

Stewardship As Love of Creation

Texts: Psalm 104:24-30; Stewardship Handout; Job 12: 7-10

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Nick Burchill is a man who lives in Halifax, Nova Scotia, on the East Coast of Canada. Burchill was visiting some Navy friends who were posted to Victoria, British Columbia on the West Coast of Canada. His friends had asked him to bring them some of the delicious pepperoni from Brothers Delicatessen. They'd enjoyed the pepperoni when their ships had been docked in Halifax some years before.

Burchill was happy to oblige and brought a suitcase full of the pepperoni. When he got to his room at the Fairmont Empress Hotel in Victoria, the pepperoni had been in his suitcase for the whole cross country trip. He wanted to cool it down to keep it fresh, but there was no refrigerator in the room.

It was a cool day in early spring, so he just opened the window and set the pepperoni on a table near the window. Then he went off to explore the beautiful city of Victoria, one of the gems of the West Coast.

After about 5 hours he returned to his hotel. He tells us what happened next:

“I remember walking down the long hall and opening the door to my room to find an entire flock of seagulls in my room. I didn't have time to count, but there must have been 40 of them and they had been in my room, eating pepperoni for a long time.

“In case you were wondering, Brothers' Pepperoni does nasty things to a seagull's digestive system. As you would expect, the room was covered in seagull crap.”

When he walked into the room, he startled the birds. He continues his story like this:

“The seagulls immediately started flying around and crashing into things as they desperately tried to leave the room. The result was a tornado of seagull excrement, feathers, pepperoni chunks and fairly large birds whipping around the room. The lamps were failing. The curtains were trashed. The coffee tray was disgusting.”

Eventually he gave up trying to deal with the situation and called the front desk asking for help to clean up the room.

“I can still remember the look on the lady's face when she opened the door,” he says. I had absolutely no idea what to tell her, so I just said, “I'm sorry” and went to dinner. When I came back, my things had been moved to a much smaller room.”

When he got back to Halifax, he found out that his employer had received a note from the hotel, telling them he'd been banned for life.

I tell this story because I think it is a wonderful example of the relation between human beings like us and God's creation.

Like David Burchill, we are visiting a place that we don't own. We're staying as temporary guests passing through. For the moment, it's our place, its where we put our stuff, and while we may venture out periodically if our name happens to be, say, Neil Armstrong or Buzz Aldrin, for the rest of us, it's our home base for the length of our stay.

Now, we all know that people have been here before us. We're under no illusions that we are the first people ever, and the condition of the room we're in tells us something about what those people were like. They handed the room over to us, but there was no maid service to come in and clean it all up before we took it over.

We also know that other people are going to come and stay in the place after we are gone. When we are in a hotel room, we know that it's not permanent. When we live on Earth, well, we can maybe fool ourselves for a bit that nothing is going to change and that we'll be here forever, but we know it isn't so.

We're going to be passing the Earth on to the next generation and the generation that comes after that. We are merely stewards of creation, looking after a world that doesn't belong to us, but which we are in charge of.

Now what happened to David Burchill is happening to us. Our intentions are good. We have no intention of trashing the place. We are respectful of the Earth and we want to leave it in good condition for our children and grandchildren. We love this beautiful blue marble floating in space. It's the only home we've got.s

Nonetheless, the actions we are taking have consequences that we didn't foresee. We have left the pepperoni out by the open window, in all innocence and for a good purpose, but now we are coming back to the room and realizing that it is in a terrible state.

We didn't realize that the expansion of our cities would drive animals like pandas and tigers and elephants and gorillas to the brink of extinction. We assumed that our grandchildren would know what they look like from seeing them in zoos or in the wild, not in history books.

We didn't realize that the standardization of our fruit varieties would bring us to the edge of disaster as two damaging diseases are destroying all our banana crops. The natural genetic variation that protects fruits in the wild has disappeared as humans have specialized bananas into just a few varieties. The banana you grew up with, known as the Gros Michel, has already been wiped out. We're now at risk of losing its replacement, the Cavendish banana. Imagine all

the school lunches that will be without bananas because we are failing to learn from our experiences.

When then-Senator Al Gore wrote his environmental warning in 1992, *Earth in the Balance*, we had time to act. Since then we have had the Kyoto Accords, and the Paris Agreement and nations have made pledges to cut down on greenhouse gas emissions.

But humans have been bad guests. Half of the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere right now has been put there since 1992. Half of it. We haven't been able to follow through on our pledges, and the consequences are coming home to roost, like seagulls in the Fairmont Victoria Hotel.

This year we had wildfires that killed a billion animals in Australia, and more fires turned the California skies orange this summer.

We have had so many tropical storms turning into hurricanes that we are now on our third alphabet to name them.

Crop yields are declining, billions of tons of irreplaceable soil is being lost to non-sustainable levels of farming each year, fresh water lakes are drying up, glaciers are melting and the temperature in the Arctic reached over 100 degrees on several days this summer.

Sea levels are already rising because of glacial melt so much that St. Mark's Square in Venice, one of the most beautiful of the Italian cityscapes, has been under waist deep water much of the time in spite of a billion dollar flood control system installed in Venice harbor.

We didn't mean to trash the place, but we have, and much of it has happened in my lifetime.

And that's big trouble, because God has put us in charge of being good stewards over the earth. We are the ones who are to care for the soil, and to look after the animals.

We are the ones who are called to oversee the natural resources that supply us with life, and make sure that they continue from generation to generation.

In Job, God points us back to a sustainable way of life. "Ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you."

I read this text as a call to pay attention to our environment, to see what we are doing to the animals and the birds and the fish and the plants. They are screaming out for help from us. One recent study said that approximately 173 species went extinct between 2001 and 2014, which 25 times faster than the normal, background extinction rate.

It's so bad that the fossil record we are creating now will tell whoever finds it in the distant

future that we are living through the sixth great mass extinction event in the earth's history.

In the past, the first five extinction events were caused by alterations in the environment from natural causes, like massive volcanic eruptions or a collision with an asteroid. But this one is all us. Humans are the natural disaster that is afflicting the world.

We are the reason that cheetahs are vanishing, cod have been fished almost to extinction, and polar bears are starving. We are the reason that bees are disappearing, threatening the pollination cycle of our crops, and putting our entire food system at risk.

We must start listening to the animals, to the fish and the birds and the insects. We have to pay attention to the plants, to the forests we are burning up and releasing their carbon stores, and to the forests we are cutting down, depriving us of the chance to take carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and release fresh oxygen for us to breathe.

They have lessons for us to learn, and they can teach us to pay attention to the unintended consequences of our actions.

As Christians it's our duty to be responsible stewards of the earth. It's our calling and if we don't do it, as David Wallace-Wells writes in his book, *The Uninhabitable Earth: Live After Warming*, future generations will curse our names for the hellish life we have left to them.

It's not enough to act alone as individuals, to buy Priuses and put up solar panels and go vegan. The problem can't be solved by a few cosmetic changes. We need to change our whole approach to life as a society, to find new, sustainable ways to live the good life.

God tells us to ask the animals, to ask the plants, to ask the world how to do it. It's the challenge of supporting science, which asks those questions, and supporting the answers that we get back from science on what we have to do to be good stewards.

We didn't mean to, but we trashed the place. Now we have to make sure that we clean it up for the people coming after us.

It's the only way to be sure that the wheat that makes our bread, and the grapes which make our wine will continue on as the elements on our communion table. It's our commission from God, whose world we inhabit, our commission from the One who has set us as stewards of Creation.

Amen