



Caring for Creation as Christian Mission

Early on, A Rocha adopted Psalm 24:1 as its inspiration: “The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it.” Though seemingly benign and simple, the proposition that the earth actually belongs to God and not to us is radical indeed. True, humans are special amongst God’s creatures, but the specialness bestowed on our species, Genesis says, has to do with our being “created in the image of God.” We reflect God’s character uniquely which, rather than giving us divine-size egos, should humble us to no end and clue us in to the fact that we might have a special role to play in the grand drama of creation.

The notion that we are image-bearers coupled with the idea that the earth belongs to God has major implications for how we live and how we respond to God’s charge to Adam to “serve the garden and keep it” (Genesis 2:15). Cal Dewitt, professor of environmental studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, helpfully unpacks the Hebrew words for serve (‘abad’) and keep (‘shamar’). The first, *abad*, is sometimes translated *till*, *dress*, or *work*—all good gardening words—but it is the second word, *shamar*, that puts a new spin on what it means to be a

good gardener for God. *Shamar* is sometimes translated *tend*, *guard*, *take care of*, and *look after*. Dewitt contends that *shamar* implies a “loving, caring, sustaining type of keeping.” The word is the same used in the Aaronic blessing: “The Lord bless you and *keep* you; the Lord make his face shine upon you and give you peace.” (Num 6:24-25)

All this points to our special role in creation, which is one of caretaking or stewarding. In fact, it is our unique position as image-bearers that qualifies us to steward God’s creation.

At A Rocha’s Brooksdale Environmental Centre this response to stewardship is played out with joy and hope. Whether we’re studying a

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threatened species, restoring a degraded habitat, inspiring children on field trips or growing vegetables organically for those living on the margins, we act with hope because we are participating in God’s redemptive work. And we are practically responding to Jesus’s call to love our neighbours by tangibly caring for our neighbour’s environment.

So: Can helping a river flourish or can planting potatoes really be mission? It seems so humble, so simple, so old fashioned—like something our grandmas did. It is so much less dramatic than hunkering down in famine-ravaged Africa to start an orphanage. Planting a garden is just so... ordinary. But then so are the words of Jeremiah to the Jewish people during the Babylonian exile: “Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters. ... Seek the welfare (*shalom* in Hebrew) of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” (Jer 29:5-7) When we seek the welfare of the city, when we plant gardens, when we care for creation, we join as image-bearers with the first Gardener who walked in the shade of the garden and saw that it was good. We join with the Gardener who walks now through our broken world and who, through *our* hands, feet, *and* trowels, works to make all things new.

Leah Kostamo is the co-founder of A Rocha Canada, a Christian conservation organization working to show God’s love for all of creation. She is also the author of *Planted: a Story of Creation, Calling and Community*.

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