

Good morning to all of our members and visitors and thank you all for being here this morning. What a wonderful day to be able to gather together to worship God!

From time to time, men of the congregation are given an opportunity to bring a message to the congregation and I am honored to be able to bring you a message from God's Word this morning. I always feel like I get more out of preparing the lesson than you do in listening to it because the preparation allows me to deep dive into the subject material and there is no better way to learn than to teach.

The topic this morning is "Thoughts on Stewardship" and I hope you get something from it that reminds you of the important job every one of us has while we live on this earth minding the creation God has put under our care.

Some of my lessons tend to be a little unconventional and you may find yourself scratching your head a little at the beginning wondering where I'm going with the subject and I ask that you be patient as I develop the story and I promise that you will see where I'm headed and how it relates to God's Word.

My wife and I always check the on-line local news from our home town in order to keep up to date on current events and - as morbid as it sounds - to check the obituaries. One thing you young folks will find as you grow older is that the people you grew up with will begin disappearing and we are so far away it is sometimes months (or years) before we get the news from the family.

One news article I ran across from the local paper (TheSalemNewsOnline.com) was an obscure article named "The Dead Rest Uneasy at West Fork Cemetery" written by Andrew Sheeley and published on June 2, 2015. At first glance, there wasn't anything really unusual about the article; the subject was about sinkholes close to a 175 year-old graveyard and concern that they might impact the graveyard itself.

Upon closer inspection of the article I found that the sinkhole under discussion was 100 feet from the cemetery and was 100 feet in diameter and four feet deep. That began to get my attention because a sinkhole that big is significant. Sinkholes are not uncommon in the area of the country where I grew up and some of the ones I've seen are massive and deep. Having said that, new sinkholes opening up are not as common as - say - Florida where those critters seemingly open up and swallow houses and cars on a regular basis.

So okay, a sinkhole had opened up and was threatening a cemetery - happens all the time somewhere in the US, right?

Still... there was something about this article that made me look deeper than just skimming it from curiosity and I was startled to find that the gentleman being interviewed for the article mentioned that when he first saw the sinkhole, there was a construction crew with some very big wreckers from the local Doe Run Mining Company pulling a bulldozer out of the deep end of the sinkhole. They own the land adjacent to the cemetery and it is part of the West Fork lead mining operations. Evidently, they had been trying to fill in the sinkhole and the dozer had sunk in the deep end of the hole.

Wow! A hole big enough to swallow a bulldozer is *huge* and now, I'm *definitely* paying attention.

Evidently, the mining company has filled the hole several times now and it just keeps coming back and at the time of the writing of the news article, it was still 12 feet in diameter and several feet deep.

Reading further, I found that new depressions had began opening inside the cemetery forcing relocation of several of the burial plots.

Doe Run Mining ran resistance (stability) tests on the soil in the area and they claim that the karst topography - formed by dissolution of limestone rocks and characterized by sinkholes - in this region of Missouri resulted in underground pockets of water that have settled and drained and that is what caused the problem.

Having said that, the article went on to say that Doe Run will also not release the results of those tests and they now consider the matter to be closed. Missouri State officials will also not release any ground stability studies related to the area and the problem.

Officials from Doe Run claim in the article that their mining operations are not the source of the sinkhole problems even though land that has been stable for thousands of years now suddenly has 5 large sinkholes opened in a year.

Having gotten that far in the article, I now ran across the most heartbreaking part of the story to me.

The West Fork of the Black River runs through this area and makes a bend at the foot of the hill below Doe Run Mining and that bend formed a beautiful swimming hole that was locally called "The Granddaddy Hole" and I have many fond memories as a child swimming with my family in that particular swimming hole. The water was pristine – clear enough to see in the bottom in 12 feet of water. The pictures in the PowerPoint give you an idea of the pristine nature of the swimming hole. The first picture is of the granddaddy hole and the second is a picture of a swimming hole at Sutton's Bluff downstream after West Fork meets the Black River and you can see from both pictures the clarity of the water in these streams.

The granddaddy hole was only a few miles from where my family lived for a while and we would make regular use of the swimming hole in the summertime – as did many families in the region.

Imagine my shock when I read that a sinkhole had opened under that swimming hole and it had drained into the lead mine underneath. The problem was so severe that the river had to be permanently re-routed and rechanneled (see pictures). The swimming hole that I loved as a kid is gone forever and is nothing more than a few weed and bug infested mud holes now.

I couldn't believe that something like this could happen and the local newspaper article left me with more questions than it answered so I researched the topic more and ran across a news article published by the St. Louis Post Dispatch called "Doe Run gives locals a sinking feeling" written by Jack Suntrup on June 7, 2015.

Having better resources, the Post Dispatch was able to dive much deeper into the problem than the local newspaper could afford to do. The Post Dispatch article was a gold mine of information for me and I found that the problems had actually begun nearly a year earlier.

Doe Run will not say for sure what happened to cause the problems but a leading theory is that they got greedy and mined some of the support pillars under the river that they should have left for mine and ground stability.

Paul Worsey, director of explosives engineering at the Missouri School of Science and Technology in Rolla, has reviewed pictures of the site and said that it appears to him likely that Doe run “took out too large of an area” – and in the wrong place. He said that “Personally, I wouldn’t have taken the pillars out that close to the mine shaft. It’s okay if you do it under a hill, but doing it next to a creek is really not too wise.” He went on to say that they had the right by law to do it because the property was theirs to do with as they wished but he said it was pretty much like “shooting yourself in the foot.”

To add insult to injury, not only has re-routing the river destroyed a beautiful part of the local environment in totality, so much water flood into the mine that Doe Run Mining pumped huge volumes of water back out into the stream containing extreme levels of lead, zinc and cadmium – way higher than they were ever supposed to do. One of the local residents said that the water downstream of the dumping area was a bright yellow where the outflow pipe was located. He further went on to say that it has been 30 years since he has seen a water snake, crawdad or tadpole in a stream that used to have life in abundance.

Not only has a beloved local landmark been destroyed but the ecology of the West Fork of the Black River has been permanently altered and I fear that the pristine beauty of the river is gone for good.

How does this tie into a lesson from God’s Word? For the answer to that, I have to back up to Wednesday evening when Al brought us a short lesson where he discussed the miracle of creation when in that first instant, God spoke and the entire universe and everything in it came into being; the evidence of which is with us this very day in the form of cosmic background radiation.

I begin the tie in for this lesson where Al left off.

As God continued the creation process, he tells us in Genesis 1 what He did on each day.

Beginning with the third day, God looked at what He had done on that day and every day after and He saw that it was good. At the conclusion of creation on the sixth day, He looked at everything He had made and behold, it was very good.

God had created a beautiful and perfect world with everything in balance and every plant and animal having a place and a function and He entrusted the care of that perfect world into the hands of man.

Gen 1:26 *Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” (27) God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. (28) God blessed them; and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” (29) Then God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the surface of all the earth, and every tree which has fruit yielding seed; it shall be food for you; (30) and to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the sky and to every thing that moves on the earth which has life, I have given every green plant for food”; and it was so. [NASB]*

Gen 2:15 *“Then the Lord God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it.” [NASB]*

What an awesome responsibility was placed on man!

Gen 1:26 and 28 say that man was to “rule” over the earth and everything on it. The old KJV uses the word “dominion” but it has the same basic meaning. When used as a verb (as it is here) it means to exercise ultimate power or authority over an area and its inhabitants – in other words, over the whole earth. Genesis 1:28 goes on to say that man is to “subdue” the earth – which means to bring all of it under man’s care.

Gen 2:15 says that man was to “cultivate and keep” the Garden of Eden which is to say that they were to prepare the land for planting and to maintain and care for the flora and fauna contained in the garden.

Did all this mean that God seceded *ownership* of the earth to man at the time of creation? The answer to that is a resounding “no!” The fact that this world remains God’s property to this day is unquestioned. In Psalms 89:11, the Psalmist writes: *The heavens are Yours, the earth also is Yours; The world and all it contains, You have founded them.* [NASB] What God had done was to assign man as His steward over the earth.

And God didn’t just assign the responsibility of caring for the earth to His early creation – He assigned that as a direct responsibility of every man from the time of Adam on down.

What does it mean for man to “rule” the earth?

If I use an analogy to the meaning of “rule” used in Genesis, to “rule” a kingdom is to cultivate – or care - for it and provide laws for order and protection; to use the resources wisely; to provide for the equitable and wise distribution of wealth and commerce; and to provide protection from external forces for that which is being ruled.

A wise king is a just king, ensuring that the population is treated fairly and provided with the opportunity to grow and prosper. A wise king provides for the protection of the populace and fiercely defends his kingdom from all outside (or inside) forces that would destroy her.

In many ways, a steward is a proxy for the king. Once assigned, they are accountable to the king. We all know the story of Joseph and of his responsibility to Pharaoh in Egypt. Daniel 6 has something to say about the job of a steward:

Daniel 6:1 *It seemed good to Darius to appoint 120 satraps over the kingdom, that they would be in charge of the whole kingdom, 2 and over them three commissioners (of whom Daniel was one), that these satraps might be accountable to them, and that the king might not suffer loss.* [NASB]

Leviticus also addresses the responsibility of Stewards in Leviticus 22 where God is telling Moses about the importance of Aaron and his sons being careful in how they handle the holy gifts (or offerings). Cleanliness was a direct command and they would be held responsible to safeguard both themselves and the offerings that they not become polluted.

Lev 22:9 *They shall therefore keep My charge, so that they will not bear sin because of it and die thereby because they profane it; I am the Lord who sanctifies them.* [NASB]

Now folks, I am not a “tree hugger” but I have lived on this earth for over 60 years and I have eyes and ears and have been somewhat observant for those 60-plus years and I see a planet that is increasingly in

distress and from where I'm observing it and it appears to me that distress is increasingly caused by bad decision making and good old fashioned human greed.

God commanded us to *subdue and use* the earth – not *destroy* the earth!

Since the 18th century, man has developed technologies of such capability that we have the power in our hands to forever change - and possibly obliterate - that beautiful creation that God made when he created the earth and everything on it and declared it very good. Sometimes that technology is used for good but when human greed comes into the picture, the same technology has been used to do some very, very bad things.

If you want to see a story of greed and bad behavior on a grand scale, just do a little research on the strip mining of coal in West Virginia. According to an article called "Plundering Appalachia", more than 470 mountains have had their tops sheared off in search of coal. Over 2000 miles of streams have been filled with or seriously degraded by mining waste. More than 800,000 acres of forest have been blown away never to return and the remaining top soil is polluted to the point that not much grows there now.

For the life of me, I can't understand why humans are not more concerned about what is going on unless it is because of the promise of better jobs and livelihoods. Maybe we're just as happy to not know about the damage being done when we have that large paycheck at the end of the week.

I mean really, what does the harm done by sinkholes to a little cemetery in the rough wilds of Missouri have to do with anything? Those folks are all dead and forgotten aren't they?

And what does the loss of one swimming hole in an obscure river in the Ozarks mean? No one uses rivers to swim in anymore anyway – there are swimming pools for that activity, aren't there?

Oh really?

And why is that? Could it be that the *real* reason rivers aren't used to swim in any more is because we've poisoned them to the point where it's not safe to swim in them anymore? I only wish that you could have seen the clarity of the water and enjoy the feeling of swimming in a natural pool like that on a hot summer's day. The spring branches that fed into the river were ice cold and teeming with all kinds of minnows, water striders, crawdads and all sorts of other insect life.

Having said that, I can't imagine any human being not being appalled by the loss of these things. No sane person wants that.

Maybe it's an effect more like the boiled frog syndrome?

The story goes that if you try to put a frog into a pot of cold water and begin increasing the heat, they will just sit there until the water gets so hot that they die. The reason they do that is because the increase in heat is so slow that the frog doesn't recognize the danger until it is too late. Maybe that is what we humans are doing – sitting there in the pot stewing away and not recognizing the danger until it is too late.

I am sounding a little like a tree hugger aren't I? But consider for a moment something with me. Israel went through several episodes the bible called "the Day of the Lord" and the results were a disaster for

the nation every time they occurred. Being captured and removed from your land and broken up as a nation is pretty devastating and that lasted for generations.

Why did these “judgments of God” happen? They happened every time the nation drew away from God because of sin.

Wait a minute – am I really equating the topic in this lesson this morning to sinful events that Israel did as a people? And sadly, that is exactly what I am doing. Sin is sin – God does not make a distinction between the types of sin and all are evil in His sight.

When He looks at us as stewards, what does He see? Does He see someone in charge of His creation that is doing their utmost to use the resources wisely and to care that those resources and the nature He created will be available for future generations or does he see a race of people so obsessed with greed that they would destroy anything in their way of making money? Just what *does* He see when He looks at us?

Would He be proud of us and say:

Matt 25:21 *His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ [NASB]*

Or would He say:

Matt 25:30 *Throw out the worthless slave into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. [NASB]*

If it were just us being punished, that would be one thing but in a “Day of the Lord” type of reckoning, everyone suffers: including future generations.

And that brings me full circle back to where I began.

Looking out at the night sky on a clear night where there is not much light pollution one can observe the Milky Way spread across the heavens in a brilliant panorama just as it was painted there in the beginning by God’s own hand. We marvel at the beauty and majesty of it and of the creation event that brought it into existence in the first place. The universe is – as far as we currently know and can see – one of a kind.

The same is true for the earth.

Scientists have gotten proficient at finding planets around other stars now. They use a combination of measurement of “wobble” of the star being measured and the change of luminosity as planets orbit between the star and earth to determine if the star has planets and just what the configuration and size of those planets would have to be in order to match the observed information. Believe it or not, the physics and geometry will give you a pretty good picture.

Want to take a guess what they have found?

For all of the observations of other star systems, they have not found a single planet with the likelihood of being similar to earth. Not one.

Looking around our solar system, there is no other planet like the beautiful blue world of earth. Venus is hot enough to melt lead and Mars is too cold with little atmosphere and no magnetic field to protect it from the solar particles that are constantly spewing from the sun.

I say all that to say this: there is no other planet that we know of that can sustain life such as exists on earth and if we destroy the ecosystem of this planet, that event will be the ultimate “Day of the Lord” and most probably will be the “end time” for man.

Even if that extreme is not realized, there could be a huge dying of people on the earth as a re-balance is done as the ecosystem tries to undo the effects of the inflicted damage. The earth’s population of humans will likely plummet in a great die off. Nations will go to war for resources and people will starve on a grand scale.

Do we really want to suffer a judgment of a “Day of the Lord” or are we willing to do our part to care for the earth as we use its resources and interact with nature?

Like it or not, every one of us is a steward of the things of this earth and the judgment will fall on us all equally.

Young people, I want you to carefully think about this lesson today. You are the people who will be the leaders of tomorrow. You won’t be able to impact every decision made but if enough of you are in the right positions of authority, you can have a huge impact in what you leave to your children and our grandchildren.

We can all make a difference just by being wise in how we care for and treat nature and I believe in my heart that God fully expects that of His stewards.

That concludes the lesson today. I believe that it is a serious topic and one that we don’t often think about because God’s creation is there around us and we see it every day and just assume that it will go on forever.

I also believe we have reached a time where we as a race are impacting nature to the point where it is being seriously damaged and maybe damaged to the point that future generations will suffer.