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**The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world,
and those who live in it. Ps 24:1**

Stewardship of the Earth

For centuries people have had the ability to look outward from the earth at the planets and stars in the universe with the aid of telescopes. But only in recent decades have we had the ability to look at the earth itself from the perspective of outer space. This image of the earth as a blue-green orb, with its verdant vegetation and deep azure seas, surrounded by a misty atmosphere, has become a sacred icon for people of our day. It is a reflection of the godness and grandeur of its Creator, a reminder that our world is a beautiful place, a friendly habitat, and a blessed creation.

The faith expressed by the biblical writers recognizes the world as God's good creation. The world belongs to God and humanity is God's steward, responsible to God for the care of creation. Preserving the resources of the earth and protecting its creatures are essential aspects of a human life faithfully bonded with God. Being a steward of the earth by living in harmony with the world's other creatures is a joyful privilege that flows from a right relationship with God. Viewing the earth as a divine gift leads to a deep and personal desire to care for that gift and to pass it on to forthcoming generations.

Our modern life often keeps us isolated from the natural wonders of our world. Surrounded by manufactured environments, insulated in our urban homes and offices, eating prepackaged foods, we may rarely have the opportunity to encounter the wild and awesome wonder of the earth's grandeur.

When we stand at the edge of a cliff with a roaring surf below, pause in an ancient forest at the foot of a giant hardwood, look out upon a dew-sparkled meadow at sunrise, we place ourselves in the situations which have engendered awe-filled reverence for the Creator and for creation through the ages. By reflecting on these kinds of experiences and by listening to the Scriptures that speak of the wonders of creation, we can nurture within our hearts a love for the natural world and a passion for its care.

In the face of the earth's ecological crisis, mostly we know what we have to do but we lack the will to do it. For this reason, many have concluded that working out the current crisis is as much a religious challenge as a political one. Our tendency to use the world's resources to gratify our selfish desires is a temptation that can be overcome with a changed spiritual viewpoint. A religious approach to caring for the earth teaches us reverence for creation and shows us how to base our attitudes and actions on God's revelation. Studying the Scriptures moves us toward a deeper awareness of the created world and appreciation of its meaning and blessing. Rather than seeking meaning by rapaciously consuming the gifts entrusted to us, we can find spiritual fulfillment through respectful engagement with the beauty of the earth.

Reflection and discussion

- What experiences have given me a deeper respect and reverence for the earth?

- In what way is the ecological crisis which faces the earth a spiritual and religious problem? In what way could studying the Bible help?

God's Awesome Yet Fragile World

The earth is a delicate series of balanced systems and processes which support and nurture all of life. Surrounding our beloved emerald and azure globe is a fragile layer of vapor and gases that protects and supports the wonderful fabric of life called the biosphere. Some gases absorb the energy of the sun and regulate its warmth while other elements shield the earth from the sun's destructive radiation. Because of the tilt of the earth and its continual rotation, the atmosphere circulates, the oceans create currents, and the seasons change. Moisture is continually recycled and purified through evaporation and the rain and snow irrigate the earth in regular cycles. Water is also naturally filtered through the flow of streams and rivers, making it habitable and drinkable for earth's creatures. The soil is nurtured and renewed through a cyclical process as decaying organisms and other elements support a growing fabric of vegetation.

The biosphere is comprised of many communities of organisms in their diverse environments called ecosystems. Forests, glades, marshes, prairies, lakes, and oceans are all places of wondrous environmental harmony. The animals, plants, soils, and climates of each system all interact as an integrated ecological unit. In each natural system, diverse species of life flourish and reproduce from one generation to the next. The wondrous balance exhibited in each natural environment requires respect for its intricate complexity.

Though we are able to investigate and understand the natural world in a way that was impossible for our ancestors, we recognize with them that creation declares the wisdom and glory of God. God lovingly provides the rains and the seasons, gives food and flowing water for the creatures, and satisfies the earth. God's eternal power and divine nature are understood and seen through the beauty and abundance of the things God has made.

Yet, in our day, living creatures, and the air, soil, and water that support them, face unprecedented threats. Many of these perils are global; most stem directly from human activity. Economies that seek to maximize immediate returns at the expense of long-term sustainability are becoming the norm throughout the world. The current practices of humanity may so alter the living world in the future that it will be unable to sustain the delicately balanced systems required for life to flourish.

Threats to the atmosphere include toxic emissions that fill the air, depletion of the protective ozone, and an unprecedented buildup of greenhouse gases

causing rising temperatures and climate changes. Perils to the earth's waters include dangerous chemicals discharged into rivers, toxic leaks trickling into the groundwater, and abundant waste dumped into seas and oceans. Land abuse includes destruction of tropical forests, devastation of natural habitats, and the ruin of creation's natural fertility with pesticides and herbicides. As a result, the variety of earth's species is diminishing and creatures that once thrived in their habitats have died.

We must learn that creation is not humanity's possession. It is entrusted to humanity for its tending and safekeeping. Exercising responsible stewardship means pursuing simpler lifestyles. It means seeking contentment in those things that will sustain us, and not grasping more and more from the earth for our own selfish advancement. Sustainable living means providing an acceptable quality of life for the present generation without compromising that of future generations. Caring for the earth means taking into account all of our fellow creatures, leaving for them what is naturally theirs and allowing creation to heal, to restore its fruitfulness, and to praise its Creator.

Reflection and discussion

- What do I know about the ecosystems near where I live? What are the trees, birds, fish, and other wildlife that share my habitat?

- How would I rate my own personal stewardship of creation? What do I do well to care for the earth, and what can I do better?

Biblical Perspectives on Ecology

The Bible offers a rich foundation for environmental consciousness. Some have accused the Christian tradition of fostering apathy for the material world by orienting people toward an immaterial existence in a spiritual heaven. But a review of biblical texts shows us that the world is not something from which we should try to escape. Both the ancient literature of Israel and the writings of the early church demonstrate that God's original intentions for creation as well as God's plan for creation's future fulfillment are centered in the world of bodily, worldly reality.

The psalms and wisdom literature of Israel rejoice in the created world. They present the world in all of its diversity as a gift from God in which all creatures delight. Singing the psalms convinces us that the non-human world is precious in God's eyes quite apart from any usefulness to humanity. The skies and the birds that fill it, the seas and the creatures that swim the deep, and the land with all of its vegetation and animals exist in a wonderful harmony in which each creature contributes to the good of the others. The book of Job and the other wisdom writings demonstrate that God's purposes for the world reach far beyond the understanding and control of humans. God loves his creation and watches over and sustains it with utmost care. Humans exist as an integral part of creation, yet God desires that people live wisely, in a way that contributes to the created world with respect for its meaning and goodness.

The opening chapters of Genesis present God's original design for the world. Every part of material reality comes from the loving hand of its Creator who declares it very good. Within this diverse and magnificent creation God fashioned his masterpiece, made in the divine image. Humankind was entrusted with the task of stewardship of the earth, charged with preserving and protecting what God had made. Even when man and woman abandoned their task, their responsibility remained. God made an everlasting covenant, not only with humankind, but with every living creature on the earth. The rainbow would be the sign in every generation of God's commitment to the earth.

Because the sinful tendencies within human beings lead to greedy consumption and callous exploitation of God's creatures, the law and prophets of Israel established commands and boundaries to encourage respect for God's gifts. The weekly Sabbath requiring rest for all creatures and the Sabbath year

for the regeneration of the land promote a lifestyle that honors the natural rhythms and cycles of the earth. The prophets condemn abuse of the earth's resources and continue offering hope for a time when God would restore creation to its wholeness.

The gospels proclaim that God loved the world so much that the divine Word became flesh and lived within it. He delighted in the natural world, taught about the seeds, flowers, and birds, retreated to the mountains to pray, and calmed the storms on the sea. And finally he rose bodily from death and assured his followers of complete victory over every brokenness and bondage.

The Christian Scriptures proclaim that God's saving will is complete restoration of the whole creation. Not only will God raise people to the fullness of life, but the entire world will be redeemed from the bondage of futility and decay. The risen Christ is the world's first experience of God's eventual renewal of the whole cosmos. The last book of the Bible returns to images from Scripture's first book, depicting a renewed and fruitful earth. The images of a fertile garden with the tree of life watered by a pure, flowing river express God's original intentions for the earth which will inevitably be fulfilled.

These wondrous images that fill the Bible's sacred texts demonstrate that God loves the world so much that he will never abandon it and will eventually restore its broken beauty. These texts teach us the responsibility of stewardship and offer us abiding hope. If God loves the world so much, then so must we. We must not abuse and destroy what is so precious to God. The Scriptures call us to be environmental stewards, people who joyfully and lovingly care for God's good creation.

Reflection and discussion

- Some heretical teachers in the early centuries of Christianity taught that the physical world was evil and the goal of life was to escape from material reality. How does the Bible demonstrate this teaching to be false?