

Caretakers Over God's Creation

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Psalm 8

Pastor Chip Fisher

About this time last year the news, happily, was not dominated by the Gulf oil catastrophe. There were riots in the streets in Iran and North Korea tweaking the nose of the world with its aggressive nuclear bomb testing, but the biggest attention-getter during President Obama's White House interview with CNBC journalist John Harwood was his swatting a fly.

First Obama issued a Presidential warning to the little flying nuisance. "Get out of here." When the fly finally settled down, Obama deftly swatted it dead. "That was pretty impressive. I got the sucker," he told CNBC. Naturally Harwood laughed and the camera crew applauded. But the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals did not let his act go unchastised; they issued a statement urging the president to act in a more enlightened manner, and sent him a humane bug catcher, which allows users to trap the fly and release it again outside.

Fortunately, that incident provided a bit of comic counterpoint to the usual reportage of the big issues shaping the news. But I think all the time we're seeing evidence of people acting, and advocating, as if human beings and animals have more or less the same intrinsic value and dignity. A few years ago, the American Humane Society was on hand to make sure that none of the hundreds of cockroaches used in the filming of "Men in Black" was injured. No one I know is in favor of cruelty to animals. Even flies and mosquitoes are created by our loving Creator. But to think that all forms of life have equal value is silly.

Some serious people have not stopped at all animals having rights. The Swiss have enshrined the "dignity" of plants in their constitution. Last year a molecular biologist at the University of Zurich sought permission to test some wheat for its ability to resist a certain fungus, in order to be able to feed more people. I could understand his being required to prove that his experiment would not have unintended environmental consequences—but he was required to debate the ins and outs of "plant dignity" with university ethicists. A blue ribbon Swiss panel upheld the inherent dignity both of individual plants and "the plant community." [reported in "Breakpoint," Aug 4, 2009] (By this logic it becomes immoral to kill mosquitoes bearing malaria, or for that matter to boil water to kill the microbes in it—after all, they have as much right to be here as we humans do. And by this

logic there is one inescapable conclusion as to what to do with all of us human beings—and some are beginning to draw it.)

If we keep forgetting about the Creator, there's no telling where the field of ethics will be taking us in another decade—but it all reminds me of the truth of G.K. Chesterton's dictum "When people quit believing in God the trouble is not that they'll believe nothing, it's that they'll believe anything." If there is no Creator who has a particular order in mind it's understandable to think a stalk of wheat is as valuable as Florence Nightingale. [[If there is no Creator, then 1958 Nobel Prize winner (Medicine/Physiology) Joshua Lederer might be correct in famously observing "Now we can define man. He is six feet of a particular molecular sequence of carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen, and phosphorous atoms." (I hope his wife and loved ones quickly corrected him in this reductionistic foray into philosophy. He could identify what he could observe through his scientific instruments—but to claim that molecules are alone what define human beings would be like claiming "now we can define Bach's music: sound waves of varying frequencies moving through air." Not incorrect—but hardly adequate.]] If there is no Creator and no particular created order, then indeed a lima bean may be the equivalent of a dog, of an amoeba, of a hamster, of Albert Einstein. Of a lump of asphalt. Whatever.

At this time this year, all of you know, the big news is the oil spill in the Gulf. I hope and pray the leak has been stopped for good. Such a devastating event has a lot of people angry: angry at BP, angry at the engineers who built and tested or failed to test the rig which failed, angry at the Government (one of you told me that the Norwegian State oil company Statoil and others offered us the use of twenty giant skimmers built to help in just such emergencies, which for whatever reason our Government has still not deployed.) Angry protesters have assaulted volunteers and EPA and Coast Guard responders so that twice in recent days the police have had to be called in. [About the only silver lining I see in this very black cloud is the fact that the estimated 200 million gallons spilled in this Gulf mess total somewhere between the estimated 140 million gallons spilled into the Mexican Bay of Campeche in 1979 and the estimated 460 million gallons deliberately trashed into the Persian Gulf as Saddam Hussein's troops sabotaged Kuwaiti wells,

tankers and storage facilities in 1991. In each of these two other cases fish and natural wildlife declined about 80% immediately but then due to natural processes bounced back to normal levels within about two years. [The Week, July 23, 2010, p 13] Of course two years is a lot if you're in the shrimping business or the tourist business in the gulf or the oil and gas business or if you are any one of the countless pelicans or fish or shrimp or plants—not to mention all the other unknown and unknowable long-term ecological and economic effects.]

This disaster has caused all of us to think about our relationship with the environment, with planet earth. The rainforests are still being depleted at an estimated 30,000 square miles per year—an area bigger than Massachusetts. Entire stocks of ocean fish are overharvested, and environmentalists now talk about the “North Pacific Gyre”—a floating patch of perhaps 100 million tons of plastic garbage now said to be twice the size of the continental United States and growing rapidly. Global temperatures have been rising and falling dramatically since long before human beings walked across what is now the English Channel from France into Britain, and from Siberia across what was then the Aleutian landmass to Alaska during the last Ice Age. (For that matter, since the dinosaurs became extinct.) More recently, there was the mini-warming boom around 1000 A.D. in which the explorers from Greenland called their colonies “Vinland” because their grapevines thrived there: in what is now Newfoundland, northeast of Maine. Whatever our human culpability may be for the current ups and downs in global climate change, we are not being very good caretakers over God's creation.

Before we look more closely at Psalm 8 and its perspective on our status and responsibility in this world, I want to apologize for the tacit insult this morning. Most of you know I do not often preach on this or that topical issue of the day—because I assume you, as disciples of Jesus, are already taking seriously what it means to live in this world. You don't need your pastors to tell you to keep well informed and live as God expects you to live. We disciples of Jesus are called to be the most conscientious and responsible citizens in this world—how can it possibly bring glory to God or motivate other people to offer their lives to Jesus if we, His followers, are living like slob? Why would anyone still living their lives in the “undecided” category want to join us in the heavenly Home to which Jesus invites us all if they notice we aren't behaving very well in this one? I don't expect you have come to worship God this morning in order to hear me tell you to recycle and reuse. We're already doing these things—right?

I hope each of you has experienced what it's like to be far away from the city and its lights, peering up into the heavens on a cloudless night. Imagine what it would have been like for the ancients—there was no human air pollution; there were no city lights. (I remember once being with one of my best buddies, both of us enjoying this opportunity to look up and be overwhelmed. After a long time of reverent silence he spoke: “This is incredible... contemplating all those stars and galaxies and everything up there reminds me just how insignificant...you are.”)

The psalmist was motivated by that same sense of awe and majesty back then just as we may be today. (We who have now seen satellite photos of planet earth see it all from a higher vantage point than the psalmist: we see this fragile beautiful blue and green ball whirling around in space, covered thinly here and there by white puffs of gossamer clouds—isn't it improbable and mind-boggling that we are here at all, that we are alive on this little spinning sphere?) “When I look at the vastness of the heavens—the moon and the stars You have placed in their places—it makes me wonder why in the world do You, the Master of the universe, care so much about us humans?”

The entire psalm explores this question: who is God and who are we relative to God's creation?

Psalm 8 sets out a lyrical outpouring of praise to God in nine verses. The structure of the psalm itself is important. Did you notice the first and last verses are the same—as if they envelop everything in between: “O LORD our Ruler, our Sovereign; how majestic is Your name in all the earth!” Sandwiched between this beginning and this end, an important question is asked and answered right in the in the middle, verse 5. Here's the answer to the question of why God the Creator and governor over all the universe might care about us human beings here on planet earth.

For whatever reasons God has, here we are. And the psalmist is telling us we humans are “but a little lower than the angels; we, like almighty God, are crowned with glory and honor.” Yet we know glory and honor belong only to God...But God, You have “given [us] dominion, authority, over the works of Your hands. You have arranged it so that we humans are over the domesticated oxen and sheep and in fact all the land animals, also over the birds of the air and the fish of the sea.” [vv 5-8]

God has deputized us all to share in His role as governor over the plants and animals and birds and fish. All beings are not equal in status; there is a God-given order to things. (As events in the Gulf Coast remind us, this is a very risky strategy on God's part—to place us in authority

over His creation.) God has appointed us humans as trustees, or stewards, or caretakers in His place. (That religious word “stewardship” is not just about how we handle the conversation or the money God has entrusted to us: it gets bigger—God has entrusted the welfare of the entire planet earth to us! A very risky strategy to trust us humans as caretakers: us whom the philosopher/mathematician Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) summed up this way: “What a chimera then is man! What a novelty! What a monster, what a chaos, what a contradiction, what a prodigy. Judge of all things, feeble earthworm, deposit of truth, a sinkhole of uncertainty and error, the glory and the shame of the universe.”

A risky strategy indeed for God to entrust the care of the earth to us humans—and especially if we emphasize this middle part of the psalm, forgetting the beginning and the end. If we forget God is our Lord, God is the Creator of the universe; if we forget God has appointed us and crowned us with glory and honor in His divine image, then it's easy to begin to think we can treat God's green earth any way that suits us. Because we have the capability and technology to re-arrange and despoil and pollute, it's easy to get careless and think it's our right to do so. We humans often behave as eco-bullies, as egotistical tyrants rather than as conscientious conservators.

God's experiment in entrusting us humans—every day, every decision, every purchase—is not going any too well. We disciples of Jesus know that He has shown us how to exercise authority: not using our position to benefit ourselves at the expense of others, but to serve others in order to be obedient to God the Father. Jesus came in order for all creation to be reconciled: “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation!” [2 Cor 5:17]

Jesus has taught us to repent when appropriate. Our first response to our part in the ecological degradation of our world is to repent. I think our ecological problems can also be seen as a theological problem: consequences of our basic problem of sin. Pride and greed cause all of us to want to use other people and things to get what we want. We have a tremendous innate ability to maximize our own desires, for our own comfort, and to minimize our care for everyone and everything else.

There are endless ways each of us might be more responsible caretakers. To begin with, we would probably do well to become as little children in cultivating a renewed sense of wonderment. How excited they can get over a fluttering butterfly or a pretty rock or the shape of a leaf. How unself-conscious children are when they pray for their pets or ask God to please take care of all the flowers and the trees.

Many Native Americans and the Amish today have a sense of the sacredness of the land. The Amish believe their farmland is holy ground—they refuse to poison it with commercial chemical fertilizers. The ancient Israelites believed all the Land belonged to Yahweh, and every seventh year they were to leave their fields fallow to allow them to be renewed. Today many of us opt for the greenest grass and the prettiest flowers all the time. We don't think twice.

For years Jim Wright has recycled the bottles and cans some of you drop off in the garbage container in the men's room. He recycles the proceeds right into a campership fund to benefit young people in the church. Thank you, Jim. If any of you has time or inclination, I bet Jim could use some help. And with a few more reminders I think we could overwhelm Jim's ability to recycle all our containers. I'm guessing some of us could make a better effort to bring our bottles and cans to be recycled. The hundreds of participants in our 12-step programs leave many, many containers in our trash containers on the courtyard each week, and we do not recycle them at all. (I believe the city of Newport Beach does.) Likewise with batteries and paint and toxic waste—for obvious reasons it's important they get to the proper recycling centers.

Maybe we've become careless with little things. Leaving the air conditioner on or the heat on when we're not there, or when they're not necessary. Leaving on a light bulb here and there doesn't seem like a lot until we realize how everything adds up—and how a lot more electricity than we use must be generated since most of it is dissipated before it ever gets to our homes. (Speaking of lightbulbs, maybe you've seen the cartoon of the thousands of people crammed together in a crowd, and the caption above each one says, “What can I do, I'm only one person.”)

We're apt to be careless with water—for our lawns and flowers, for washing our cars, for use in our home. Is it really necessary for us to buy all the plastic bottles some of us buy, or could we be using the refillable containers which do not taint the water inside? (I still remember the drought we suffered in the Bay Area in 1972 when we collected all the shower water before it got hot and then took that water out to water the lawn and the plants. It was illegal to wash cars.) It would be shortsighted for us to wait until we have the next drought—which surely will come—to begin to be careful. I hope we've all started already. We are the caretakers.

I was quite proud of myself the first time I paid an extra dollar or two for fair-traded cocoa. It seems a small enough price to pay to be sure nobody along the line is being exploited. These little things add up to become habits, and when enough of us do them it makes

a difference.

Some have opted to become vegetarians or vegans out of concern for the ecology of beef production. Part of our ongoing responsibility includes assessing the footprint our consumption habits are making on this fragile planet. How is the Holy Spirit directing you to eat? It seems to me the Seventh Day Adventists are wise about this: they do not call it a sin, but they strongly urge their people not to eat red meat—and they tend to be very healthy and going strong til they're about a hundred.

On the other hand, one of the things the psalm reminds us is that you do not need to apologize for being alive. Jesus re-affirms how every last person is important: "...And are you not worth much more than the lilies of the field and the birds of the air?" (And the flies and cockroaches and grains of wheat, I would add.) God sees you as part of the solution, not as the problem.

If you and your gardener both went away for a long time and no one were in charge, your garden would not do very well. This seems to be the predicament in which God finds His creation. He asks us to keep making it better than we found it, not worse. It's a risky strategy—but it seems to be God's own.

Maybe you've heard the story of the preacher who went to pay a call on one of his parishioners, a farmer who wasn't too big on church. In fact he kept away with great determination. That preacher showed up, but the farmer didn't make it easy on him. The preacher decided on a little flattery: "that's a fine field of wheat you and the Lord are growing together." The farmer totally ignored him. Thinking maybe he hadn't been heard, the preacher repeated himself, and the farmer again ignored his remark. But the preacher was not one to give up easily. Next time he visited that farmer, he again observed, "that's a fine field of wheat you and the Lord are growing together." This time, the farmer looked him in the eye. "I wish you'd seen it last year when the Lord had it all to Himself."

The farmer had no chance to provide grain, no matter how hard he worked, without the rain and the sun and the seeds and the soil only God can provide. But from that field God, apart from a faithful caretaker, was only going to get weeds and chaos. Being a faithful caretaker means we thank God for His gifts—especially the gift of creation—and keep taking care of them for His sake.

"So, sisters and brothers...whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God." [1 Cor 10:31]

Psalm 8:1 O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.

2 Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger.

3 When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established;

4 what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?

5 Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.

6 You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet,

7 all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,

8 the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

9 O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!