



# The Sanctity of Life: The Perfect Place

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The best starting place to talk about the Sanctity of Life is to begin where life began, and that is Earth. God uniquely put this beautiful place called Earth together so that life could exist here. Earth is the place where God generated life. Even man was made out of the dust of the earth. Let's look at this idea of Earth being the perfect place that God created for life.

Look with me at the biblical description of the earth being created in six days. It is just really cool how God put this whole thing together. The first day God created light. Light is the energy that makes any life possible. If you don't have light, you don't have life. So boom! God said, "Let there be light." And there was light. We don't have the stars or anything yet; we just have light! The next day he decided to start giving some shape to the stew of elements that he had created. He did this by separating the waters above from the waters below on the earth. You have to understand that the ancients believed the sky was like a hard translucent blue dome storing water above it and releasing it through rain. Then there were the great oceans on the earth and between the two was the sky. God wanted to make this place the perfect place for life, so it couldn't be one big mess here.

The next day God separated the waters on earth from the solid land. The great seas appeared, as did the awesome mountain ranges. When the dry land appeared, vegetation began to grow, which would be able to sustain life. God was beginning to get the place to grow. He was putting the things in place that would be needed for more complex life forms to thrive. So, now we have light, we have water, and we have land and vegetation.

One amazing thing about Earth is the amount of water that there is on this globe. We have these beautiful and amazing oceans that, as of yet, have been found in no other place. Without the oceans, without the water that we have, we would not have life. Do you know how amazing, how miraculous, water is? There isn't anything else like it. Water it is the perfect liquid. It is a solvent for almost all other elements and when it freezes, it actually becomes less dense, so that ice floats! Can you imagine what would happen if our lakes started freezing from the bottom up, or if our ice cubes just sat on the bottom our lemonade? Scary!

In the first three days of creation we saw God making places, and now in the next three days He's going to fill these places. He set up this whole expanse of light and

now filled that light with the celestial bodies: sun, moon, and billions of stars. There is an awesome beauty to the sky and all the planets, stars, moons, and other celestial bodies that declare their Maker's glory.

Then after the sky was filled, God filled up the air and the water with birds and fish. He didn't just make a few of them, He made swarms of them! And then, of course, the next day He had to fill up the land, so He created man and animals. He made Earth a special place for life in all of its diversity, beauty, and complexity. It is incredible if you've ever thought of how privileged this planet is among all of the planets that we know about.

This is a very special place. A couple of years ago Discover Magazine ran an article entitled, "Earth May Be a 1-in-700-Quintillion Kind of Place." Yup, that's right, 1-in-700 quintillion. That's a 7 followed by 20 zeros. That's how many rocky planets are estimated to be in the universe. For all of the conditions to be exactly like Earth, where life thrives, it's a one in 700 quintillion possibility. Sure, nobody has visited all these planets, yet God knows them well, and they say the likelihood of any other planet having the unique circumstances of Earth is highly improbable. Earth is just the right distance away from a sun—a sun that's not too big, because if the sun is too big there'll be too much gravitational force, and Earth would not rotate around its axis. But our dear Earth is in the habitable zone of a star where everything is just right; not too hot and not too cold, as Goldilocks would say. It is absolutely incredible to think about all the things that have to fall into place perfectly to be able to have life. This has led astrophysicist Erik Zackrisson to say, "From a purely statistical standpoint, Earth perhaps shouldn't exist."

Earth is a very, very special place and God has called us to care for it. The first two chapters of Genesis teach us that he commissioned mankind to fill, subdue, rule, work, and care for the earth. So let's look into what God might have in mind for us to do in our care of the earth.

Fill it is pretty obvious—we need to fill this place with people so that everyone can enjoy it. But also explore it—we can go places and see things that God has done and say, "Wow, this is amazing!" One of the most beautiful things is to go around and fulfill the command to go out and fill it, to see what's around us; travel around, see what God has done. It's amazing, it's glorious, and it's a beautiful place!

God says we should rule and subdue it. Now those are the same words that God often uses when he talks about a king ruling over a nation. They need to control it, but also not destroy it. If you read throughout the Bible it talks about what a good king does. Listen to what Ezekiel 34:4 says of rulers who are not ruling well, "You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the

injured, you have not brought back the strays, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them.” Those who rule over creation need to have this same perspective of deep care for a broken world.

And the other thing God talks about is to work with and to care for creation like a garden. These are priestly words. So, talking to man as both king and priest, He tells us to take care of, nurture, work, and tend the garden He’s given us. In other words, you might say God has called us to be stewards of this place. He made this a one of a kind place, and it is as if He said, “Dear ones, made in my image, you are the stewards who are to care for what I am giving to you. I am not going to quit working. I am still going to be here. This is my sacred space. This is where I want to engage with you. I want to walk with you in the cool of the morning; and with you, I want to enjoy all the things I made. To do that, I want you to take care of this place for me.”

Our stewardship of the earth has not changed since Adam and Eve sinned. It’s just more work. Our calling and our commission, the first one we received from God, is to care for this earth. So it is probably good to ask how we are treating this fabulous place. How are we doing in caring for this special place where God has brought about life?

There are actually three areas where we should do a self-check. The first check is to ask ourselves how we are caring for the space between the waters above and the waters below. How are we caring for our atmosphere and what should be done about a rapidly changing climate? And how does that indicate how we are taking care of this special place, this one of a kind, non-disposable place?

In 2012, the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church got together to talk about a report concerning creation stewardship that had been in the works for about three years. The report dealt a lot with climate change, because they thought that was perhaps the biggest thing that needed to be addressed concerning the stewardship of the earth. At that Synod, they made a variety of pronouncements based on the careful research of scientists and theologians. Synod made several statements to publish to the churches of the Christian Reformed denomination. I would like to share a couple of them with you.

First they declared: “It is the current near-consensus of the international scientific community that climate change is occurring and is very likely due to human activity.” Now this statement may fly in the face of some of the things you hear and maybe even believe. This statement is not politically motivated or one which the scientists and theologians are making for personal gain. But after three years of seriously looking at the scriptures and the science, and prayerfully seeking God’s direction in their work, they came away with this conclusion. And when they say near consensus, they are talking about roughly 90% of scientists who say that this is what’s happening—that

climate change is occurring and that it is very likely due to human activity. There’s hardly any way to get around that anymore.

The second statement says, “Human-induced climate change is an ethical, social justice, and religious issue.” There are a few people who will say that humans can’t do anything to destroy this earth. Well, we can do a lot of things (in fact, we have enough thermonuclear weapons in the world today to basically destroy the earth), but Satan can, too. Caring for creation is not merely a physical exercise, it is a spiritual battle. After the fall of mankind into sin, Satan became, as Jesus described him, the prince of this world. He would like nothing better than to destroy this beautiful creation of God, his arch enemy. Unfortunately, Satan can get all kinds of people to help him do that. We are in a spiritual battle and it is important to name that battle and address it. This is what Synod’s statement about climate change does very well.

We cannot omit the ethical and social justice issues as well. Let me just give you an example from my experience as a missionary in El Salvador. I lived there while a civil war raged in the 1980s. I was church-planting in a small rural town named Huizucar. This beautiful village was surrounded by coffee plantations. Hundreds of the people there worked picking coffee when those yummy beans ripened. On my last visit there just three years ago, all the coffee plants had died and they were no longer caring for them. I asked my hosts why this was happening. They quickly, and correctly, said it was due to climate change. They told me that they have grown coffee in this area for as long as they have known. But now the same plants cannot take the heat, and they are experimenting with new varieties. This has put hundreds of people out of work in an economy which already struggles with high unemployment. Add this to the violence in the country and you begin to understand how climate change affects mass migrations of people to other countries.

A second check we need to add is the loss of species. Again, God has created everything uniquely. And He took all of those animals and birds, and He brought them to Adam, and He said I want you to name these things. I don’t know what the names were that Adam gave them (after all he did not speak Latin), but we now know the species by our own names. The point is that the process of having Adam name the animals and birds means that God intended Adam to have a relationship of protection and care with them. What would God say if, under Adam’s care, one of the animals went missing?

In the United States, just over 100 years ago, there used to be passenger pigeons by the billions. Then people started to kill them for meat. People were so certain you could never make a dent in their population. You can find pictures from the early 1900s where a person is standing in front of a pile of dead passenger pigeons that is over 20 feet tall. Folks would pack the pigeons into barrels and ship them to the East Coast, to Boston and New York, where people would eat them.

When a Michigan Potawatomi leader, Pokagan, witnessed how the passenger pigeon was being slaughtered by the millions, he wondered what type of divine punishment might be “awaiting our white neighbors who have so wantonly butchered and driven from our forests these wild pigeons, the most beautiful flowers of the animal creation of North America.” And in a span of about 30 years, every single passenger pigeon was killed. They no longer exist. The interesting thing is that the people who wanted to kill them said, if you restrict the killing, people will lose their jobs. Now, you’ve heard that over and over again. “Let’s not do anything for the environment because people are going to lose their employment.”

Unfortunately, the extinction of species has not stopped. You have probably seen a picture of a Spix Macaw, made famous in the Disney movie Rio. God painted those feathers iridescent blue, and gave them a nice black beak, and beautiful penetrating eyes. The Spix was a large macaw that numbered in the thousands. And now scientists believe the last one died, about 6 or 7 years ago. There are 70 of them still alive in captivity, but there are no more in Latin America.

Mankind was given the privilege to name and care for the animals and the birds. God brought all of those specific animals over to Adam and said, “Hey look at this one! It’s beautiful! What are you going to name it?” So Adam named it, and by naming it he gave it value. God told him to take care of this special creature He had created. But, I’m not so sure that we’ve done as good of a job as we could. What will we say when someday God asks us about His passenger pigeons?

Now, on to the third and last item we much check. How about plastic pollution? What about ubiquitous water bottles showing up everywhere? The unfortunate thing about a lot of fish and birds is that they eat plastic. From whales that get beached in Norway and Thailand to albatrosses on the Marshall Islands, thousands of animals that God has entrusted to our care are dying from ingesting plastic. I could show you picture after picture of rivers emptying into our oceans in the U.S. and around the world that are floating with plastics of all kinds.

We now dump into the ocean every year, intentionally or not, 8,000,000 metric tons of plastic. Environmentalists figure there’s probably about 150,000,000 metric tons of plastic in the oceans right now. They figure in another 20 to 30 years the weight of the plastic in the ocean will outweigh the fish in the ocean. So how much is 8,000,000 metric tons of plastic that gets dumped into the ocean? I filled five plastic grocery bags with plastic garbage. Eight million metric tons means that for every 1 foot of shoreline around the ocean, there are five bags of plastic trash that are going into the ocean. Now, I don’t know how many of you have walked some of the shorelines in Florida, or maybe California, or anywhere along the Gulf of Mexico or the Jersey

Shore, but realize, there’s a lot of shoreline around all of the oceans in the world. And if you figure that for every one foot of shoreline, you line up five plastic bags full of plastic garbage, that’s what’s going into the oceans every year!

So how is the Church of Jesus Christ doing at caring for the world which was created through Christ? Not so good. This is very frustrating. And it should be frustrating. Of all the people on the earth, those who acknowledge our creator God should be aggressively caring for what He has created. Today, it is one of our greatest opportunities to witness to the world our love for God and His Earth. But we have all but abandoned God’s cause of a clean, beautiful and healthy Earth. We live on this 1-in-700 quintillion Earth with the magnificent opportunity to teach others how to care for it and about the God who created it, but we have not been faithful to the calling. People will not be interested in the God who created the earth if his own family is not obedient in caring for it.

I think it is due to the fact that mankind was created to care for our environment that we find people everywhere doing just that. However, it is so unfortunate that often those very people, who have the most knowledge of God in Christ, are not as serious in caring for creation as many other people who have little knowledge of God. Unfortunately, in fact, some Christians, instead of being on the cutting edge of creation care, are actually dragging their feet. But what an opportunity we are squandering by not coming alongside of anybody who is leaning into the care of our magnificent Earth. Christians have a great opportunity to engage with anybody who has a keen interest in caring for our environment and letting them know the great motivation for our concern, given to all of us by the Creator. The conversation could even go further.

I remember when the Magi came seeking the King of the Jews. All they had was what they saw in the sky, or general revelation, which brought them to Jerusalem. From the heavens which declare the glory of God, they understood a king was born. This knowledge took them to Jerusalem. But it was the testimony of Scripture that brought them to Jesus, the one born in Bethlehem. There are great numbers of people on this planet who are coming towards God because of their care for what He has created, though they might not even know it. For them, it might simply be the “green” thing to do. However, if Christians can work alongside of others in our care for creation, we have the opportunity to be witnesses to the Creator and the Savior. Perhaps, in God’s grace, some will come to Faith.

We have a great opportunity to care for this 1-in-700 quintillion place which God has created in order for life to thrive here. And as we do so, we will have many opportunities to reclaim the wonders of our God and Savior through whom all things were made. Let’s go in joy and do it.

Rev. Gerry Koning is the pastor of Trinity Christian Reformed Church in Grandville, MI. He is the 2019 recipient of the Creation Care Pastoral Leadership Award, a recognition given by the Au Sable Institute to a church leader who is committed to serving, protecting and restoring God's earth. Rev. Koning delivered this sermon to his congregation as part of a sermon series on the sanctity of life.



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