

**Job 38:1-7, 34-41** “Who.”

**Hebrews 5:1-10** “Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears”

**Mark 10:35-45** “What is it you want me to do for you?”

**O God of all creation, grant us the strength, the wisdom and the courage to seek always and everywhere after truth, come when it may, and cost what it will.**

This morning I’m going to do something a little bit different (for me, anyway). Rather than preaching on our lectionary readings, I’m going to spend some time talking about our sacred duty of serving as guardians of the earth, or in Hebrew, *shomrei adamah*, which is the theme of our Emmanuel Center programs running from this past Wednesday through this coming Tuesday for the Jewish festival of Sukkot. I want to extend a special welcome to Rabbi Shire and our cousins from Central Reform Temple who are joining us for worship this morning. Together with the Temple, we are hosting a week of programs that explore our responsibility to care for the earth. Today, after our service, we will move into the parish hall for a bite to eat and a presentation by Jennifer’s daughter, Gina Coplon-Newfield, Managing Director of Sunstone Strategies, a communications consulting firm working to end fossil fuel pollution by advocating for strong climate-friendly, healthy communities. Then we will go out to the Sukkah for a tour of its symbols and meanings led by Gina’s mother and CRT member, Jennifer Coplon. I hope you will stay for as much of the program as possible!

In the very first chapters of Genesis, we find the two stories of creation— powerful narratives that frame our understanding of humanity’s sacred relationship to the natural world. God creates the heavens and the earth, the seas and the skies, the plants and animals, and finally, God creates an earthling (*adam*) from the earth (*adamah*). Genesis 2:15 says, “The Lord God took the earthling and put the earthling in the Garden of Eden to work it and to keep it.” In Hebrew, the word used here for “to keep” is *l’shomrah*, from the root *shamar*, meaning “to guard” or “to protect.” In this simple yet profound verse, we come to understand that earthlings are entrusted with a sacred task: to be *shomrei adamah*, guardians or protectors of the earth.

This idea of environmental stewardship is not a peripheral theme in Judaism and Christianity, but rather, it is woven into the fabric of our understanding of our identities as humans, as earthlings. It is an obligation, an ethical and spiritual calling that requires us to care for the earth and all its inhabitants. Yet as environmental degradation, climate change, and pollution threaten the well-being of our planet, this ancient mandate feels more urgent than ever.

But what about the earlier creation story in Genesis 1:28 which says that God blessed Adam and Eve, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and every living thing that moves on the earth.” At first glance, this verse seems to suggest that humanity has an unbridled right to exploit the natural world for its own benefit. And indeed, some have interpreted this passage to justify environmental destruction, arguing that the earth’s resources exist solely for human use. But a closer reading of the Hebrew reveals a more nuanced understanding. The word for “dominion,” *radah*, can also mean “to guide” or “to lead,” and it implies responsibility, not tyranny. We are not granted *carte blanche* to abuse the earth; rather, we are called to be its caretakers, using our power to sustain, nurture, and protect the natural world.

When paired with the command in Genesis 2:15 to “keep” the garden, it becomes clear that our proper role is one of stewardship. We are entrusted with a treasure, a divine gift, and we must preserve it for future generations. This is the essence of *shomrei adamah*—to guard the earth with

reverence, to honor its beauty and its fragility, and to ensure that it continues to thrive long after we are gone. The concept of *shomrei adamah* is not just about environmentalism; it is about recognizing the interconnectedness of all life. In Jewish and Christian traditions, the earth is seen as a living organism, created by God with intrinsic value. Psalm 24:1 declares, “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it.” This means that the land, the seas, the animals, and even the air we breathe do not belong to us—they belong to God. We are merely temporary dwellers, entrusted with the care of God’s creation.

Our relationship to the earth is not transactional; it is covenantal. Just as God made a covenant with the people of God, God also made a covenant with all of the inhabitants of the earth itself. After the flood, God says to Noah, “I establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you... Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood” (Genesis 9:9-11). This covenant is a promise of protection, not just for humanity, but for every living creature. Therefore, to be a *shomer adamah*, a guardian of the earth, is to live in alignment with this covenant, understanding that our well-being is inextricably linked to the health of the planet. When we pollute the air, we pollute our lungs. When we destroy forests, we destroy the lungs of the earth. When we harm animals and ecosystems, we harm ourselves. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel famously said, “In a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible.” We are responsible for the welfare of the earth, and we must act accordingly.

The Jewish concept of *tikkun olam*, “repairing the world,” is often invoked in discussions of social justice, but it also applies to environmental justice. Whenever the earth is broken—scarred by pollution, deforestation, and climate change—it is our duty to heal it. In the same way that we strive to bring justice to human communities, we must bring justice to the earth.

This is not an easy task, and it requires both individual and collective action. On a personal level, we can make changes in our daily lives—reducing waste, conserving energy, and making sustainable choices. But individual action is not enough. We must also advocate for institutional and systemic change, pushing relentlessly for policies that protect the environment and hold corporations accountable for their impact on the planet.

Judaism and Christianity both teach that we are partners with God in the ongoing work of creation. In the *Midrash* (Kohelet Rabbah 7:13), there is this powerful story: “When God created Adam, the earthling, God led the earthling around all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to him, ‘Look at My works! See how beautiful and praiseworthy they are! Everything I have created, I created for you. Be mindful that you do not spoil and destroy my world, for if you spoil it, there is no one after you to repair it.’” This is a profound reminder that we are not passive observers in the story of creation; we are active participants, co-creators with God. Our choices matter, and they have lasting consequences.

One of the important environmental principles in the Torah is *bal tashchit*, the prohibition against waste and destruction. This commandment comes from Deuteronomy (20:19-20), where the Torah instructs the Israelites not to cut down any fruit trees during a war or siege against enemies. Over time, this principle was expanded to prohibit any despoliation or plundering of natural resources or material goods. *Bal tashchit* teaches us to be mindful of our consumption, to avoid wastefulness, and to use the earth’s resources with care and respect. In a world of consumerism and excess, this is a radical and countercultural message. It challenges us to ask ourselves: Do I really need this? Is this the best use of the earth’s resources? How can I reduce my negative impact on the environment? This principle can be applied in countless ways, from reducing food waste to choosing energy-efficient

machines to supporting sustainable agriculture, finding and acting on ways to reduce our carbon footprint. But beyond these practical actions, *bal tashchit* calls us to adopt a mindset of humility and gratitude. We are not entitled to the earth's resources; they are a gift for the whole world, and we must treat them as such.

Caring for creation also reflects Jesus' commandment to love and serve. Just because Jesus' teachings the Second or New Testament don't address creation care directly, Christians are not free to disregard the teachings of the Torah and the Prophets. Jesus taught that he had not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; rather he said, "I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." (Matthew 5:17-20) When we protect the earth, we show compassion to the poor, who often suffer most from environmental degradation. Christians live out a Christ-like humility when we recognize that the earth does not belong to us, but to God. Our obligation to care for creation is a sacred trust, a reflection of our love for God and our neighbor. Early church theologians such as Augustine, John Chrysostom, and Aquinas taught that humans are tasked with caring for creation as a way to reflect God's love and justice.

The signs of environmental degradation are all around us: rising sea levels, extreme weather events, mass extinction of species, and the rapid depletion of natural resources, affecting millions of lives, particularly the most vulnerable among us. In the Episcopal Church, we include creation care in one of our six baptismal vows, promising to cherish the wondrous works of God and protect the beauty and integrity of all creation."

As peoples of faith, both Jews and Christians are called to be a light unto the nations, and part of that calling is to model responsible stewardship of the earth. We must lead by example, showing the world that it is possible to live in harmony with nature, to balance human needs with the needs of the planet, and to care for creation as God intended.

In the face of such overwhelming challenges, it can be easy to feel despair. But we are also called to be peoples of hope. And where hope is waning, we are called to create hope, as Rabbi Shire said in his Rosh Hashanah sermon. We are inheritors of the vision of redemption, not only for humanity but for the entire world. The prophet Isaiah envisioned a future where "the wolf will dwell with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the young goat... and the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord" (Isaiah 11:6-9). Likewise, John the Divine envisioned heaven on earth, a vision of peace, not only among peoples but among all creatures, a vision of a world restored to its original harmony. To achieve this vision, we must take seriously our role as *shomrei adamah*. We must embrace the responsibility that God has given us and commit to being guardians of the earth. This is not just an environmental issue; it is a spiritual issue, a moral issue, and a Jewish issue and a Christian issue. Let us rise to the challenge, for the sake of the earth and for the sake of those who are coming after us. Together we can do more to be *shomrei adamah*.