

Sermon: The Gospel Call to Care for Creation

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<https://youtu.be/WRyN9eyh5h4>

(Introduction) Greetings, sisters and brothers. It's good to be with you today.

This isn't my first time at Boston Chinese Evangelical Church (BCEC), though I was a lot smaller and younger the last time! As some of you may know, I'm originally from Singapore. My mom is Cantonese from Malaysia and my parents taught at Singapore Bible College while I was growing up. They had a couple sabbatical years, one in 1988-89 and the other in 1992-93, and our family came to Boston those years and spent them with your church. I have such fond memories from back then, and it was in Sunday school here that I learned the value of memorizing scripture, primarily because it was rewarded with donut holes (which was something we didn't get in Singapore and so was VERY motivating for me!). My father was ordained at BCEC in '93, and some years later, we came back to the Boston area more permanently where my parents served at the Chinese Bible Church or Greater Boston until they retired. I was away most of this time—first in college and then working out of Chicago. So, it is a special joy to be back with you over two decades later. I only wish that circumstances would've allowed me to greet you in person. Hopefully one day soon they will. But in the meantime, I'm deeply grateful for the ongoing ministry of this church and for this faithful attention to our role as part of God's creation.

Throughout the ages, Christians have often been leaders in caring for creation. It's an important aspect of our biblical discipleship and witness. But, sadly, it's become a blind spot for many churches today, especially in this country. Now, I grew up in the Church, but it wasn't until my undergraduate years at Wheaton College that I was able to connect my love for God and people with my passion for the rest of creation.

Skip forward over a decade. I'm now finishing a doctorate in environmental studies at the University of Florida, where part of my research focuses on the role of Christians in addressing issues like climate change. The data I've collected here line up with numerous other

studies showing that evangelical Christians in the United States tend to be among *the most* skeptical about climate science and *the least* supportive of environmental concerns. Many Christians here have a reputation for being *anti-climate* and *anti-environment*—does that sound familiar to you? But why? Why is this the case? I remember being asked at one of my talks, “Why is it that Christians argue so much about exactly how (or how long) God took to make the world, but then they treat it like it doesn’t matter. If you really believed that your God made this world, wouldn’t you treat it a lot better?”

Yes! Why are God’s people so often neglecting this? When you think about it, we have among the best reasons to care, and really, to be on the forefront of addressing environmental concerns, most fundamentally perhaps because it belongs to God, and we are called to care about what God cares about. But, even more so, creation care is an essential part of our discipleship and witness, not because it’s often trendy today, but because it is, and has always been, an integral part of God’s vision and mission in the world.

So, what does creation care have to do with God’s vision and God’s mission? This is the message I have been invited to remind us of today. So, let’s start at the beginning. Imagine with me....

(Creation) In the beginning there was darkness, emptiness, chaos....

But the Holy Spirit was hovering. Then God spoke, the Word went forth, ordering the chaos with day/night/sky/sea/land. And filling the void with plants/sun/moon/birds/ fish/and all the other creatures.

God spoke and it happened. And it was good, it was good, it was good, it was good. What was it? Yeah, it was good.

But something was lacking; creation was not yet complete. God spoke again: “Let’s make humans out of the humus. But let’s not make them like the fish, or the birds, or the land animals. Let’s make them like us, in our image. This way they can govern the fish and the birds and the land animals. We’ll create them set apart, so that they can rule in our name and on our behalf—in other words, so that they can be stewards of the rest of creation.”

So, God made humanity in God's own image. Male and female, he created them in the very image of God. And behold, it was all so very good. Creation was complete, it was flourishing, there was shalom. Please join me in this prayer from Psalm 8:

LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory in the heavens. Through the praise of children and infants you have established a stronghold against your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger. When (we) consider your heavens, the works of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is humanity that you are mindful of (us), human beings that you care for (us)? You have made (us) a little lower than the angels and crowned (us) with glory and honor. You made (us) rulers over the works of your hands; you put everything under (our) feet: all flocks and herds, and the animals of the wild, the birds in the sky, and the fish in the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas. LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Amen

(Rebellion) How did we ever forget what God made us for?

It was rebellion/an insurrection, instigated by the evil one but committed by our ancestors. They chose their way instead of God's, and their relationship with God was fractured. Without a right relationship with God, they couldn't be in right relationship with each another, nor within themselves, nor with the rest of creation. Injustice had been perpetrated, and where there is no justice there can be no peace—for people, for animals, or even for the land. The pure goodness, flourishing, and shalom was lost. Creation started to groan.

Can you imagine what it must have been like to lose shalom? Sadly, I think we can. For we are all part of this same story. We live in the reality of this broken world:

- A novel virus wreaking havoc across the planet
- Uncontrolled fires devastating human and nonhuman communities yearly from California to the Amazon and beyond
- Just recently, a deep freeze killing both people and wildlife in Texas

- Super-charged hurricanes pummeling islands and coastal regions—including my state of Florida—and sea-levels continuing to rise into our cities, our streets, and, in some places, even our homes.
- An estimated 4.6 million people currently die every year from causes related to air pollution.
- The last five years have been the hottest five on record, and we haven't seen a globally cooler than average month since Feb 1985. That's over 400 back-to-back-to-back warmer-than-average months. Over 400. In a row.

Other global crises include contaminated water, chronic malnutrition, polluted air, growing deserts, declining fisheries, acidifying seas, the largest refugee crisis in history, and the list goes on....

And remember all those good things God made and entrusted to our care – the fish, birds, and other creatures? Recent studies estimate that in the last fifty years we've lost three billion birds in North America and sixty percent of wildlife globally. It's being described as the "thinning" of life. How is this bearing our Creator's image?

All these socio-ecological problems we're facing—many of them connected with and exacerbated by climate change—they aren't JUST environmental problems, or just political problems, or even just scientific problems. Were the biblical prophets with us today, they would remind us, as Hosea does in chapter four of his book, that the wellbeing of people and of the land are intimately connected, and that environmental problems are symptoms of deeper illnesses—like greed, pride, selfishness, apathy, and every kind of corruption. In other words, these are all moral problems; they're spiritual problems; they're sin problems.

There's a great evil and brokenness in the world—including in the Church—and we can no more save this earth than we can save ourselves or our communities. At the end of the day, what we desperately need is a solution to sin, at every level and in every place—as far as the curse is found.

(Reconciliation) And thanks be to God, there is a solution; there is an intervention:

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in Jesus Christ, and through Christ to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross (Colossians 1:19-20).

Sometimes I think we make Jesus out to be only partially successful—that he took on flesh and came here to save us humans while giving up on the rest of his creation. But the Apostle Paul is clear in Colossians chapter 1 that the “all things” that Jesus created, are the same “all things” that Jesus sustains, and are the very same “all things” that Jesus is reconciling to himself through his blood shed on the cross. As one of my friends puts it, “the cross is for all of the fall.”

This is still our Father’s world, and he is not giving up on it; neither should we. The global Lausanne Movement, first convened by Billy Graham and John Stott, representing thousands of evangelical leaders from 200 countries, puts it this way in the statement from their last global congress in Cape Town, South Africa. They write:

The Bible declares God’s redemptive purpose for creation itself. Integral mission means discerning, proclaiming, and living out the biblical truth that the gospel is God’s good news, through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, for individual persons, and for society, and for creation. All three are broken and suffering because of sin; all three are included in the redeeming love and mission of God; all three must be part of the comprehensive mission of God’s people (The Cape Town Commitment, Part I, Section 7).

4. (Mission) In other words, as God’s people, we are all called to be on mission with God, and creation care is an integral part of that mission

What an extraordinary privilege. And we know how this mission ends. We are assured that one day, there will be no more darkness, no more suffering, no more injustice, for the old order of things will pass away. On that day, the day of Revelation 22, all things will be made new, shalom will be restored, creation will flourish with every nation, tribe, and tongue, and

God Almighty will dwell among us as we rule together forever and ever. Just as it was intended since the very beginning.

This will come to pass, one glorious day. But even now, dear sisters and brothers, we can be part of loving and restoring the people and places where God has called us. For we are loved to love, we are reconciled to reconcile, and we are being transformed to transform.

These aren't just abstract ideas, as my colleagues in A Rocha will testify. A Rocha is an international Christian conservation organization working in over 20 countries to show God's love for all creation.

In the UK, in a predominantly immigrant neighborhood around London called Southhall, local Christians who were part of A Rocha helped transform a 90-acre dumping ground at the center of their community into the beautiful Minet Country Park. What was once a community hazard and eyesore is now restored to a lush green oasis that has playgrounds for kids, facilities for community events, and trails for walking, jogging, and biking. Over one hundred species of birds have now been recorded from this urban site along with numerous other wildlife. And if you get to visit Southhall, as I have, and you ask how that beautiful space came to be, the community will tell you that it's the Christians who did this! From an abandoned wasteland to a flourishing garden—this is what it looks like to “write the gospel into the landscape,” as we often say in A Rocha.

In Kenya, the national A Rocha group is working to help protect the last remaining coastal forests around Malindi. These forests are important habitat for numerous species, including some endangered ones, but they have largely been cut down by communities in need of livelihoods, building materials, cooking fuel, and land. Within this challenging context, A Rocha has been working from within their communities to help raise awareness about the importance of the forest and identify alternatives that help the community generate income from protecting the forest instead of from chopping it down. They're doing this in part through developing ecotourism projects that are run by local community members. The revenue from these ecotourism projects then goes toward providing scholarships for kids in that area to go to school.

Here in the U.S., A Rocha is hard at work resourcing Christians and churches with the tools to better care for creation. We're doing this through developing nature-based Vacation Bible School curricula that help kids connect with the Creator through learning about creation. We also work with Christian music artists to write and distribute music for churches that address key creational themes, which are such important aspects of our theology. A major focus these past couple years is on the Love Your Place program. Love Your Place is an online community resources that any of you could sign up for—it provides a diverse range of resources, trainings, and connections around ways to care for creation in your own daily lives.

Additionally, we have various community groups and projects around the country, including at my alma mater, Wheaton College, which is how I first got involved with A Rocha. The Wheaton chapter has been going for almost two decades now and has helped make creation care a key concern across this influential Christian campus. This has included improving the recycling, starting a campus garden, mobilizing student government to improve sustainability policies, reducing food waste in the cafeteria, and much more. They've also partnered with the local forest preserve district to conduct research on protecting key species and habitats, which has helped build greater awareness around wetland conservation in the community and even resulted in a peer-reviewed journal article.

Much more can be said about A Rocha: in France, Peru, Ghana, India and many other places. But another growing movement that encourages me is Young Evangelicals for Climate Action (YECA): through YECA, college students and young adults across the country are stepping up to lead their campuses and churches in responding faithfully to the challenge of climate change, which younger generations are increasingly concerned about having to inherit and deal with. Actually, one of YECA's leaders, Elysia Moy, is part of this church! What a great resource to have here, as well as a direct link into the cutting edge of the creation care movement in this country.

There so many more examples I could share – but what sort of example or witness will you be? What sort of example or witness will BCEC be?

I'm profoundly grateful for my heritage and faith, which, as you know, is tied to this church. I'm especially grateful for your social concerns team and their vision for this conference

focused on creation care and climate action. I know they've been working hard on this for the past couple years, especially Jay who I've emailed and talked with a number of times leading up to this week. This is good, missional work. I pray that many other churches will follow your lead here, and that the things we're talking about now will lead to meaningful action and produce lasting fruit, both here and in your broader communities.

For there is a great need here no matter who you are, where you are in life, and what your calling may be. We need more Christians who can work through business to create good for God's world. We need teachers who can educate future generations about how to live well in creation, we need entrepreneurs who can innovate new approaches and strategies, engineers who can design, manufacturers who can build, artists who can imagine and inspire, politicians who can govern, lawyers who can hold society and corporations accountable, and so much more.

And we also need people to pray. We can all pray. Pray for God's creation, pray for those being impacted by environmental degradation, pray for those perpetrating environmental injustice, and pray for God's people to be faithful in showing God's love for all creation.

If we had time we could keep going. But may God help us to see the many significant ways that creation care fits into our lives, our churches, our communities, and our callings. For the same choice that our ancestors faced, faces us still today: will we choose to go in God's way, to be part of God's mission, or will we rebel and choose our own?

"Creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God" (Romans 8:19-21).

"You are the light of the world. A town on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good works and give glory to your father in heaven" (Matthew 5:14-16).

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.