

Text: Psalm 24
Title: The Fullness Thereof
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As I kid I learned not to ask my dad questions.

Not because he didn't know the answer, and not because he wasn't wise and loving and smart, I quit asking questions because the answers were always long and usually involved him handing me a book, or two, or four. I was looking for a short summary, he would offer a dissertation.

Most of us like concise answers. We want a clear statement and we're annoyed by political and theological obfuscation. We wish politicians, preachers, and parents would get to the point.

I think that's part of why organizations craft mission statements and companies work so hard at branding. In a fast-paced-digital-world, that buries us in words and images and noise, how does anything stand out? How does an organization or company rise above the din to offer an accessible reminder about purpose or product? There's all sorts of complexity, nuance, and implication behind mission statements, but clarity and precision matter.

By the way, lately I've been thinking about Hope as "a community that experiences and explores the life of faith in Jesus Christ." I know that's not very catchy, but it does get at what we do together....

Psalm 24 starts with a clear summary statement. The first verse offers a pithy precise beginning point for a biblical world view. If you want a simple foundational sentence for the rest of scripture this is about as good as it gets:

The earth is the Lord's and everything in it....

That's a profound assertion.

Despite thinking that, "This land is your land, this land is my land, from California to the New York island..." the claim of scripture is that we're not owners. This land belongs to someone else. We're guests or renters; we're not owners.

I'm reminded that the beginning lines of two of the confessional statements that define our particular brand of what it means to be a Christian begin with ownership. The Heidelberg Catechism opens with this question and answer:

*What is your only comfort in life and in death?
That I am not my own, but belong, body and soul, in life and in death to my faithful savior...*

And the contemporary testimony that opened our worship this morning begins with this line:

As followers of Jesus Christ, living in this world – which some seek to control and others view with despair – we declare with joy and trust: Our world belongs to God!

We start with ownership.

You belong to God.

Creation belongs to God.

Or as Abraham Kuyper put it, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!”

The earth is the Lord’s and the fulness thereof.

I like that traditional more colorful translation of our text.

I’m sure I was too distracted and self-absorbed when I was younger, but it seems the older I get the more I’m aware of, and grateful for, “the fulness thereof.”

From the shades of green blooming, budding and busting through the ground, to the blue of the spring sky over muddy fields; from the mystery of cosmic black holes, to the tiny blue-ringed octopus that carries a venom 1,000 times more-deadly than cyanide and there is enough of it in one octopus to kill 26 people; from the mating dances of the red-capped manakin in Central America, to the obsessive-compulsive idiosyncrasies of the Golden Retriever/Chow mutt at my feet who wishes I would take him for a walk....
all of creation – the fullness thereof – belongs to God.

We’re simply caretakers, temp-worker, and stewards called to live in, enjoy, explore, tend to, unfold, and use creation’s productivity. We’re called to flourish in creation, and pursue creation’s *shalom*, but we don’t own it and we can’t do whatever we want with it.

Bill McKibben in *The End of Nature* writes that the margin for life on earth is relatively small. According to McKibben most life (human, animal, and vegetation) exists in a tiny band of atmosphere five and a half miles deep – which is from sea level to the top of Mount Everest. And as one writer puts it:

Into that tiny envelope human beings have been pouring poison in the form of carbon dioxide, methane, and other toxic gases for several centuries. The trees, of course, are the system’s wonderful mechanism for cleansing the atmosphere. And we’re cutting them down at a rapidly accelerating rate – to build houses, to create farm land, to get at the oil beneath the surface which, when burned, will pour more poison into the envelope.

You know the resulting litany of creation’s degradation: deforestation, bleached coral reefs, extinct species, loss of biodiversity, climate change, toxic run off into rivers, oceanic dead spots, increasingly intense and irregular weather patterns, thawing arctic permafrost, loss of animal habitat, top soil erosion, pollution, plastics in lakes and oceans, etc, etc....

I could go on. You get the point.

We have failed in our calling as stewards.

We have diminished “the fulness thereof.”

And while you might think that climate change is a liberal conspiracy built on faulty science, or that technology and the unrestrained hand of a free market will lead to solutions, and while you may think this sermon has taken a turn to the left, my point is not political, but theological, or biblical....

The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof.

That's our mission statement.

That's our base line.

And from the first chapters of Genesis to the last chapters of Revelation the purpose and pursuit of God is to love and reclaim the earth. We're called into partnership with God in that process. As those made in God's image, after God's likeness, we are God's vice-regents. We are, in other words, called to rule as God rules.

As Tom Regan puts it:

...we are chosen by God to be as loving in our day to day dealings with the created order as God was in creating that order in the first place. In this sense, therefore, there is a morally relevant difference between human beings and every other creaturely expression of God. For it is only members of the human species who are given the awesome freedom and responsibility to be God's representatives within creation. And it is, therefore, only we humans who can be held morally blameworthy when we fail to do this, and morally praiseworthy when we succeed.

Dear friends, we're called to extend the creative loving rule of God. And that means not to pillage, pollute, and poison, but to tend to this world with the very best that we can muster and with an eye to the future. For, as some have noted, we don't inherit the earth from the past, we borrow it from our children.

Now. Psalm 24 was most likely written to accompany a procession into the temple. It has three distinct acts. There is the opening dramatic statement: "The earth is the Lord's..." That's followed by the entrance of people into God's sphere ~ the temple. And the last act is the entrance of God into humanity's sphere.

*Lift up your heads, you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.*

The Lord who owns earth comes to earth.

And, as the gospels proclaim, in the fullness of time, God entered into creation in the birth of a baby in Bethlehem. Therefore, one thing that means, among many meanings, is the affirmation of creation. God loves, blesses, and becomes part of creation. He joins in its very living and dying. And he rises to redeem it.

As Steven Bouma-Prediger puts it:

Indeed, if Jesus did not die for white-tailed deer, red-headed woodpeckers, blue whales, and green Belizean rain forests, then he did not die for you and me. Jesus came to save not just us but the whole world. Thus, our work is to be patterned after Christ's reconciling reign as cosmic Lord.

That is to say that our calling to creation care is rooted not only in God's creating but in God's saving. We are partners and participants with God in creation and reconciliation.

Most of the time I'm aware of how I fail at this high calling.

I have dear friends who tread lightly. They heat with solar, they grow, raise and locally source their food, and they "reduce, reuse and recycle" so that for the most part they have disengaged from the consumer consumption machine. Life seems to grow up around them. I love and envy their commitment. But, I also know that very few of us can pull that off. The very structures and demands of suburban life mitigate against that....

So, while I know a deeper appreciation for "the fulness thereof" I'm also a participant in creation's degradation. I'm thoroughly suburban. Eating local for me means going to my neighborhood Chipotle. When Com-Ed sends me the chart that shows my energy consumption in comparison to my neighbors I'm middle of the road, but if that was a global snapshot it would capture a gargantuan footprint. And, while I may get to park in energy efficient parking spots, I've logged more than 230,000 miles in the Prius. That's a lot of burned carbon.

Therefore, the closing lines of an essay by Joseph Sittler have a sharp bite:

If in piety the church says, "The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof" and in fact is no different in thought and action from the general community, who will be drawn to her word and worship to "come and see" that her work or salvation has any meaning? Witness in saying is irony and bitterness if there be no witness in doing.

Dear friends, I know that global ecological health is a function of massive international issues, demographic trends, technological innovation, and policy decisions. Our best efforts at conservation and changing patterns don't make that big of a difference. But, even as creation itself groans in longing and anticipation for its *shalom*....

Let us get outside at every chance to enjoy and love the Lord's earth.

Let us live and give in response to our first calling as vice-regents.

Let us vote, whatever our political philosophy and predilection, with the calculus of creation's good as a primary commitment.

Let us use less and leave behind less.

Let us turn toward "the fulness thereof" and find there the face and blessing of God.

Amen.

Note: A sermon by John Buchanan helped set the theme and content for this sermon.