

“STEWARDSHIP CONNECTIONS: EARTH”

Psalm 136:1-9, 23-26 Genesis 1:1-10, 14-18, 26-27; 2:4b-8, 15

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So Captain Kirk went to space. I mean William Shatner, but for some of us, it’s hard to separate the actor from Captain Kirk, who led the crew of the Starship Enterprise to explore “space – the final frontier.” But this time, he went to space for real, as one of the first “space tourists.” I remember hearing about it at the time – this was last fall – and thinking “what a ridiculous, wasteful thing for these super-rich people to do, just to be able to say they’ve gone where (almost) no one has gone before.” (In case you’re thinking that this sounds like a fun idea for your next vacation, let me tell you now that a ticket on one of these flights will set you back a half-million dollars or more.)

So I was surprised to read just recently what William Shatner had to say about his experience.

I had thought that going into space would be the ultimate catharsis of that connection I had been looking for between all living things—that being up there would be the next beautiful step to understanding the harmony of the universe. In the film “Contact,” when Jodie Foster’s character goes to space and looks out into the heavens, she lets out an astonished whisper, “They should’ve sent a poet.” I had a different experience, because I discovered that the beauty isn’t out there, it’s down here, with all of us. Leaving that behind made my connection to our tiny planet even more profound.

It was among the strongest feelings of grief I have ever encountered. The contrast between the vicious coldness of space and the warm nurturing of Earth below filled me with overwhelming sadness. Every day, we are confronted with the knowledge of further destruction of Earth at our hands: the extinction of animal species, of flora and fauna . . .

What struck me about his reaction was that reawakened sense of connection to the earth – warm and nurturing... home. And then, having experienced this sense of belonging and connectedness, he immediately makes another connection: to the tragic fact that we human beings have been and continue to be terribly destructive in the way we’ve lived on this planet. I guess when you feel a connection to something, you also feel a responsibility.

Maybe, on some level, that trip to space *was* a vanity project, but it became an experience of humility... in the most basic sense of that word, meaning “down to earth” – derived from the same Latin word as “human” and “humus,” or soil. We are connected to the earth.

Fortunately for us, we don’t have to go to space in a rocket to gain this insight. Because we have the first couple of chapters of Genesis. And both of these creation stories, different though they are, emphasize connections. In fact, when you look at them with that lens, you can identify all sorts of connections.

In Genesis 2 the connection is there in the words “human” and “humus” (*adam* and *adamah* in Hebrew) but also in the way the story pictures the creation: God molding clay from the ground into a human figure. And then God breathing life into that figure. This story portrays a profound and intimate connection between God, and the human being, and the earth.

Genesis 1 gives us a different perspective on the connection between God, and human beings and the earth. It imagines a deliberate and planful process of calling into being a world of day and night, water and land, animals and plants – a world that’s both well-ordered and richly varied ... and God’s loving pleasure and delight in it all, reiterated in the repetition of “God saw that it was good.” This story envisions the creation of human beings in an entirely different way than the other story. There’s nothing about forming a creature from the earth; instead we are told that they are made “in God’s own image.” We could reflect all day on the many implications of *that*, but one thing it means is evident right away: the human beings who are made in God’s image are meant to “take charge” of this earth God calls good, and all the life flourishing on it.

Another translation of that verse says “take responsibility for,” but most often we hear that human beings are to “rule over,” or “exercise authority,” or “have dominion over” the earth. This troubles us, because we know that people have used these words to justify any and every use, abuse, or destruction of the earth’s ecosystems and creatures. And we’ve reaped extinctions, disappearing habitats, polluted air and water, depleted soil, hunger, massive inequity, and now all the consequences of climate change. As we’ve become more technologically advanced, we have increased our capacity for destructive kinds of domination that could never have been imagined by the ancient people who handed down this creation story to us.

But the assumption that everything on the earth is just there for human beings to use and use up was never a sound understanding of the creation stories in Genesis. That view sees the earth as merely a resource, separate from us. A habitat destroyed here, a species made extinct there doesn’t matter much, because it’s human advancement that matters. But that point of view isn’t in these stories, which see human beings as deeply connected to the earth, *and* all of creation as valued and cherished and cared for by God. So human beings who have power on the earth are meant to exercise that power in a way that reflects the way the God in whose image they’re made exercises power – with wisdom, care, and delight.

As if to balance the “take charge” language of Genesis 1, the story in Genesis 2 gives us a different word: “The Lord God took the human and settled him in the garden of Eden to *farm* it [this word also can mean to “serve”] and take care of it.” There’s an implicit understanding here that ultimately the earth belongs to God, and that the human beings who belong both to the earth and to God are meant to be *care-takers*, in the most literal and profound senses of that word.

Which is what we mean by “stewardship.” The connections at the heart of both these stories define the human relationship to the earth as one of stewardship.

Our connection to these stories, and to the earth, and to the God who loves the earth and gave us these stories leads us to making other connections... and stewardship is all about making connections. That's true, I believe, of every aspect of stewardship to which we are called. But it's especially evident when it comes to stewardship the stewardship of creation.

It's about making the connection between the beautiful wild places that inspire us, and the need to preserve them.

It's about making connections between our actions and their consequences;

Between what we do now and the kind of life that generations after us will have;

It's about making connects between fossil fuels and climate change and sea level rise and the refugee crisis;

Between power and pollution and poverty and poor health;

Between the stuff we buy and the environmental impact of how it's made and its eventual disposal;

Between public policy and things like safe drinking water and clean air;

It's about making the connections between each small thing we can do to reduce waste, and the bigger changes we all need to make in the way we live;

Between being an earth care church and casting our votes for leaders who see the urgency of addressing climate change;

Between God's love for us and God's love for the earth;

Between us and our human siblings all around the burning, flooding earth,
Between human beings and all the other living things with whom we share the planet,
Between ourselves and the earth,
Between us and God who has charged us with stewardship of the earth.

Sometimes when we make a connection, it startles us. Sometimes it gives us a whole new perspective. Often it challenges our assumptions, sometimes even upsets a long-held belief. It can take us in a new direction, or recommit us to a path we've started on. Making connections might bring joy or sadness, regret or hope. Making a connection always asks something of us. Compassion. Trust. Honesty. Change. Responsibility. Learning. Action. Prayer. Generosity. Sacrifice. Love. Gratitude. Service. Some investment of our selves. The risking of something. But that's what it is to be human, isn't it? And it's a pretty good description of what stewardship means, too.

Resources:

"Rethinking Dominion Theology" by Theodore Hiebert, directionjournal.org

"William Shatner: 'My Trip to Space Filled Me With 'Overwhelming Sadness,'" variety.com