

Just Food¹

Associate Pastor Adam M.L. Tice

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Exodus 23:10-11

Leviticus 26:3-6

II Chronicles 36:15-21

As part of our emphasis on issues of food and eating this summer, today we explore our relationship to the land. When I was growing up, I recall suspicion in my evangelical surroundings about the environmental movement. At its best, it was seen as a benign quirk to be tolerated as long as it was couched in the language of good stewardship. At its worst, it was a pantheistic religion borrowed from New Age philosophy, whatever that meant. And whatever it was, it was essentially a distraction from the real work of the Gospel.

Fortunately, over the last 20 years or so, even evangelicals are catching on to the Biblical imperative to care for creation. But I still encounter rationale for prioritizing care for the Earth that is simplistic, not rooted in our own faith tradition and anthropocentric — that is, focused exclusively on preserving the Earth for human benefit.

It is illuminating to realize, then, that God has prioritized the land from the very beginning, even treating it as an equal to humanity in many respects. This is clear already in Genesis, where God provides humans to the Earth as caretakers. And later on, as God establishes Israel, the land of Israel is not a gift.

¹ Portions of this sermon are adapted from my paper “Land, Sabbath, and Exile: A Christian Perspective on Reconciliation with the Land,” Spring 2006, unpublished, written for an Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary Ethics course taught by Gayle Gerber Koontz.

Instead, God establishes a contract as a landlord with tenants, with extraordinary stipulations for the care of the property.

The covenant between God and Israel was always a complicated one. There were terms and conditions, caveats, exceptions and clauses. One theme is consistent and clear — the land is God's. Humans are permitted to live there as long as they treat the land with care and respect. Like a good landlord, God gives the tenants all the information they need to successfully inhabit the land. Paramount among these instructions is the land Sabbath. This regulation is part of the larger principal of Jubilee — the time of release of the captives, remission of debts and returning of property to rightful owners. Recall that at the beginning of Jesus' ministry he made these Jubilee principals the centerpiece of his work. Land Sabbath provided for what we now understand to be good, environmentally sustainable land management practice. Just as humans were allotted time for rest and restoration through the Sabbath, so was the land. Land was to lie fallow periodically in order to be restored.

It is interesting that the books of Exodus and Leviticus offer two different interpretations of this fallow year. In Exodus, the land was to go untouched so that whatever would happen to grow there would provide for the poor and hungry. Thus the land Sabbath had a humanitarian focus. In Leviticus, the purpose of the Sabbath was the return of the land to its rightful owner — in this case, God. In both interpretations of the law it is clear that the well-being of the land in human care also determines the well-being of those humans.

Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggemann suggests that “[l]and is a central, if not *the central theme* of Biblical faith.”² From the beginning of Genesis we see a description of humanity and the land living in absolute harmony in Eden. When this harmony is disrupted the relationship between humans and the land becomes that of inhabitant and inhabited, worker and field. Brueggemann presents two histories of Israel: the first is the move from landlessness to the possession of land.³ This history extends from Abraham to Joshua. The second history is of a “landed Israel in the process of losing the land.”⁴ This leads to the exile in Babylon.

God is clear in his promise to Israel in Leviticus. Following a set of extensive land regulations in chapter 25, chapter 26 lists the fruits of obedience and disobedience. “If you follow my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them faithfully, I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit” (26:3-4). Not only is agricultural success assured, but so are peace, military success and prosperity (verses 5-10). The highest blessing that God offers is found in verse 12: “And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people.”

In contrast, disobedience will result in terror, agricultural failure, defeat, brokenness and increasing punishment culminating in exile (verses 14-33). The exile is intended as the cure for the abused land. Anticipating the exile to come,

² Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, (Fortress Press: Philadelphia) 1977, 3.

³ *ibid* 71.

⁴ *ibid* 72.

verses 34 and 35 state “[t]hen the land shall enjoy its Sabbath years as long as it lies desolate, while you are in the land of your enemies; then the land shall rest, and enjoy its Sabbath years. As long as it lies desolate, it shall have the rest it did not have on your Sabbaths when you were living on it.” The writer of II Chronicles clearly understood the Babylonian exile as a result of Israel’s mistreatment of the land and as a blessing to the land itself.

While I am not one to promote a wholesale reversion to Levitical laws, I think that we can adopt Walter Brueggeman’s understanding of land as central to the Biblical narrative right through the New Testament and on down to our own time.

There is very little explicit mention of the land in the New Testament, however it is a major subtext if we read between the lines. First of all, Jesus’ appeal to Jubilee living must have been understood in relation to the land. This is surely part of why his Nazareth sermon got such a strong reaction. If you lease land, give it back to the owners. If you own land, let it sit fallow. These laws had been ignored for hundreds of years. Was Jesus’ pronouncement of Jubilee meant to imply that Israel’s occupation by the Romans was another sort-of exile — another punishment for ignoring the Jubilee law?

And then there is Jesus’ constant talk of Kingdom. Although we tend to spiritualize this concept, perhaps we should not understand it apart from our literal inhabitation of the land. Part of Jesus’ revolutionary ministry was to expand Israel’s understanding of God’s realm beyond the borders of their physical territory. This did not, however, mean that the kingdom was no longer concerned

with the physical. It meant, rather, that *all* land, all the Earth, is God's realm and should be treated as such. Rather than obliterating the land laws, Jesus universalizes them.

Perhaps the most compelling evidence that the New Testament offers regarding Jesus' relationship to the Earth is at his death and resurrection. All of creation cries out as Jesus dies, and the Earth literally shakes as he is raised from the dead.

There are several principals that we can glean from this Jubilee understanding of land. First is that all land belongs to God, and we inhabit the land as tenants. If Israel was due for eviction for its treatment of the land, what do we deserve? At times, God seems to prioritize the welfare of the land over the welfare of humanity. This is to the benefit of both humanity and the land. We must learn to treat the ground we walk upon with deference. American Indian theologian George Tinker tells a story of an older man observing a younger man walking on the sidewalk. The younger man leans over to spit on the grass. The older man chides him; "Treat the Earth with respect! Spit on the sidewalk!"

Second, the way we use the land matters. That goes for what we do with our urban lawns and landscapes, as well as the choices we make in regards to food. Sustainable agricultural practice is essential both for the welfare of humanity as well as the welfare of the land itself. Eating locally and organically is a large step in the right direction.

Third, we should regard what we eat with deep gratitude. It would be incredibly difficult to avoid eating food that has involved some sort of suffering in

its production. Land is overworked, over sprayed, under-rotated and isn't regularly allowed to rest. Food is transported great distances with great expenditures of fossil fuel. Meat is extremely land-intensive and is often farmed in abusive, environmentally unsustainable ways. Chemical herbicides and pesticides degrade soil quality. Fertilizer use pollutes water systems. Land disturbance provides avenues for invasive species to flourish.

All of this means that all of us, unless we avoid eating altogether, are connected to the pain of the Earth. For this we should lament, and for this we should give thanks for the sacrifices the land makes for us.

When we pray before meals, and with every bite we take, let us be mindful of the land we have borrowed from God. We are a part of this good Earth, and daily we make it a part of us.

Perhaps we are due an exile. What if we treated the land with the respect and dignity described in Leviticus? What if we understood it as God's domain which we inhabit as steward tenants? Perhaps, by the grace of God, we can perceive the sacred character of the land and restore its goodness for future generations.