interpretation of the Hebrew understanding. However, dominion has been practiced as "dominate," in terms of human behavior with the environment. So *The Message* interpretation seeks to add another level of interpretation. It takes the Hebrew interpretation and adds on a practical application which ends up as, "to be responsible for." This added level of interpretation is not exactly the same as dominion, but does seek to create distance from a historical application of domination.

If you were given dominion over a collection of people or property, how would you rule? Christ the King is the model of leadership in the Christian Church. This type of dominion, or leadership, is defined on the basis of service to subjects and not service of the leader. While there are plenty of contrary examples to this model, servant leadership has been the ideal form of human leadership in the Church. It is the basis for the Church's work with hunger, education, health and poverty.

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The second Creation story uses the Hebrew word, *shamar* to define the human role in creation. This word can mean to watch over, guard, protect and/or preserve. In my opinion, *shamar* more faithfully captures the idea of servant leadership that Christians strive to model. At the same time, it provides a healthy understanding of the Christian approach to the unique role of humans in the modern environmental movement.

The *New Living Translation* is actually more consistent with the Hebrew understanding of the *shamar*. The unique human role in the system of the environment is to tend and watch over. I find this to be consistent with the “land ethic” put forward by Aldo Leopold, and to Webster’s definition of *stewardship* as “the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one’s care.”

Finally, one of my personal pet peeves regarding the environmental movement is the elevated role of human beings. Where the Church historically gave humans the authority to wreak havoc on the environment because of their elevated status, modern environmentalists have given humans an equally elevated status of responsibility and control. My children came home from school in junior high telling me that human beings were the worst thing that ever happened to the planet. The teacher’s basis for this claim was that human beings were responsible for every environmental atrocity ever committed.

There is overwhelming proof that historically the earth has gone through several periods of global warming and several ice ages that had no connection to human life or behavior. Dinosaurs became extinct with very little help from human beings. I am not trying to absolve humans of responsibility, but simply to lift up that the world we live in is a dynamic reality – always changing, always adapting. Not every event has a direct correlation to human behavior. In the mid-1800’s radical volcanic activity in Malaysia sent the world into a mini-ice age that produced a mid-summer snow fall in North America.

Humans influence, but do not control the environment. This is an important distinction. As Aldo Leopold pointed out, we are one part of “a community of interdependent parts.” God did not stop creating or sustaining creation after the sixth day. God did more than put forth a system of regeneration and interdependence. God remains actively involved in the system. A view of the environmental that places control in the creature’s hands removes the Creator from the process.

I have included excerpts from the Catholic Social Teachings, ELCA (Lutheran) Social Statements and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to give you an idea of what the Christian Church is saying in regards to the environment. I encourage you to look more deeply into these teachings to help guide your own lesson planning.

4. **Catholic Social Teaching:** “The goods of the earth are gifts from God, and they are intended by God for the benefit of everyone. There is a “social mortgage” that guides our use of the world’s goods, and we have a responsibility to care for these goods as stewards and trustees, not as mere consumers and users. How we treat the environment is a measure of our stewardship, a sign of our respect for the Creator.
5. **ELCA Social Statement:** Humans, in service to God, have special roles on behalf of the whole of creation. Made in the image of God, we are called to care for the earth as God cares for the earth. God’s command to have dominion and subdue the earth is not a license to dominate and exploit. Human dominion (Gen 1:28; Ps 8), a special responsibility, should reflect God’s way of ruling as a shepherd king who takes the form of a servant (Phil 2:7), wearing a crown of thorns.
6. **Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)**
 - i. Restoring creation is God’s own work in our time, in which God comes both to judge and to restore.
 - ii. The Creator-Redeemer calls faithful people to become engaged with God in keeping and healing the creation, human and non-human.
 - iii. Human life and well-being depend upon the flourishing of other life and the integrity of the life-supporting processes that God has ordained.



- iv. Earth-keeping today means insisting on sustainability—the ongoing capacity of natural and social systems to thrive together — which requires human beings to practice wise, humble, responsible stewardship, after the model of servanthood that we have in Jesus.

Bible Verses

Psalm 8: 6-8

Psalm 24:1

Psalm 65: 8-10

Psalm 89: 11-12

Psalm 104

Psalm 148

Genesis 13 (Abram and Lot split because they are taxing the land)

Deut. 11: 11-14 (Be faithful the gifts given and the one giving them)

Ecclesiastes 2

Jeremiah 12: 10-12 (the land goes to waste because no one cares)

John 1:3

1 Cor. 8:6

Romans 8: 19-25 (All of creation waits and will participate in redemption)

Romans 20: 1

Phil. 2: 1-8 (Christ as the model of leader)

Col 1: 15 – 17; 19-20 (reconcile all things to himself / in Him all things hold together)