

Creation Care: Our Stewardship of Creation

Part Two: Understanding the Human Footprint on Planet Earth in Biblical Perspective

Some long-time Christians feel ambivalent about environmental concerns. This is partly a reaction to excesses in the early environmental movement. Key papers in the 1970's pitted environmentalism over and against faith; this led to the impression that environmentalists think humans are bad news and should go away; that the choice is between human need and the survival of endangered species, or between the environment and economic development. The tune has changed within the environmental movement, but first impressions are lasting. My goal today is to move beyond "isms" thinking, and to embrace a biblically-informed perspective on our responsibility within God's creation.

Our topic is *Understanding the Human Footprint in Biblical Perspective*. Here it is in a nutshell: **We humans are a mixed blessing; we've had a negative impact on the world around us, but by the saving grace of God we can become part of the solution, and can find our rightful place in creation.**

Within the biblical understanding of the human footprint on the creation is a dynamic tension between pitfall and promise; between unvarnished truth and hope. If we can get this right, we can settle into a better relationship with the environment, and contribute to society's response to environmental concerns. I want us, as a church, to be in position to make that contribution.

The Gospel is most powerful story ever told. It bears personal, social, and global transformation... It changes lives and relationships, near and far. It is the divine catalyst for addressing our most pressing global concerns. The gospel is a great big gospel because God is a great big God!

We're going to tackle *understanding the human footprint* not from a single text, but with a biblical sweep from start to finish. Within that sweep we'll see themes of pitfall and promise, a painfully honest assessment, and hope.

Gen. 1: 24-31: Here we see humans in the context of a vast and flourishing creation. They bear a unique dignity: they are made in God's image. They have a leadership role (rule). The rule is not a self-serving domination, it is a self-giving servant leadership. It is rule, nevertheless. Here we see it is

the human destiny to be a global species, to multiply and fill earth. Humans were not just to occupy a local ecological niche, but a global one.

Gen. 2: 15. Part of our "rule" as image-bearers is to "*work it and take care of it.*" The Hebrew word *work* is a worship word, referring to our priestly service to God; the Hebrew *take care* means to guard and protect. We are to be the Earth's tenders and protectors.

Gen. 3: 17-19. *The Fall From Grace Environmental Impact Statement.* As we strayed from our calling, our relationship with God, others and creation as a whole shifted from the realm of blessing, to curse; from fruitful to futile; from harmonious and true to discordant and bent out-of-round.

Genesis 3: 15. Imbedded in tragedy, the promise of restoration is to come through a human line, fulfilled in Jesus ("the woman's seed").

Mark Twain once said, "A lie runs half way 'round the world, while the truth is putting on its shoes." As story unfolds, the negative impact of humanity runs half way around world, while truth is putting on her shoes. Truth will prevail, but only in the end.

The promise moves slowly from a "woman's offspring" through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob--the people of Israel who will give birth to the Savior. Eventually, "All shall be well and all manner of things shall be well!"

Meanwhile, the pitfall widens into an abyss spreading over time and earth; human culture develops, spreads, mixing blessing and curse. The spread of humanity is part of the original *blessed command*; culture, technology, and increasing complexity are implicit in the blessed command. The Bible, however, is unflinching in facing the devastating impact of that spread.

Genesis 4. Cain kills Abel! Abel is a hunter-gatherer who offers what he's hunted in sacrifice; Cain is a farmer bringing a grain offering. Abel's sacrifice is pleasing; Cain's, mysteriously, is not.

Sound ecology! Shift from hunger-gathering to more advanced farming brought a cost to environment (disrupted habitat, making way for cities that do further damage). Right here in the book of beginnings it's begun. "Mixed blessing" is putting it mildly!

"The Lord God saw how great man's wickedness on earth had become and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all

the time. The Lord was grieved that he made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain." (Gen. 6: 5-6)

Notice the focus here: man's wickedness on *earth*, grief over making man on *earth*... Man's footprint is trampling one: soiling, spoiling, ruining God's good earth. (As the lie travels half way round the world...)

Next comes the flood as judgment, with a remnant and the promise preserved. Then, the tower of Babel. **Genesis 11: 1-4:** Humans have multiplied again, gathered into complex society with a common language and advancing technology [baking the bricks, tar for mortar, work teams, ladders, architects, engineers, etc.].

God's response? "*Oh no! My little geniuses, always smarter than they are wise--I've got to slow them down to let wisdom catch up with them!*" So he scatters them. In spite of this, they regroup to form Babylon, the land of Chaldeans, out which comes Abram. The promise slowly unfolds as the seed of Abraham, divine wisdom, is making his way through the gene pool to Mary of Nazareth, whose son will gather again. All the while, the pitfall widens. Humanity expands, cities proliferate, pollution spreads. Population of the biblical era numbers in millions, today numbered in billions.

HUMAN ECOLOGICAL IMPACT PATTERN: We expand as technology advances; we then run wild [examples are pollution in industrial England; across the pond, cowboys wipe out buffalo; in 1800's we clear-cut Michigan's virgin white pines]. But, slowly, wisdom puts her shoes on and catches up. We then say, "Oh, this is excessive!" and do better...

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Because the Bible was written when human footprint smaller, the soiling and spoiling of the environment was not as bad then as it is today. The ruin of the good land, however, was on already on the Bible's radar:

"Your children who follow you in later generations and foreigners who come from distant lands will see the calamities that have fallen on the land and the diseases with which the LORD has afflicted it. The whole land will be a burning waste of salt and sulfur—nothing planted, nothing sprouting, no vegetation growing on it." (Dt. 29: 22-23)

"I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak...I will shepherd the flock with justice. 'As for you, my flock, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will judge between one sheep and another... Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet?" Ezekiel 34:16-18

In Revelation, a global environmental crisis seems to be on radar: a third of the sea ruined, a third of the sea creatures lost, a third of the rivers, and springs [Rev. 8: 8-10].

"We give You thanks, O Lord God, the Almighty, who are and who were, because You have taken Your great power and have begun to reign. And the nations were enraged, and Your wrath came, and the time came for the dead to be judged, and the time to reward Your bond-servants the prophets and the saints and those who fear Your name, the small and the great, and to destroy those who destroy the earth."
Revelation 11:17-19 (NASB)

Then, good news in the middle of a battered land!

Gehenna, a toxic dump. Jesus used *gehenna* as warning word for hell, place you didn't want to end up. It refers to an open pit of toxic waste, bodies, human waste, garbage--so bad it could only be burned, which just spreads the contamination.

Golgotha, place of the skull, where he died. Here he pulled into himself everything in us that destroys us, our relationship with God and each other, and that causes us to trample the earth like a bull in china shop. Thank God for the third place!

Garden: where Jesus rose the first day of a new week! Mary thought he was *gardener*. The promise of new creation has begun!

Finally something good happens ahead of schedule, makes *early* arrival--
"Before she was in labor she gave birth! A land brought forth in a day, a nation in a moment!" (Is. 66) Something of the future--at last a 'divine hurry up!'--breaking into the present.

Morning has broken, like the first morning
Blackbird has spoken, like the first bird

Praise for the singing, praise for the morning
Praise for the springing fresh from the word

Sweet the rain's new fall, sunlit from heaven
Like the first dewfall, on the first grass
Praise for the sweetness of the wet garden
Sprung in completeness where his feet pass

Mine is the sunlight, mine is the morning
Born of the one light, Eden saw play
Praise with elation, praise every morning
God's recreation of the new day

Our task is not to trample away because it's all going to burn anyway! As resurrection people our task is to *live as though the new creation were already here*, because through Jesus it is!

Yes, our human impact has been destructive. We have a big footprint that we've used to trample the earth. But Jesus is risen, God is back in the garden, teaching us to walk gently again. There's hope that we who have been such a big part of the problem can become part of the solution.

THE WORLD is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.
And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;

And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings

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world around but by the saving grace of God we can become part of the solution and find our rightful place in creation.

Let me draw out two final implications of saving grace:

1. *We are empowered to move beyond defensiveness and denial about humanity's negative impact on God's creation.* Our natural tendency is not to face up to mess we've made of things. From a biblical perspective it's understandable there would be reluctance to face environmental problems—to hope, wish, convince ourselves it must be overblown, like another Y2K scare. Psychologically it's hard to face. Why bother to become informed? It's easier to "Say it ain't so, Sam!" We are tempted to listen to soothing voices saying "Peace! Peace!" when there is no peace. Of course we'd prefer experts to tickle our ears with tales of how great everything is....

Jesus gives us courage to face big problems.

2. *We are empowered to move beyond a paralyzing despair that says, "What can we possibly do to make things better?"* Jesus is Lord of a New Creation, who will teach us how to walk gently again on the earth! Yes, the problems are complex, but God will help us get our arms around the complexity, and show us what we may do.

The DNR tells us discouraging news about water quality in our state. Pregnant women are urged not to eat certain fish from the Great Lakes because mercury levels are too high and can hurt unborn. We used to do baptisms in the Huron River until we finally had to tell people who were baptized to go home and take a shower because the water was not safe for swimming because of contamination! Our rivers & streams suffer "algae blooms" created by run-off from our homes. 75% of contaminants in the Huron River are from home sites. For example, phosphorous in our fertilizers super-charge the algae, which proliferates, depleting the oxygen in rivers leaving the fish gasping for breath.

Oh my goodness! It's all so complex, what can we do? There are things we can do, and some of 'em are easy! The DNR website tells us to reduce the need for fertilizer that pollutes rivers and streams by not cutting the grass shorter than 3", and to avoid bagging the grass clippings. Leave them as mulch in the lawn, which is great fertilizer and safe for the water! I'm making me a "tread lightly" ruler, three inches long so I can say, "Honey, I want to cut the lawn today but it's not long enough! [And I'm putting an "Environmental Impact Sticker" on the lawn mower bagger: "Do not use! Unsafe for the fish!"]

There are many things we can do—some are easy and good for starters. They make us feel good, and encourage us that we can do something, which motivates us to do more. My daughter Grace taught me this one... those plastic thingies that hold six packs together? The beaks of birds that forage in our landfills get caught in those suckers. Before you throw 'em in the trash, cut 'em up!

The gospel empowers us to face our personal and social messes, because the God of the gospel steps into our personal social messes to help us transform them. The gospel also steps into our global messes, including the big environmental ones. Through the gospel, we are empowered to move beyond denial and the paralysis of despair to "make a searching and fearless inventory" of our impact--and to learn to walk more gently, like Jesus in the garden. The promises of God find YES in Him.

Closing Prayer: "Most gracious God and Father, you are with me as I make my journey throughout this day. Help me to look lovingly upon all people and events that come into my life today and to walk gently upon this land. Grant this through Jesus who lives and walks among us ever present at each moment. Amen. " (From The Book of Common Prayer)