

The earth is the Lord's (Psalm 24:1)

A sermon for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

We've been asking how one lives a Christian life in a practical way, with our feet on the ground, and not just for one hour a week. Our overarching theme is from the Reformation gospel in John 8:36: "If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." How does this work?

Today we'll look at the whole world of nature, starting with that part of nature we call the animal kingdom. The animal kingdom is a real problem for us because we belong to it; we are animals, and yet we are different. How are we alike and different?

In Genesis 2:7: "God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being." Then in Genesis 2:19 which talks about God creating the animals, the Hebrew word used here, as well as in 2:7 means living beings or warm bodies. Animals and human beings are both warm bodies.

What then is the difference between human beings and animals? The difference is that God became a human being. The Lord became human to die for us and redeem us from sin and death. That's what distinctive, not some other kind of thing derived from speculation about apes or artificial intelligence, or any other kind of speculation about some intrinsic difference of a biological sort.

When Genesis 1:26-27 says that man is created in the image of God, it really describes how things are to be ordered. The image of God is not a physical likeness but a task. Our job is to have dominion, to care for life on earth.

We may think of nature as a world of beauty, but it is also a world of conflict and violence. The nineteenth century British poet, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, described nature as "red in tooth and claw."

We are part of the problem, too. As we look back in history we know we have done terrible things not only to each other but also to the world of animals. If you have read Charles Dickens, you will recall his novels not only talks about the terrible things in London, mostly about what people do to each other, but also about how badly horses were treated. It was just awful, and yet even in the last century this kind of thing was allowed. Even today we know some animals are treated brutally and perhaps we've even been tempted ourselves to hit the dog when we're mad because the dog can't hit back.

In the beginning of the last century the carrier pigeon was nearly exterminated, more or less for amusement. In a similar way the buffalo almost eliminated, sometimes they were slaughtered just to take their tongues. We know the awful things done to animals, the horrible conditions in slaughter houses of the past.

In medicine today there are many moral dilemmas involving animals. There is growing concern about vivisection, about performing operations on live animals. There can be abuses as there can be in slaughterhouses. On the other hand, if researchers are using mice and rats for experiments to develop better care for humans, who is not grateful for the advances in treating humans that result?

There are moral dilemmas about the absence of natural predators for certain species, for example, rabbits in Australia, deer in the upper Midwest. Today independent fishing and hunting organizations are important vehicles for both caring for the wildlife habitat and stabilizing the populations of these animals.

There are moral dilemmas about zoos. Some say we should not keep animals in zoos; they should be free and out in the wild. On the other hand, zoos have been very useful for preserving animals that have become abandoned, injured, endangered, and for species that have become exterminated.

What do we as Christians do? **First**, we Christians are not experts regarding matters in the natural world, even when we meet in assemblies. Church convention goes sometimes wrongly think: We did the right thing because before we voted on that resolution on climate change or whatever, we prayed about it. People misunderstand and misuse prayer.

Second, we see the error of using the Bible to give a patina of holiness to favored agendas. For example, vegetarianism. Some Christian vegetarians claim certain Bible passages mean that we should not eat meat. Gen 1:29-30:

“Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.”

Gen 9:3 implies that before the fall into sin, people only ate vegetables. And in Isaiah’s vision of the restoration of all things (11:6-9: “The wolf shall dwell with the lamb . . .”) the wolf and the lion are not eating the lamb, but eating straw! Some also claim support for vegetarianism in Deuteronomy 20:19-20: “When you besiege a city, you shall ... not cut down the trees which provide food.” Do these texts really prove vegetarianism is God’s way? We know that using Bible verses this way is a misuse of the Bible.

Third, we Christians know sin is in us and in others. As John Calvin rightly said: “The human heart is an idol making factory.” Our hearts become factories of idols in which we fashion and refashion God to suit our desires and agendas. As Jeremiah 17:9 states: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt.”

Fourth, we know “good” causes tend to become religions. As G. K. Chesterton famously said: “When people stop believing in God, they don’t believe in nothing, they believe in everything.” Environmentalism is such a cause, an “ism,” that is, a religion. Environmentalism is apocalyptic.

Environmental prophets cry the end of the world is coming unless people repent and adopt their policies are adopted now!

There is even a revival today of Gaia, the ancient Greek earth goddess, the great She who is the very soul of the planet offering nourishment to all her children. In fact, most religions are like this, that is, reflections of nature and the cycles of life.

This phenomenon of an environmental apocalypse is nothing new. Back in 1798 Thomas Malthus wrote a book, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, which warned that improved standards of living would cause the population to overrun the world, leading to mass starvation. Malthus failed to predict the industrial revolution and failed to foresee that as people become wealthier they had fewer children.

From the 1940 to the 1970s fear of global cooling was all the rage. In 1975 the cover of Newsweek predicted the planet was on the cusp of a New Ice Age. There was said to be an “almost unanimous consensus” in the scientific community about global cooling.

In 1968 Paul Ehrlich wrote *The Population Bomb*, which predicted great disaster in the near future because higher standards of living would lead to overpopulation. Ehrlich failed to foresee that higher standards of living would lead to smaller families.

In 1972 the Club of Rome released a report, *The Limits to Growth*, which predicted a future disaster caused by limited resources and growing population.

At about the same time, a Swedish Lutheran, Norman Borlaug, won a Nobel prize for plant pathology that had led to the Green Revolution and saved a billion human lives. But today Borlaug is denounced by environmentalists because he didn't use natural fertilizer.

The Kyoto Protocol (1997) and the Paris Agreement (2016) are different yet similar agreements requiring Western nations to reduce greenhouse emissions. Although they differ, both claim to be based on “scientific consensus,” and scientists dissenting from this consensus are shunned and denied grant money. Dissent is not tolerated. Nations sign on to these agreements but that doesn't mean they follow them.

You may know of the Danish professor, Bjørn Lomborg. He is now a visiting fellow at the Hoover Institute, Stanford University, and author of the best-selling book, *False Alarm: How Climate Change Panic Costs Us Trillions, Hurts the Poor, and Fails to Fix the Planet*. Lomborg has pointed out that if all of the Kyoto regulations were kept for one hundred years, it would have a very minor effect on global warming, but the effect on the poor of the world would be devastating because the resources they need would be diverted elsewhere. Every time Lomborg speaks or writes he is denounced by the powers that be because he dares to dissent.

Fifth, we are able to discern priorities, prophecy, and apocalyptic pretenders. This past week the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), issued what the UN Secretary-General called a “code red for humanity.” The UN report warns that the climate

Apocalypse is nigh, and unless governments take over the world economy, havoc and death are inevitable. One reporter wrote of the report: "Future warming could mean that in some places, people could die just from going outside."

But more sober futurologists say predictions about anything beyond five years is guesswork because things change. You hear someone say: In 20 years this is going to happen, or in 30 years this is inevitable. But perhaps that person has a financial agenda, or is mesmerized by the feeling of power he gets from thinking he is so much smarter than everyone else. Deuteronomy 18:20-22 asks how can you tell the true prophet from the false prophet. The answer: The true prophet is the one who predicts what actually later happens, and that's the only way you know.

There is an ancient Chinese greeting and proverb that say to make progress, go slowly, very slowly. Because of sin, we go slowly. We use common reason with a concern to minimize harm as Paul writes in Romans 13:10: "Love does no harm . . ." Common reason includes weighing evidence, seeing all the data, and considering the costs.

Sixth, where do we land? Where do we stand? We stand with Luther, who in his Small Catechism, in his explanation to the petition in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy kingdom come," writes that God's kingdom comes by his power alone, without our doing anything. And of the petition in the Lord's Prayer: "Thy will be done," Luther writes that God's will is done regardless of our wills. It is not our job to bring in the kingdom. We can be confident that the Lord is bringing in his kingdom by his power alone.

Our job is to care for the earth, to have dominion over this world. As Paul writes in 1 Cor 6:19b-20: "You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body." That's the perspective with which we live, as well as the perspective that we were bought out of slavery and bought for freedom. As Paul writes: "For freedom Christ has set us free" (Gal 5:1a). We are free now, free to live in him in the life he sets before us. Amen