

Sermon on Sunday 19 October 2025

by Rev. Alan Stewart

Readings: Genesis 2. 7-15 & Mark 4. 35-41

Environment Sunday – Rewilding

If you think back over your life, what have been some of your major cultural influences?

An early one for me was that epic space opera from a galaxy far, far away; *Star Wars*!

To say it was an obsession is probably an understatement. I spent all my pocket money on action figures and spacecraft, read books and got thoroughly lost in this science fiction multiverse. So, it was important, of course, to indoctrinate - sorry, introduce - my children to this tale of Jedis and Sith from a very young age.

Rosie, my daughter, sadly resisted, favouring *High School Musical* and *Lord of the Rings*. Thankfully, Elijah, my son, took up the mantle, and when the appropriate time came, I ceremonially

handed over the custodianship of my precious collection. Now, that was both brave and risky. He was eight years old; he could potentially break them, lose them, trade them, forget about them. I had to trust that he would care for them, as I had so carefully over the years.

In this epic poem of Genesis 2 which we've read from this morning, God does a far riskier thing. He entrusts the care of a whole planet to a race called humanity.

Now, I hope it goes without saying that these early chapters of Genesis were not composed to answer big questions like, 'How and when did this all begin?'. Clearly, it took a lot, lot longer than seven periods of 24 hours! Instead, the writers are much more interested in a much, much more important question; 'Why are we here?'.

Well, the rest of scripture and the history of humankind have been wrestling with that very question. This morning, I want to focus on the one clue our Genesis reading offers; we are here to be custodians, caretakers of the earth.

More than that, this poem tells us that we are, in fact, part of the earth. There's that beautiful idea that we are created from the dirt and dust of the earth. And it is to this dirt and dust we finally return in that great cycle of carbon and atoms.

It's a reminder that we humans are interconnected with all of life. And, of course, we are the newbies. We have been around for 0.004% of the world's 4.5 billion-year history.

And in that relative blink of an eye, we have not always lived up to that caretaking call. Our one species has polluted and destroyed countless habitats and ecosystems. In the last 500 years, our species has contributed to the extinction of nearly 1500 species.

Now, this isn't a sermon about what we need to do to save this planet; others are much better placed to speak into that. This, instead, is a sermon about how we might save ourselves by reconnecting, by restoring a spiritual intimacy with our sacred world.

Notice I say 'sacred'. Richard Rohr, a Franciscan, calls the earth the 'Body of God', a living being with which humans are deeply

interconnected and must, therefore, treat with reverence. He argues that we need a shift away from this idea of human domination, of us being separate and superior to other life, to an understanding of relationship with the earth; to see ourselves as one with it. This reorientation is not just ecological but spiritual.

By caring for the earth, humans find a deeper connection with others and with the Divine. Rohr talks about the Universal Christ as the fullness of God in all living things.

Now, that idea might make some of us twitchy. Isn't this a form of pantheism? It's important, however, to distinguish between pantheism, which believes that God *is* the universe, and panentheism, which sees God as being *in* the universe, but also beyond it. Pantheism believes that 'all is God'. Panentheism believes that 'all is *in* God'.

We need to rediscover the truth that we are divinely interconnected to this earth and to the other species who also call this 'home'. I heard recently that New Zealand now defines its population as 695 billion, to include the country's wildlife population. That's a beautiful recognition of what I'm talking about.

You might have heard talk of a 'sickness of separation', an eco-anxiety, a sense of disconnect in our lives because we live so separately from nature. We need to rediscover our wild selves and our relationship with the wild. We need to rewild; get outdoors more, walk barefoot on occasion, get the earth under our fingernails, feel the wind on our faces; give our full and loving attention to this extraordinary natural world.

Jesus, we know, would often withdraw to wild places like gardens and shorelines, mountains and deserts. And here he would reconnect with his source, with the one he called Father.

I think we can all relate to that. Most of us feel a deeper connection with the Beyond, the Divine, with God in forests or fields, in earth and sea and sky, in this 'church not made with hands'.

When I need perspective; when I need solace; when I need to feel rooted and reorientated, I walk in the woods and by the lakes near where I live. And I find that all that unhealthy introspection, and that overthinking begins to surrender to new rhythms as I look up and out. I begin to hear my true nature. I begin to

commune with what I am part of and with this sense of 'all is in God'. It's not just a recalibration, it's prayer.



And this is not only about me and my wholeness. It is also about the wholeness of humanity. We are an increasingly disconnected and polarized species; us versus whoever; Left vs Right, religious vs humanist, Palestinian vs Israeli. And it's becoming crueler. Think for a moment of whose ideology or politics or faith you personally oppose. And now, say to yourself, 'They are part of me, and I of them'.

That is the shift we need if we are to build a more humane and sustainable and kind world. Violence to another, violence to the earth, is violence to me.

So, for the sake of ourselves, the sake of others, the sake of creation and the sake of God; spend more time reverently in this wild 'church not made with hands'. Look up with the soaring trees, be still with the quiet earth, wonder at the wonder and beauty of it all. Marvel at our place within it. Reconnect with the life-force that flows through all living things, take seriously our call to be stewards, caretakers and co-creators with God who is over all and through all and in all. Amen.