



It's Getting Hot in Here
Leviticus 25:1-7, 23-24
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In these first weeks of 2024, we are preparing ourselves for how to engage faithfully with family, friends, coworkers, and neighbors around challenging political conversations in the midst of a General Election year. Not every hot button issue has a clear connection with the Biblical story, and so some topics really are left up to personal preference and opinion. But other topics, even some highly contested topics, are very clearly addressed in the Biblical text, and we, as a people whose faith is built on that text, would do well to let the scripture guide our conversations.

First, we looked at how the scripture invites us in to such challenging conversations with patience, peace, and gentle teaching. And last week, we looked at what the scripture has to offer around immigration and how we might faithfully approach conversations regarding immigrants.

This morning, we're going to look at what the scripture has to say about *climate change*.

As I did last week, I want to start off by naming what the scripture does not say before we get to what the scripture does say.

Let's first name the obvious: the Bible is not a scientific textbook. It wasn't written as a scientific text book. The Bible is a story of God as recorded and told by God's people. It is first and foremost, if not exclusively, a story about faith and faithfulness.

And, let's be honest, at the time when the scriptures were written, even if the Bible had been a scientific text book, climate change was not a concern. You won't find Jesus going around talking to his disciples about the ozone, or the increase in the strength of storms, or the rising temperatures of the summer heat.

The scriptures were written nearly 1700 years before the first combustion engine was invented, near the turn of the 19th Century (just a few decades into the Industrial Revolution). The idea of climate change, and the scientific tools needed to bring about measurable evidence of climate change, are relatively new in the history of humanity. One of the earliest publications warning about climate change, which focused on the effects of carbon dioxide on the greenhouse effect, was penned in 1896, less than 130 years ago.

With that said, it should make sense that the Biblical text doesn't offer any affirmation that climate change is real. You won't find that in the Bible. Now, you also won't find America in the Bible, or Disney World, or nuclear bombs, or battery-powered electric vehicles ... they aren't in

the Bible either, but they all exist. So, while we won't find evidence of climate change in the Bible, I am approaching this topic with a personal belief that climate change is real. And I think I'm in good company, because, at least according to NASA, 97% of actively publishing climate scientists agree that humans are causing global warming and climate change.¹

But honestly, I'm not sure it matters if you believe climate change is real or not to approach this topic from a Biblically sound and faithful perspective. For, while the Bible doesn't say anything about climate change directly, it does have quite a bit to offer about the need to care for God's creation. The rationale may be different, but the result is the same – faithful living requires us to care for the creation.

Let's turn to the Bible and see what the text has to offer on this politically charged topic.

Like our focus on immigrants last week, there are a number of scriptural texts that talk about creation in both the Old and New Testaments. The majority of the texts that talk about creation offer blanket statements about the one to whom creation belongs. Let me offer just a few of them:

Deuteronomy 10:14 reads, "To the Lord your God belongs the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it."

Psalms 24:1 reads, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it."

1 Corinthians 10:26 reads, "the earth and its fullness are the Lord's."

Creation belongs to the one who made it, which is affirmed in the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth and called them good. Indeed, God called the creation "very good."

Right after creation was set in motion, God gave the instructions to the first of humanity to care for creation. In Genesis 1:28, the text offers, "God blessed the humans, and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it.' ... Only, the English translation here fails us. There are two words used here that are important to our relationship with creation.

The first is the Hebrew word that is translated into the phrase "fill the earth." This comes from the Hebrew *mālā'* (maw-lah). *Mālā'* means "to fill," "to satisfy," or "to complete." It's a word that carries with it an invitation from the Creator to share in the continual formation of the creation – to help creation be all that God designed it to be.

The second word is the one translated as "subdue," which comes from the Hebrew *kābaš* (kaw-bash'). *Kābaš* can mean to subdue as in our modern understanding, which carries with it force and violence in the act of dominance. But I think, given the context and connection with the preceding word *mālā'*, the better understanding comes in a different definition, which offers, "to press, squeeze, or knead." The invitation of God to humanity to fill and subdue the earth is

not to run creation into the ground so that it can no longer be livable or produce what is necessary for healthy living; instead, the invitation of God is that we tend to the earth and knead it (k-n-e-a-d ... to knead it) so that creation might offer the fullness of life God intended.

A skeptic on this might say, Pastor Thomas, you're subjectively choosing to interpret "subdue" in a way that fits *your* climate change agenda. ... First, I don't really have an agenda, other than to try and be as faithful as I can in understanding the Biblical text. Which means, I'm not willing to let this text stand on its own. What I pull from this text builds on the greater storyline of the Bible, because, as I've said before, no text in the Bible stands in isolation. So, with the Genesis text in mind, let's look at our scripture reading for this morning, which comes from Leviticus 25.

The Book of Leviticus is the third book in the Bible, included as part of the Hebrew Torah. As part of the Torah, which is comprised of the first five books in the Bible, Leviticus is understood to be part of the basic instructions for living faithfully as a member of Israel, or as a part of the people of God. More so than the other four books in the Torah, Leviticus is a rule book. There are over 250 laws, commandments, or rules in the Book of Leviticus.

Our text today comes at the start of chapter 25. As it begins, we find that the Lord God is speaking to Moses at the top of Mount Sinai, and that what the Lord is saying is to be conveyed to the people Israel. It's important to note that, as of the writing of this text, the people Israel have not yet entered the promised land ... they are still wandering in the wilderness following their escape from slavery in Egypt. The instructions that are being set forth in this text are designed to govern the life of Israel once they have reached the promised land.

Let's pick up in verse 2. "When you enter the land that I am giving you, *the land* shall observe a sabbath for the Lord."

The people of Israel had already received the 10 Commandments, and so they were aware of the instructions to observe a Sabbath, which would require them, as a people, to rest on the seventh day of the week. This text in Leviticus 25 is not reiterating a sabbath for the people, but *instituting* a sabbath for the land.

The next few verses will further define what that land-sabbath looks like.

"For six years you shall sow your field, and for six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your unpruned vine: it shall be a year of complete rest for the land."

Take in the fullness of what this text is requiring. For six years, the people will do all they can to ensure the fields provide the necessary harvest of food for the people. It's understood that such work requires some subduing of the land – there is some kneading required – to include pruning and gathering, reaping and harvesting.

But after six years of such hard work on the land, shaping it and molding it, watering it and stressing it, tilling it and trimming it ... on the seventh year, the *land* is to rest. The land is to go untouched, unworked, and to be given reprieve.

To really understand this requirement, we need a faithful understanding of Sabbath.

In the simplest of meanings, *Sabbath* means “to stop” or “to rest.” But there is a deeper meaning for Sabbath, which stems from the Sabbath God commands of the people.

Sabbath orders our lives in relationship to God. The Sabbath day is supposed to be a day in which we reflect on our relationship with God. It invites us into an intentional time to give thanks for the life God has made possible in the week prior, and to prepare us for the invitation God gives to continue a life of faithfulness in the week ahead.

In that framework, Sabbath is meant to restore us. Taking a Sabbath rest gives our bodies a day off, allowing our physical being to recover. In fact, if you visit Israel today, you will find Sabbath elevators in many buildings. On the Sabbath day, these elevators go from floor to floor automatically so that you don’t have to push a button, because to push a button requires physical work. It may seem over the top, but the goal is complete rest. The Sabbath is also a day for mental recovery: there is to be no work that requires thinking on the Sabbath. It is a day for spiritual recovery, which necessitates a time of prayer and worship.

Sabbath, as a way to orient our lives to God, requires rest and recovery so that we might be healthy and faithful in the week ahead.

This is the hope of Sabbath extended on to creation here in Leviticus 25. The Sabbath need for the land is one that allows the creation to recover. At the very foundation of the Sabbath year is the Lord’s desire for the eternal well-being of creation. So, while climate change is not what is precipitating this text, God’s instructions to ensure the eternal well-being of creation is certainly at the core of the land-sabbath. And, as humanity is the part of creation invited to fill and subdue it, it is humanity that is instructed to share with God in the well-being of creation.

Next week we’re going to look at how this land-sabbath impacts our relationships with one another using the rest of Leviticus 25, but to close out today, I want to jump down to verses 23 and 24 as we reflect on God’s call to care for the land. The text reads, “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me, you are but aliens and tenants. Throughout the land that you hold, you shall provide for the redemption of the land.”

This text reiterates what so many other Biblical texts state, that creation – the land – belongs to God. Here, this statement argues that relationship even further, saying that *we* (humanity) are but tenants and aliens (that’s the same Hebrew word *gār* from last week, those without an inherited stake in). The land is not our own. We are at best caretakers and stewards of the

creation, which belongs to God. But our role as tenants, foreigners, caretakers and stewards carries with it a huge responsibility: “you shall provide for the redemption of the land.”

I know there are many who want to debate the science behind climate change and global warming ... I’m honestly not interested in that debate, because I don’t think the Bible invites us to dispute whether or not we should be caring for the land. The Biblical text gives us an imperative to care for the land, and to share in the Creator’s work of creation’s eternal well-being. We should be bending over backward to ensure that the land, the seas, the sky ... indeed, all of creation, is well-cared for. We should be willing to go so far as to give the land its own sabbath rest to ensure God’s land, God’s creation, is healthy and that it might continue to sustain us even as we continue to sustain it.

Though science may play a great role in the conversation today, this is not a scientific or modern teaching. The call to care for creation is built into the very foundation of our Biblical text, stemming from the first of God’s humanity. The call to care for creation is steeped in our faith tradition. May God lead us to give the land its rest, that we might fill the earth and subdue it, sharing in the Creator’s work of providing for the eternal well-being of creation. Amen.

ⁱ “Do scientists agree on climate change?” <https://climate.nasa.gov/faq/17/do-scientists-agree-on-climate-change>. Retrieved January 31, 2024.