



## A SCIENCE & RELIGION COMMENTARY

# GENESIS 2:15

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**15** The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

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Wendell Berry has a book of essays entitled "What Are People For?" , which is a provocative question. Genesis 2:15 is one place where we find a glimmer of an answer. In creating humans, God plants us in the midst of the other biota and assigns us the task of tending the garden. Note well that this is prior to the fall, so there can be no claim that the work of gardening is the consequence of human sin.

In a personal sense, God gave Adam and Eve specific responsibility for one part of God's creation. In a broader sense, it conferred on humans a basic task in this world. We are, in Hebrew terms, to 'abad' and 'shamar' the Garden. These two verbs from Genesis 2:15 – 'abad' and 'shamar' – are wonderfully common words. There is nothing mysterious or obtuse about them. They describe common activities. 'Abad' is the root of words related to service. As a noun it refers to a servant and as a verb it means 'to serve'. 'Shamar', on the other hand, means 'to protect' or 'to keep'. The famous blessing that the descendents of Aaron were to pronounce over the people of Israel (and which ends many worship services) uses the word 'shamar': the Lord bless you and keep you.

Think of those two words and the couplets that resonantly describe their meaning: Serve and preserve. Tend and keep. Enhance and protect. Human's God-given task in the world is to serve and preserve God's Garden. The knowledge gleaned from science – knowledge that in the modern sense of science allows us to perceive the workings of nature and manipulate those workings to various ends – is not intended to serve our interests alone. It is to serve the

creation in all its variety just as much or even more so than it is to serve ourselves.

One of the geniuses of the Christian faith and a fundamental meaning of Christian stewardship is that the Earth is the Lord's. Our nobility is not to be found in the fact that everything else exists for us. As Jesus noted when talking to his disciples about greatness, the one who would be great must be a servant. Our greatness is to be found in our special place as caretakers of God's glorious creation and our task to be for the rest of creation, humans included but not exclusively. Our greatness is to serve God by serving the creation and enhancing its capacity to praise and glorify its creator.

## Preaching Suggestions

From the standpoint of human relationship to the world of nature, this text makes a fundamental difference in the way Christians live in the world. Rather than seeing the whole world as created for our use, we are here as caretakers to serve the creation – to enhance and protect its capacity to glorify God.

There are times when this makes so much sense. When walking through field or forest or even the local park in the early morning or the descending dusk, there's a sweetness to the sky, air, and land that speaks of nurture and protection. Or when I get down on hands and knees to tend my backyard garden, working the soil and prayer become closely connected. The words of Rudyard Kipling come to mind: "Oh, Adam was a gardener, and God who made him sees that half a proper gardener's work is done upon his knees." Ora et labora (Latin: prayer and work) are the mainstays of every gardener. They often become one and the same thing. Scientific knowledge of the

biological world is essential to proper tending and keeping of the garden.