



Aliens and Tenants

SCRIPTURE:
Leviticus 25:23-24

October 31, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Zach Walker

When I was in seminary, I lived in the same campus dorm for the majority of my three years with my own room, and by the end of my second year, I no longer believed the rumors about what happened if you made big changes to the room—most notably that they would withhold your degree or charge you some exorbitant fee. So, I painted two walls a pleasant light blue color and I left it like that when I graduated. They gave me my degree. I was never fined.

In Seattle, I lived in a house owned by a family in the church that I served. The property was adjacent to theirs with a kind of fixer-upper house on it and it had a rodent problem, and by problem, I mean infestation. When the cold, wet season rolled in—which, in Seattle, is about nine months of the year—I would get frequent... visitors. Mouse droppings would show up in the kitchen, on the furniture, and sometimes on the bed covers. I let the family know what was going on but let's just say when I moved out, I imagine the mice in the house were glad somebody finally did something about the human problem.

In California, I lived in a two-bedroom apartment managed by a company. When they said, "Don't paint the walls," they meant it. About once a year or so, they found some reason for someone to inspect the apartment. As a result, I didn't make any permanent changes unless I was prepared to deal with actual consequences.

How you operate when you are renting a space is largely dependent on how long you live there, whether you care about who lives there after you, and who you perceive the owner to be—or *how* you understand the owner to be—which is to say, how involved is the owner? How much does the owner care about what you are doing with your temporary home? And what

are the consequences—natural or otherwise—for what you do?

I've lived in several places that I owned, too. The first house I owned was a cozy two-bedroom and what I remember most about it is that I didn't know how to take care of it at all. I didn't know how to take care of the yard. I didn't know what preventative care you could do to keep things working smoothly. I didn't know how to fix things that broke, nor did I have a sense of what was and wasn't critical to fix.

I didn't grow up in a family that taught me how to take care of a home. I don't want to give you the wrong impression; my parents took good care of our house growing up. But they didn't do much in the way of educating me for the sake of my own future home. They provided an example for a standard of care—and that's not nothing—but I owe my current home-care knowledge more to YouTube than anyone or anything else. But even still, home care wasn't natural for me; I learned it late and out of necessity.

In Leviticus, God reminds the people of Israel to whom the land belongs. God has just outlined the Sabbatical Year—a once-every-seven-years event when they are to let the land rest. And the Year of Jubilee—a once-every-50-years event when economic justice is returned to the land. After years of wear and tear, the Earth needs rest; it needs sabbath. God cares for humans, to be sure, and these verses remind us God also cares for the land itself—that we should be careful not to mistake our tenancy for ownership or mistake the land's resiliency for invincibility.

We are all just aliens and tenants on a land that itself has limits and not under some distant and uninterested landlord, but God who is intimately close and supremely interested in the redemption of this durably fragile world. Remember, God seems to say, you and the land are bound together, the fate of the Earth

is also your fate.

In the biblical view, writes theologian George Knight, “one cannot separate humanity from the world in which it exists. You cannot separate humanity from the environment. Humanity is part of the soil, and our bodies will return to it when we die.”¹

At the time, humans certainly understood they could impact the area where they lived, but they could not have imagined the global impact of the present day. They could not have imagined, as author Elizabeth Kolbert puts it, that right now “we are deciding, without quite meaning to, which evolutionary pathways will remain open and which will forever be closed. No other creature has ever managed this, and it will, unfortunately, be our most enduring legacy.”²

In her book, *The Sixth Extinction*, Kolbert details that we are bearing witness to one of the rarest events in life’s history: a mass extinction.³ By the best calculations, she notes, one amphibious species should go extinct every thousand years or so. But pretty much every person studying amphibians today has witnessed several amphibian extinctions. What’s more concerning—other species are approaching amphibian extinction levels: “one-third of all reef building corals, one-third of all fresh water mollusks, one-third of sharks and rays, one quarter of all mammals, one-fifth of all reptiles, and one-sixth of all birds are headed toward oblivion.”⁴ Kolbert concedes there are a lot of theories about why this is happening and climate change is one of them. But it all boils down to this: No matter how you frame it, the cause is us.⁵

When did we begin to see the earth to which we are bound as infinite, and as something to which we were fully entitled without regard to consequence? In the context of Leviticus, we are either acting like tenants who have forgotten who the owner is, or we are acting as though we are owners of this land who have not paid enough attention about how to take care of it.

Helen Keller once unnervingly said, “People do not like to think. If one thinks, one must reach conclusions. Conclusions are not always pleasant.” When we stop and think about what is happening with the

environment, we reach less than pleasant conclusions.

Like me, if you’ve heard a sermon about earth care, the central statement seems to be that we are the stewards of this earth. I’m on board with that. But I’m also increasingly dissatisfied with it, not because the statement isn’t true, but because it isn’t enough. To agree that we are stewards is fine, but I’m worried I don’t have the knowledge, and in some ways, the power, to do what I need to do in order to steward well. Knowledge and power.

It isn’t enough to just agree we should care for this finite world, any more than it is enough to agree that I should eat healthy food but then have no knowledge on how to do so and thus fail in the crucial aspect of actually acting in a way that bears out the benefits of that conviction. Agreeing with a statement and then failing to behave in a way that proves it doesn’t amount to much difference.

I’m guilty of that. I often live as though resources are largely infinite, as though the world has no owner other than humanity, or that the world has no higher owner who cares about how we maintain it. I often live forgetting that I am an alien and a tenant here, one that doesn’t know how to take care of where I live.

The reading from Numbers, in brief, outlines some prescribed work for the Levites—in particular, the expectation that they would serve in the Temple from age 25 to age 50, at which point their role was to teach and advise. For 25 years they would have learned from both practical experience and from those who were older. They were tenants in that Temple, caretakers for a time, before passing their knowledge on.

And I wonder if there was any revelatory knowledge that became critical for how they did what they did. I wonder if they discovered they were doing something wrong—something that meant they needed to change a lot of their customs and habits. And how critical it would have been, as they passed on the knowledge to the next generations, that they kept heading in that new direction, uncertain and worried that the old habits would drag them back.

The sudden, uncertain future would have nagged

1 George A.F. Knight, *Daily Bible Study Series: Leviticus* (1981), pp. 152-153.

2 Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction* (2015), pp. 268-269.

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

4 *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 237.

them, hopefully in ways that would have resulted in changes to expectations and teachings.

There's a degree to which it should bother us that those coming after us won't know how to properly care for something when it was in our power to do something. It should bother us and it should be a good thing that it would bother us.

To let it bother us is what can spur some personal change, but personal change can't be where it ends because we also must grapple with our limited individual power. We live in a world where governments and corporate policies must align themselves with earth care in ways that will require collective commitment, risk, and the ability to imagine a different future, a different economy, and a different relationship with the land. It is clear the status quo cannot continue and we must let a conviction for change seep into our personal lives as well as government and big business. If larger entities are going to make changes, we must encourage that imagination with our votes and our resources.

Jared Diamond, in his fascinating book, *Collapse*, writes that, "In the long run, it is the public, either directly or through its politicians, that has the power to make destructive policies unprofitable and illegal, and to make sustainable environmental policies."⁶

After the U.S. public became concerned about the spread of mad cow disease, the FDA instituted regulations to curb the practices associated with the risk of spread. The industry promptly insisted the rules were too expensive to obey. This persisted for five years. But when customers' purchases of hamburgers declined, McDonald's Corporation made the same demands and the industry complied within weeks.⁷

6 Jared Diamond, *Collapse* (2004), p. 484.

7 *Ibid.*

8 Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction* (2015), p. 265.

The public spurred government to action to develop policies, and then moved big business when the policies weren't taking hold.

So I'm making the commitment to do more. And Village is going to help. Pastor Hallie and I have asked some local organizations to come to Village to teach any who are interested about what more they can do. We are going to learn about composting. We are going to learn more about water conservation. And we are going to learn more about what our local and larger governments are doing to help this community look at this world through the eyes of aliens and tenants who take seriously our care and sustainability of the land, not to mention the air and water.

In doing so, my hope is I, and hopefully some of you as well, can put action to the idea that we are stewards of the earth—to take some step you have not yet taken. Maybe it will change some of the products we buy. It might change how, and how often, we choose to travel, or what car you buy next, or the kind of energy that powers your home, or how much we consume in general. That doing so will change how you perceive the responsibilities of businesses and governments that shape so much of our lives and this world.

Kolbert writes, "Life is extremely resilient, but not infinitely so."⁸ Let the warning in that statement bother you. It is past time to do more personally and to demand more from large institutions. We are tied to this land and we are aliens and tenants here; we need to take seriously that we are to knowledgeably work for the redemption of it and demand that larger institutions do the same. With God's grace, we can take better care. Amen.