

Preacher: Tim Hollenberg-Duffey

Scripture: Leviticus 25: 1-7, 18-24

Just a month ago, *The New York Times* printed an article updating the world on what has come to be known as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. It is estimated that 87,000 tons of plastic debris floats in this massive conglomerate of trash in the Pacific Ocean between California and Hawaii. Researchers say it is a mass maybe 4 times the size of California, but it isn't like an island but rather a spread-out collection of large and small pieces, sometimes hardly visible. It's where our trash goes to die, but then again it doesn't really die. It takes forever for these plastics to break down, but eventually the ocean breaks them into micro plastics that can be consumed by sea turtles and fish and likely then return to our own food chain. How does it all get there? All kinds of reasons. Certainly tsunamis, floods, or hurricanes don't help, but most certainly neither does the rate by which we consume.¹

Studies are showing that even as the rates of human consumption rise steadily year after year, the ideal "good life" remains something beyond our reach.² Will we ever be satisfied with our stuff?

Well, folks, it's Earth Day, and as Christians, I believe it is our responsibility to care about these issues that relate to the pollution and overconsumption of the earth. In 1970, organizers set April 22 as Earth Day, a day to remind all of us of the dangers of pollution, toxic emissions, and overconsumption of non-renewable sources. But other than set aside a day, what have we really done about it? The Great Pacific Garbage Patch has grown exponentially since 1970, and David Radcliff of the New Community Project reports that "wildlife populations will be down by two-thirds by 2020 from 1970 levels." So, what are we really doing about all of this?

I'll admit that it's very hard to imagine that my little choices amount to a whole lot in such a big world. It's hard to imagine that I can make much of a difference at all. But as the Once-ler once said in the Dr. Seuss classic, *The Lorax*, "Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not." So then, why shouldn't it be Christians who begin to care a whole, awful lot? Our Bible is riddled with texts that support a strong stance for creation's health. God believed this place was good and he called it such and he gave us dominion in Genesis 1. It was not a dominion to over consume and spoil this good earth but to keep it and keep it well.

So, this morning, our text comes from a book that I know some of you would prefer to gloss over, but not today. Today we go to Leviticus. Leviticus is one of the books of the Bible that reads more like a textbook than a good story, a narrative. It's a book of the law, and any good lawyer would come to know it well. Nestled in this book of law is Leviticus 25, which explains the Years of Sabbath and the Year of Jubilee.

Now all of you know about the Sabbath day. It is one of the ten commandments that we honor and keep the Sabbath day, our day of worship, Sunday. It is meant to be a day of rest, worship, family, and prayer. For six days you work, but on Sunday give rest as a gift to your soul and be renewed in the presence of God. That's the Sabbath day, but did you know that the

¹https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/22/climate/great-pacific-garbage-patch.html?module=WatchingPortal®ion=c-column-middle-span-region&pgType=Homepage&action=click&mediaId=thumb_square&state=standard&contentPlacement=1&version=internal&contentCollection=www.

² Roxburgh, Alan. *The Sky is Falling*. ACI Publishers, 2005.

Bible also prescribes for a Sabbath year? Every seven years, according to Leviticus 25, there is to be a Sabbath year for the earth to rest. Yes, a year for the land to not be tilled and worked, a year for the soils to rejuvenate and recover. I think this is still a farming practice in some small farms to let a field be for a season and allow it to recoup. But this law made it so that every field in the land of Israel sat while the people ate from the bountiful produce of the prior year, according to God's blessing and the fruits of the unworked land. That's a Sabbath year for the earth.

Then every 7 times 7 years (that's 49 years), usually rounded up to 50, there is to be a year of Jubilee. Not only does this year permit the land to rest, but it also resets the Israelite economy, returning the lands and fields to their original owner, returning people in bondage to their familial properties. The year of Jubilee is what Jesus declares when he announces his ministry in Luke 4, the year of the Lord's favor, when the oppressed and bound go free.

Why would such years of Sabbath and Jubilee be built into the Jewish law?

Commentator Perry Yoder says that it is a reminder to the Israelites that they own nothing. The creation belongs to the creator, to God. So, they do not buy and sell the land, nor do they buy and sell one another as slaves or servants. The land and the people all belong to God. We merely tend to it. Yoder says that, thus, the Israelites don't buy land as much as they buy the crops that the land will produce until the next Jubilee year, when everything is reset.³

We are the resident aliens on God's earth. There is nothing permanent to our nomadic sojourn on this land, but God's presence is eternal. This isn't the way we think about property today. When we buy property, we think of it as our own, to do with as we please—we do not think of it as God's and we are merely caretakers. To think of it this way means we are all just renters and one day the property passes on to another renter, but the owner remains forever God. When we think of ourselves as owners, instead of God's renters, we think our property is ours to use as we want, and we want to maximize its yield. So, who needs a Sabbath year? Who wants a year when we can't make money off something? If there's a resource I can sell, I ought to. This is for my own profit.

This line of thinking means the earth never gets its true rest.

Do we ever let the earth rest? Or do we impose our relentless profit driven, goal driven, ego driven mindset onto the earth? Unfortunately, it seems to me that the earth tends to take a back seat to our immediate perceived needs. And quite honestly, I think this has always been the case.

As I studied this collection of Sabbath and Jubilee laws in Leviticus this week, I learned that after the laws are cast, there is little evidence to show that the Israelites ever truly practiced them once they entered the promised land, settled in, and began to work the land. Sabbath years and Jubilee years go absent from the text aside from the prophets hoping for a day of Jubilee when the prisoner or slave goes free. But that's future oriented. Then, at the very end of the book of 2nd Chronicles, the book ends with the Israelite's deportation to Babylon. The end of the Monarchy. And the Chronicler writes in 2 Chronicles 36: 20-21: "He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had made up for its sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept sabbath, to fulfill seventy years."

The Israelites sit in exile for 70 years to make up for all the Sabbath years they missed. That's the Chronicler's rationale. So, if a Sabbath year happens every 7 years, and the people remain in exile for 70 years, that means they hadn't honored a Sabbath year in nearly 500 years.

³ Yoder, Perry. *Believers Church Bible Commentary*. Herald Press, 2017.

That means they hadn't had a sabbath year possibly since the period of the judges soon after they entered the promised land.

They took that land for their own, considered it their own property, and neglected to let it rest. Are we not guilty of the same sin?

We hardly take a Sabbath day to allow our souls to rejuvenate, let alone a Sabbath year to let the earth rejuvenate. So, my Christian friends, on this Earth Day, let's figure out how you and I can make commitments to allow the earth to refresh.

A recent issue of the *Messenger Magazine*, the Church of the Brethren magazine, says something to me. A recent edition had articles on the Brethren tradition of simple living. It asked questions like How do we live the simple life in a modern context? Well, one of the suggestions remains in my mind and I'll issue the challenge to all of you.

Take an economic sabbath one day per week; don't buy anything and consume only what you require, what you truly need. An economic sabbath.⁴ And if you can't do a day per week try per month. Most of us aren't farmers, so we can't let our fields rest, but we can let our over consumption rest. We can let rest our drive to accumulate, our drive to be more than comfortable. Our consumptions have an impact on the earth. And let's face it, this poor creation is long overdue for a rest from providing for us more than what we need. So, give it a rest. Take an economic sabbath, and make yourselves aware of your consumptions, your true needs, and all that the creator has provided for you in creation.

⁴ Bachman, Jan Fischer. "Simplify," *Messenger Magazine*, March 2018.