

Field & Stream

Genesis 1:27-28 So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. ²⁸ God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."

Matthew 6:26-30 Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷ And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸ And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you-- you of little faith?

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Back in the 80s, I lived in Houston. I accepted a job in Dallas, and we moved to Mesquite, a suburban community on the eastern edge of Dallas. The housing market in Houston was flooded with foreclosed homes at bargain prices and there was very little hope of selling our house in Houston. So, we decided to put the house up for rent. For almost two years the house was rented to a couple. She was a police officer and he was a coach. But they divorced and the rent payments stopped. We went through the eviction process and then drove down to Houston to clean up the house so we could put it up for rent again.

The house in Houston was important to us. Cathy and I bought it when we got married. We had spent the first ten years of our marriage in that house. Our son, Bill, had grown from a second grader to a high school junior in that house. It was where he did a lot of growing up and, at his age, it was where he had lived most of his life. I had spent several weekends one fall putting a new roof on the house. All three of us had strong emotional ties and lots of memories tied to this house.

When we unlocked the door we were shocked at what we found. There was trash everywhere. Weeks and weeks of junk mail was strewn all over the place. The sink was full of dirty dishes. There was food caked on so hard that the roaches hadn't been able to eat it! The bathroom facilities had been used long after the water had been turned off. The carpet had red Kool-aide stains, stains that are almost impossible to remove. Doors had been slammed open so hard that the door knobs made holes in the sheetrock. Everywhere we looked we saw trash, clutter, thoughtless damage, and foul accumulation. Our hearts just sank. Our beautiful house with such good memories was trashed and damaged. Obviously, the renters had no respect or affection for the house that we had invested ten years of our lives in. We were shocked. We were angry. But perhaps, most of all, we were hurt because something that was so loved by us was so unloved and disrespected by someone else. It was an ugly experience that is seared into our memories.

We've all heard of the Ten Commandments. We generally think of them as the foundation upon which are built the laws and ethics that we find in scripture. But the Ten Commandments are not the first rules given to us. There is a much older and even more basic command given to us. At our very beginning, we were given "dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every

living thing that moves upon the earth.” All the creatures of the earth, sky, and sea were placed in our domain. That is, we were given the responsibility of caring for them. You might call this Commandment # 0. If you like science fiction, you might describe this responsibility as our prime directive. No matter what you call it, this is the purpose for our lives that was expressed at the beginning of our relationship with God.

For a long time, we chose to interpret our dominion over the rest of creation as the opportunity to do whatever we wished with the rest of creation. As it turns out, we had to ignore a lot of other texts in order to maintain that illusion. . We thought that having dominion meant that creation belonged to us, that we had ownership. But in Leviticus 25:23 God tells us, “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants.” Our problem is that we think we own the land and that it is ours to treat and use however we want to, but God says we are tenants. We are stewards of the land. We have the responsibility of taking care of the land. We need to remember that God is our landlord.

Now, you know that one of the Ten Commandments is that we are to rest on the Sabbath. Sometimes we seem to think that the Sabbath rules must be some sort of test to see if we can be obedient and measure up in some way to some arbitrary regulations. But, Jesus made it clear that the Sabbath was instituted for our benefit, not just to give us more rules to obey. In Mark’s Gospel we read that Jesus taught, “The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath.” (Mark 2:27 NRS) The Sabbath was established for our benefit, to provide time for rest, for reflection, and for renewal. It’s an example of God’s loving-kindness for humanity.

We might be less familiar with the fact that God shows that same loving concern for the land. In Leviticus 25:2-5 we are told, “Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; ⁴ but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the LORD: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. ⁵ You shall not reap the after growth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your unpruned vine: it shall be a year of complete rest for the land.”

Just as God shows care for the earth itself so too God cares for all of the creatures that inhabit the earth. Just as God claims ownership of all the earth, the same is true with regard to all of the animals on the earth. ¹⁰ For every wild animal of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. ¹¹ I know all the birds of the air, and all that moves in the field is mine. . . . the world and all that is in it is mine. (Psalm 50:7-12 NRS) Just as the Sabbath is for our benefit, so, too, is it a day of rest for livestock and working animals. (Exodus 20:10) A few years ago, when we studied the story of Jonah, we learned that God cared for the people of Nineveh, even though they were long- time enemies of Israel. God also expressed concern, not only for the human population of the city, but also for the many animals of that city. (Jonah 4:11)

What’s more, if you found a beast of burden such as a donkey collapsed under too heavy a load, you were obligated to set it free. One of the unusual regulations regarding animals is the command in Deuteronomy 25:4, “You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.” It would be cruel to force an ox to tread out the grain and not allow it to eat the food that it was working on. One of the loveliest passages in scripture is found in Christ’s Sermon on the Mount. ²⁶ Look at the birds

of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. . . . Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you-- you of little faith? (Matthew 6:26-30 NRS)

We see that God claims ownership of all of creation, the land and all of the creatures that live on it. More than that, God cares about the well-being of the land and all of the creatures. God is the landlord and we are the tenants. I think about how I felt when I opened the door to the house we had rented out. I think about the anger and the disgust that I felt because someone abused my property. How must God feel about many of our actions? How must God feel about the huge swirling mass of plastic refuse in the Pacific Ocean? How must God feel about the pollution in so many waterways that makes it unsafe to eat the fish that live there? How must God feel about mountain top removal to get to coal deposits? What must our landlord think when our actions lead to the annihilation of whole species? What must our landlord think when the air is unfit to breathe? How will we be able to answer for our actions? May God have mercy on us! Amen.

Sisters and brothers,
we are tenants with a most loving landlord.
We have an awesome responsibility as stewards of this world.
Be bold in caring for God's property!