

Hey Preacher! Sermon Series
What's the Role of Caring for Creation in our Faith?
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Rev. Kory Wilcoxson

I had a professor in seminary who ended each lecture with, "I hope all your questions were answered and all your answers were questioned." I hope that's also happened for you this summer, as we've turned your faith questions into a sermon series called "Hey Preacher!" You've asked some great questions and we've done our best to provide some answers that hopefully raised more questions for you. That's the journey of faith. Questions lead to answers which lead to more questions. Today's question is, "What's the role of caring for creation in our faith?"

One of my favorite purchases for my sabbatical a few years ago was my first pair of hiking shoes. I thought it was kind of crazy that I'd never owned hiking shoes, until I remembered that I'd never hiked before. If you don't hike, you don't need hiking shoes. But I was planning on doing some hiking on my trip to Alaska, so I thought I should at least look the part and get hiking shoes.

I purchased my shoes a few months before my sabbatical started so that I'd have plenty of time to break them in. Then I started hiking. I wore them while hiking around Target. I wore them while hiking around Wal-Mart. They were waterproof, which came in handy when I stepped in a puddle while hiking from the parking lot to the mall. These shoes were ready for Alaska!

I got to put them to use my first day there. After checking into my hotel in Anchorage, I drove outside of town to Flat Top Mountain, a popular hiking site whose website included phrases like "easy-to-follow trail" and "low-key circuit tour." It said that fit hikers can go up two or three different times. Hey, I'd hiked around Fayette Mall two or three times, so what's a little mountain? My shoes and I were ready!

I found hiking up Flat Top Mountain to be surprisingly easy for a veteran hiker like me. As I was walking the trail, I looked up and saw the plateau at the top, and then a much larger mountain in the background. I said to my shoes, "Sure am glad we're not climbing THAT one!" Then I realized the big mountain WAS Flat Top Mountain. My shoes immediately complained, "We can't do that! We barely made it around the mall!" But I trudged ahead, because I didn't want the money I spent on my shoes to go to waste. The "easy-to-follow" trail disappeared about two-thirds of the way up, blocked by a recent snow and huge mud ponds. I navigated my way around, finally making it to the top to enjoy the gorgeous view of downtown Anchorage and the bay beyond it. But then I looked down at my poor hiking shoes, covered in mud and snow. And my first thought was, "Oh no! I got my hiking shoes dirty!" Take a minute to let the absurdity of that comment sink in.

I don't like to get dirty. Growing up, I was not your typical boy. I had no desire to make mud pies or splash in puddles. I didn't like dirt because it was so...dirty. Even as a boy scout, I preferred to stay in my tent playing cards than go tramping through the forest. I had what author Richard Louv calls "nature-deficit disorder." Louv claims that many children today are living in a de-natured environment and are missing out on the benefits of spending time in God's creation. He lifts up the example of a young boy who was asked his favorite place to play. The boy said, "I like to play indoors because that's where all the electrical outlets are." I bet that boy didn't own any cool hiking shoes.

For the most part, we are a de-natured society, cut off from the land, surrounded by a buffer zone of technology and convenience that keeps us from having to interact with creation. For us, the land is one more thing to be controlled, mined, managed, in order to get what we want. We don't feel any special kinship with dirt; dirt is something to be washed off and removed.

That's a far cry from what the Bible tells us about our relationship to the land. In the Creation story, God made the first man, Adam, whose name is derived from the Hebrew word for "dust." God scooped up a palm-full of dirt and breathed life into it. Adam was literally animated dirt, and each one of us who have come after are made from the same material. We have a soul-deep connection to the ground around us. It's not a commodity to be used up; it's a part of us.

Jesus picked up on that theme, telling agriculturally-based parables about farmers clearing fields and seeds being scattered on different types of soil. The Bible animates creation, telling us that rocks cry out and rivers clap their hands and mountains sing for joy. You'll remember that in the very first book of the Bible, when God made everything, first God made the earth, then humans. The earth was here before us. When we finally came along, it was because there was no one to till the ground, so God made us and gave us our marching orders to "keep the land." The earth is alive, and we were created to be its custodians, its stewards.

But we haven't been very good at following those instructions, have we? The Industrial Revolution drove us off the land and into the cities. The soil became something to manage or remove. Farming has become a mechanical process of food production, not a relationship with the soil. And the church has done its share of the damage. By focusing on the importance of getting to heaven "up there," we've sent the message that the earth "down here" is only a means to an end. We've lost our connection to the place from which we've come. And in doing so, we've demonized the very ground under our feet.

Does that sound too strong? Let me ask you this: as the saying goes, what is next to Godliness? Right, cleanliness. We often talk about baptism as washing away our sins, as if they are a layer of grime covering our soul. Salvation means cleansing us of our spiritual dirt. It's only a short leap to say that anything unclean is unholy. We've severed our connection to the land, lost our reverence for the ground under our feet. And yet, the psalm I read says, "For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also. The sea is his, for he made it, and the dry land, which his hands have formed." And Psalm 94 says, "The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers."

It might be helpful to remember that the God who we've traditionally thought of as "up there" isn't really up there. God has come to earth in order to be with us in the form of Jesus. Theologian Paul Tillich called God "the ground of all being." We are grounded in God, who made us from the ground. From dust we are made, and to dust we shall return. When we care for the earth, we are caring for ourselves, as well. Our land is responsible for feeding us, and yet we mistreat it to the point of crisis. Because of over-development and climate change, we are losing farmable soil four times faster than it can be replenished. As author Diane Butler Bass says, we literally need to gain ground in order to keep this planet alive. No soil, no food, no us.

So how do we live out our role as stewards of God's creation? For too long, our worldview has been, "We're humans, we're awesome, and we can do whatever we want." But now we're starting to see some of the consequences of that. Author Bill McKibben writes, "The

story of the twentieth century was finding out just how big and powerful we were. And it turns out that we're big and powerful as all get-out. The story of the twenty-first century is going to be finding out if we can figure out ways to get smaller, to try and fit back into this planet."

So how do we fit back into our planet? It involves more than just throwing a few more plastic bottles in the recycling bin. It starts with listening – listening to the scientists who study the earth for a living, listening to the ecologists and naturalists who spend their lives caring for the earth, listening to the earth itself as it groans under the strain of overuse. I'm no conspiracy theorist, but I wonder if part of our current pandemic is the earth letting us know that we're not doing a very good job of being stewards.

We need to do a better job of holding ourselves accountable. We can't do that ourselves because we don't have the self-discipline. And we're not good at being accountable to God because God's not a tangible presence to remind us when we start to abuse the earth. So here's my recommendation: To whom should we be accountable? To our children, and grandchildren, our great-grandchildren, our nieces, our nephews. We are accountable to the generations that come after us, who must continue to live on this earth we are destroying.

You may have noticed that the Bible is big on tradition. It doesn't focus on the here and now as much as it focuses on what has gotten us here. When God says over and over, "I am the God of Abraham, of Isaac, of Jacob," God is calling forth the rich tradition of faith and the ancestors that made our relationship with God possible. Without those ancestors, we would not be here.

We need to learn to be good ancestors. Generations will come after us and will point back to what we did or didn't do to make their lives, their faith possible. Will they say, "Because of them, we are here"? Or will they say, "Because of them, we can't be here"? Based on our treatment of the earth, are we being good ancestors?

"The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it." And it was here long before us. The earth is not a resource to be used; it is a partner with which to perpetuate and nurture the fragile gift of life, and we mistreat it at our own peril. We've committed a grievous sin; we've made this planet disposable. Making peace with our world means that we pursue climate justice, working to restore what's been lost and giving a voice to that which cannot speak for itself. It means speaking up for and acting on behalf of the air, water, earth, and creatures that we steward in Jesus' name. When we take creation for granted, we are taking the Creator for granted. Instead, let us answer God's call to be good ancestors to those who come after us.