**Caring for Creation Sermon**

**“RECLAIMING THIS WORLD’S ONLY TRUE WONDER”**

**Leviticus 5:15-16, Romans 1:20-25**

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 Way back in the ancient days of the late 1970’s, I distinctly being mesmerized as we learned about the “Seven Natural Wonders of the World”. And of course, being “all-boy” I was convinced that there was an 8th wonder as well, because that was the nickname the professional wrestling commentators gave tp Andre the Giant. But leaving Andre aside, these seven “wonders” are just spectacular! They are snapshots of creation in all it’s glory that will take your breath away and leave you in awe of this incredible world that we get to call home. In case you don’t remember them all, they include the Northern Lights, the Grand Canyon, Paricutin, Mount Everest, Harbor of Rio de Janeiro, Victoria Falls, and the Great Barrier Reef. And as brilliant as they are to experience up close, they’re even more awesome from a distance. As cool as I am sure it is to see it up close if you raft down the winding rivers of the Grand Canyon or ride down to the bottom on a donkey, I have a hunch that the view from Desert View or Hermit’s Rest where you can just soak in miles and miles of canyon as it blends into the horizon will leave you in speechless. Each of the 7 is like that, so it’s no wonder they’re called “WONDERS!”

 I do find it ironic though that when we speak of the “ Seven Wonders of this World” we now have to make it clear as to whether you’re talking about the great seven **natural** wonders or a different set of seven, the most magnificent **man-made** structures in the world. To me, something seems off in giving the same title to the greatest accomplishments of man as we assign to the work of The One who created the heavens and the earth. This is not to say that the Great Pyramids of Giza, or the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, or the Statue of Zeus at Olympia are not incredible accomplishments……….but describing the natural wonders alongside the man-made wonders and calling them all “wonders” does reflect a truth that is not lost in the pages of God’s Word. For in the first chapter of his letter to the Romans, Paul pens these words:

 “***For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what is made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. Therefore, God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather the Creator, who is blessed forever.”***

Only in a world where everything is completely turned upside down would anyone ever consider serving or worshipping those things which have been created rather than bowing down and worshipping the Creator of all those things! But then again, this is exactly the world we have created for ourselves and the deceptive ways that make us foolish sinners feel wise. Paul’s words to the Romans certainly speak truth about the fact that the Creator of this universe, the architect of this planet, and the One through whom all things have been made gave us ample evidence of His splendor and majesty long before Jesus ever left His throne in heaven and humbled Himself by taking the form of a servant. Creation itself declares the glory of God, and never forget that Jesus Himself declared that if there were ever a day when man refused to acknowledge God, the rocks themselves would cry it out!

As Paul states so perfectly, even though His eternal power and divine nature can clearly be seen through creation and things that have been made……….humanity chose a different path and exchanged that great truth for a lie. And rather than honoring God and giving thanks for this glorious world He has given us as a tribute to Himself and a reminder for us, we have become foolish, choosing to worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator. Plain and simple, because of our sinful choices and the fallen world we have created for ourselves, we have given up so much in order to gain so little……….and are even proud of our accomplishments and temporarily satisfied in our ways. If you doubt whether the satisfaction of earthly accomplishments is fleeting, just ask Solomon or read the 11 chapters of Ecclesiastes where the wisest, richest, most accomplished man who ever lived declared that it was all vanity!

 Because of sin, we often look at the beauty and intelligence behind something that is man-made and we lift it to a place that has been reserved for another, in THE place that the Creator of this universe has reserved for Himself at the center of our hearts. This is the fruit of what Jeremiah was talking about when he declared that above all else the heart is deceitful and desperately sick. Our diseased hearts crave making ourselves the star of the story, finding ways to become the center of our own little universe, and for the world around us to become a reflection of ***what we can do***, ***what we can make***, ***where we can go***……….and ***how quickly, cheaply, impressively, and efficiently we can get there***. And yet, without the work of The Creator who created with a purpose, we would have nothing and we would be nothing! Remember how things were before God spoke the heavens and earth into being. There was nothing, nothing except a darkness that hovered over the surface of the deep.

 Don’t you see my friends? We so easily get sucked into this false belief that God made this world FOR US when the reality is that God made this world for Himself, so that His glory, His majesty, and His divine nature could and would be on display for all of time (or at least until the view of God got better through the incarnation of Jesus Christ our Lord). **Yes,** it is true that we, as humanity, are special among all of creation as we alone were intended to be a fullest reflection of God Himself. And **YES,** it is important to know that many of the things God made were specifically intended to sustain us and give us joyful lives. It is no accident that we breathe in oxygen and breathe out carbon dioxide while at the same time trees and plants breathe in that carbon dioxide and breathe out the very oxygen we need. God did that for us, but God also did that for ALL of creation! The world around us was never given to us to “use and abuse” until it has been raped and robbed of all it’s value. Or even worse, until it has become so altered and distorted that it no longer even reflect the glory of the Creator who made it all. This world may have been made for us to enjoy, but it was NEVER MADE exclusively for us. God did not hand this world to us so that we might have the most comfortable 80, 90, or 100 years we could……….but the care of creation was placed in our hands so that we might be good caretakers and stewards of what God has made. God clearly declared through Paul that the greatest evidence of His existence other than the incarnation of Christ himself. And just look at how we treat it! But then, again folks didn’t treat Jesus too kindly either when He walked the earth.

 I believe our calling as followers of Jesus Christ is to rediscover what has been lost, to become what we have never really been, and to restore the damage that those who have come before us as much as we possibly can with every day we have. Maybe even as followers of Jesus we have looked to the person of Christ so intently that we have stopped listening to what He told us about the majesty of God that we can see in the world. Do not misunderstand, it is vitally important that we always look to Christ for He is the only experience salvation. But, I believe that it is possible that even in clinging to Jesus, we can neglect the greatest piece of evidence that there is a God who sent His Son or maybe fail to see it’s value in assisting us point the world to Jesus. I heard a great quote once, and I do not recall who said it first, but it says “when the only tool we have is a hammer, we tend to treat everything like a nail”. Perhaps in our effort to confront the world of it’s sin, our passion to bring them to Jesus even if we have bring them kicking and screaming, we have failed to recognize the worth of pointing out creation as the second greatest calling card of God. Creation is still the handywork of God and neither it’s purpose nor it’s splendor has not been diminished because God became flesh. In fact, Creation and the Incarnation accentuate one another. Unfortunately though, I think the truth is that most Christians have failed to realize that truth and failed to be good stewards of the very first tool God used to build the case of evidence for His existence.

 Chase this rabbit with me a little further. If creation’s purpose is to provide evidence that there is a Creator, then we would say that God has set His creation aside for a specific purpose. Is that not the very definition of the word “HOLY?” When something is deemed “HOLY” it means that it has been set aside for a specific, special purpose. Paul’s words in Romans 1 that we read today shout it from the heavens above that CREATION ITSELF IS HOLY UNTO GOD!

Noted Christian Author Author MAX LUCADO wrote a great article in the Christian Post several years ago and in it he pointed out 7 things which are defined as “Holy” by the teachings of the New Testament. He says:

1. YOU ARE HOLY

2. HUMAN LIFE IS HOLY

3. MARRIAGE IS HOLY

4. SEX IS HOLY

5. SABBATH REST IS HOLY

6. STEWARDSHIP IS HOLY

7. THE NAME OF GOD IS HOLY

Max did a great job in compiling this list, but maybe it’s time to add CREATION to that list and acknowledge together that God considers all of creation “HOLY” as well. Because it is only when we begin treating creation as “holy” that we will really begin to grasp the full picture of what it means to be God’s people.

 Now here’s where this gets deep, maybe even a little deeper than most are willing to go. The Book of Leviticus begins with a list of five different types of offerings that the Lord told His chosen people to bring to Him. Of course, this was in the earliest days of their official relationship and so God was making it very clear what He desired within the covenant relationship. The problem was that the perfect God was continually being offended by the imperfect people and He had to establish ways for reconciliation to take place. So He told them to bring specific offerings for specific reasons.

 The “burnt offering” was a symbol of commitment and surrender to God.

 The “grain offering” was a way of saying “thank you for being God”.

 The “peace offering” sealed covenants, made vows official, and showed gratitude for specifically answered prayers.

 The “sin offering” sought forgiveness when God’s people had unintentionally shamed themselves and brought dishonor to Him.

But the 5th offering was different. It was called the “Guilt Offering” and the Guilt Offering was specifically intended to make things right when something that had been declared as “holy” had been treated by the people as if it were common or without value. It might be as simple as using one of the priest’s tools in a way that it had not been intended for, or it may be as complex as abusing or mistreating another of God’s chosen people. Among the five different offerings that God told His people to bring to Him, it was only the Guilt Offering that also included an additional penalty to be paid before restoration was complete.

 If you read Leviticus 5 and 6 you will hear multiple times that the consequence for damaged property was replacing it AND THEN add 20% of it’s value as a fine. For making yourself the center of the story, for considering created things more important than the owner (or Creator) of those things, for treating what had been declared as “holy” as if it were common…………not only did you have a responsibility to restore, you had to go above and beyond to add to it!

 In Isaiah 53, we are told that Jesus WAS A GUILT OFFERING. God has made a promise to us that because of what Jesus did, in presenting Himself as a GUILT OFFERING, He not only got us out of debt with God, but He provided a way for us to be adopted into God’s own family as well. That’s making things better than they were before IF EVER I HAVE HEARD IT BEING DONE!

 In terms of creation care, there is some low hanging fruit here and easy examples of application. Once we have become the recipients of grace, we are called to offer grace to others as well. Once we have been pulled out of darkness and into the light, we are to take carry light into those places that are still dark. We don’t always do those things well, but I do think that all maturing followers of Jesus will discover those two callings without exception.

 But what if we were to consider the part we have played during our time in the dark of not being good stewards of creation? What if we were to take seriously the words of Paul in Romans 1 and begin to grasp that the intent of creation was not just so we might have something to enjoy or a luxurious place to live………but to announce the glory and majesty of God Himself. Would not a vital part of the living out of our salvation ***have to*** include beginning to treat what has been declared as “holy” like it really is holy? Would not part of the great calling of our lives as followers of Jesus Christ then also include not just “fixing what we have broken” but worshipping our Creator who saved us through Jesus Christ by going the extra mile, paying it forward, and doing our small part to leaving this world better off than it was before we added to the mess?

 There are countless ways that we can worship and bring honor to the name of God by caring for His creation and treating it as “holy” because it is. But, the purpose of this sermon is not to tell you to start riding your bike to work, to stop using aerosol sprays, to reduce your carbon footprint by a certain percentage, how to make Smokey the Bear happy by preventing forest fires, or to stop making that Indian chief cry by throwing trash out your car window when driving down the road. (remember that commercial from the 70’s?) All of those are worthy ideas and there are 100’s more to add to that list. But I believe that the church needs a starting point, and that is not focusing on ***what we should do***, but focusing on ***why we should care***!

 And just to be abundantly clear, we should care because out of the darkness that hovered over the deep, God said “let there be light” and called every beautiful that we have ever seen and experienced in this world into being so that we might recognize the majesty, splendor, and glory of the one who made it all. For me, this all points to one great truth, that there really aren’t 7 great wonders of the world, but just 1. And His name is God, and we see Him clearly through creation and up close through Jesus. For through Him all things that have ever been made came into existence, through Him all things that are at this moment held together are being held together, and all things that ever will be will come about when He returns for His people.

 Until then, may we be known as people who are good stewards of what He has left in or hands. May we seek to treat His creation as “HOLY”.