

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
The Human Vocation
2nd in the series, “Beginnings”
Genesis 2:4b-25
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This week at lunch, Andrea said something that made my heart sink... and my opinion of her drop a few notches. I hate to share this with you, but you might as well know. Andrea... who is much better read than I am, doesn't like the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

Disappointing isn't it?

We should probably put her on the prayer list.

I told her that I was going to work in the *Lord of the Rings* into this Sunday's sermon just for her, and that's exactly what I plan to do. I first fell in love with Tolkien's epic in the movie theater, and I'm two thirds of the way through reading it now. Part of what I love about it is of course the adventure and excitement. But even more grabbing for me are the symbolic struggles with evil that creeps in the hearts of so many different characters in so many different ways.

For example, the great realm of men is known as Gondor. But this realm has been without a king for hundreds of years, for generations. So, instead of a king, the Steward of Gondor rules the land. Now remember, a steward is someone who rules over the master's affairs in the master's stead. It's their job to not only represent the wishes of the master or the king, but to lead and direct the estate as if they embody the master. Think Pharaoh putting Joseph in charge of Egypt, as second in command. Joseph was taking on the role of the steward.

Since the last king of Gondor died without an heir, the Steward of Gondor, the second in command took over... and since that time, they've been waiting for an heir to return to the throne. You can imagine what it's like to wait generation after generation. Any idea of an heir begins to feel like a pipe dream.

So, the steward and his sons govern Gondor... ready to assume the throne themselves...

believing... there *is* no other king.

believing... they have become the rightful heirs.

Over time, they've lost sight of their identity. Some strange mixture of ambition and fear has taken over their thinking. They're clouded by the needs for security and survival, for esteem and affection, for power and control. And now, they, the stewards, consider themselves rulers of their own kingdom.

It's a delusion that, not only corrupts, but destroys them... and has a way of destroying us.

In Genesis 2, we have this second beautiful creation narrative. It's the story given to us to help us understand who we are. God takes the dust of the ground and beings to form it into this earth-creature. Then God takes this creature that's been formed and breathes life into it. And the human becomes a living being.

Then God takes this living being and sets him in the middle of a garden planted in Eden. The garden was lush and beautiful. There were trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. It was a gift to the human being. All it's needs were met.

Verse 15 says that God took this human being and placed him in the garden **“to work it and take care of it.”** That's the role of the human. It's the vocation we've all been given by God. We are in this world not to possess it, not to own it, but to work it and care for it.

Our life was given to us by the breath of God. And this good and generous God places us in this world of beauty and abundance... in the world of Eden... and entrusts us to be it's caretakers.

We are stewards. This is the human vocation.

That's exactly what the human does. He lives there, in the garden, naming the animals and livestock and birds... which is to say he knows them and cares for them. He grants them identity. And then, from his flesh is created a woman. And the two of them live together, in intimate community, as co-caretakers of all that has been entrusted to them.

But you and I know where this story goes. There was one fruit that the humans were not to eat... one thing in the Garden that was off limits, the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

A little lie slithers its way into Adam and Eve's hearts and minds. A lie that says they can become like God if they'll take this fruit for themselves. They can become the ruler, the owner, instead of the stewards.

And so... they do.

They take and eat of what is not theirs.

They treat the garden as if they are the owner... instead of God.

*A little lie, and they lost sight of what is true of their identity, of **who they are** and **who they are not**.*

In the Biblical narrative, this is the moment when everything begins to fall apart. When the human begins,

created uniquely in the image of God,
loose site of their true identity,
when they treat creation,
when they treat what has been entrusted to them,
as if it's theirs for the taking...
the world begins to unravel.

Here at the beginning of the biblical narrative, we're given this story to teach us the human vocation. We've given this story to help us see that we are stewards... and as stewards, there is both great goodness and abundance offered to us... and great temptation before us.

Jesus echoed this idea when he said, **"I have come that you might have life, and have it abundantly... but if anyone tries to save their life (if they cling to it), they will lose it. But if they give up their lives for me and for the gospel, they will save it."**

Jesus is trying to help us to see, what the ancient creation story has always said: Everything we are, everything we encounter, and touch, and see is God's... even our very breath. To forget that, is a delusion that, not only corrupts, but destroys us.

The Steward of Gondor isn't the only steward in *The Lord of the Rings*. Frodo, the main character of the epic is another kind of steward. He's been given the task of carrying the One Ring all the way through middle earth, to Mordor, up Mt. Doom, and to *"cast it back into the fiery chasm from whence it came,"* ...in order to destroy it.

You see this is no normal ring. It's a ring of enormous power, and if it is used, the powers of darkness will grow, take over, and likely destroy Middle Earth. Many have been fooled into thinking they could use the power for good, but its a deception the ring puts into the mind of it's owner.

In fact, anyone who has it in his or her possession begins to be enchanted by the ring. They begin to call it **"precious,"** and precious it becomes to them. It takes over their identity, their thoughts, their life.

The story, is this epic journey of Frodo taking the ring back to its origin, into the very heart of Mordor, the land of darkness and evil in order to destroy it. Along the way the Ring becomes more and more of a burden to Frodo. It begins to destroy the light within him. He begins to both hate and to love the ring.

At the climatic moment, when Frodo is standing inside of Mt. Doom with fiery lava flowing below, his faithful companion is yelling, **"Throw it in, Frodo. Destroy it. What are you waiting for?"**

As Frodo stares at the ring... he decides... to keep it... for himself.

He can't let it go.

He can't see the truth,

...the truth that he's no longer in possession of the ring.

The ring is in possession of him.

It's a tragic moment. Frodo begins as an innocent and pure steward of the ring. But the lure, the power of the ring slowly takes over. And when it comes to the decisive moment, Frodo thinks that the ring is his.

It's the deception that stewards easily fall into.
It's the deception at work in all of us from time to time.

You see, biblical stewardship is not just about money. It's the whole ordering of our lives. It's the recognition that nothing in the garden of our life is ours to claim or to possess. It includes our stuff... and it includes our relationships,
and our time and energy,
our work and our families.
They are all gifts entrusted to us by God, to care for on God's behalf.

We've had a tendency to think about this stewardship thing all wrong. We think that being a faithful steward is diving up our stuff,
one for me and one for God...
or nine for me and one for God (if that, right?).
We tend to think in terms of:
what would God have me do with my money?
what God would have me do with my life?

That sounds good, doesn't it? It sounds like a noble question. But it's just enough off to fool us. Because that question really comes from the wrong presupposition. The real question to ask is not: "*What would God have me do with what is mine?*" The real question is: "*What would God have me do with what God has entrusted to me?*" The real question recognizes that none of it is mine.

And so we ask:

"How will I deal with that part of God's abundance that have been placed in my care?"

"How will I deal with that part of God's life that has been breathed in me?"

"What was a good and generous God up to when God placed me in the particular garden of my life, when God entrusted me with all this?"

Will we remember that we are stewards, and not the owner?

Douglas Hall writes, "**Stewardship does not describe any one dimension of the Christian life; it describes the whole posture called 'Christian.'**"¹

Because being a Christian, means giving our life back to the one who gave it to us. It means surrendering ourselves to the One whose very breath and life flows into us. That's what it means to call Jesus Christ our Lord.

If you're anything like me, as I think about this human vocation described in Genesis 2, I can't help but think of the capital campaign we'll be entering next month.

¹ D. S. Hall, *The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age*, 232.

We're going to be trying to raise the necessary money to replace the Delmar House that is crumbling and falling apart and it's not serving the ministry of the church well. It is a large and daunting challenge that we're taking on. These moments ask great things of us as a church and as individuals.

My promise to you is that no arms will be twisted. No guilt trips will be given. No high-pressure tactics will be used to raise money. That's not what this moment is about. But all of us will be invited to ask ourselves what role we are going to play in this great moment in the life of our church.

All of us are going to be asked to consider, what was a good and gracious God up to when God entrusted this particular piece of God's abundance into our care? And could it be that part of that was so that we might have the joy of participating in this moment in our church's history.

Those are the questions we'll be asking. I promise you, no one will be guilted into giving anything. But as you begin to think about what you might give, or how you might give to this endeavor, above and beyond what you're already giving to the church, I know there will be a moment when your heart starts to choke you or your anxiety spikes and fear grips your chest.

I know this because I'm already experiencing it in moments. **And so as your pastor, I want to invite you to the same life-giving remembrance I'm inviting myself:** There is nothing to be anxious about, or to fear here... because none of the garden of my life is mine to cling to anyway. The only question to ask is what would God have me do with what God has entrusted to me?

What beautiful and wonderful things do I get to be apart of because of what God has entrusted to me?

That's the question we'll be considering next month as we enter this very unique and exciting season in the life of our church.

But for today, here at the beginning of the bible, here in Genesis 2 where we see for the first time, the vocation of humanity, we're asking a much broader question. It's a question that's not just about money.

Today the question is very simple... and yet very hard.

Do you remember who you are and who you are not?

Or another way of asking that:

Are you the center of your life or is Christ?

As you reflect on your relationships, your motivations, your time, your money, your energy. Look at all of it.

Are you honestly living as a steward or as a master?

Do you remember that the throne is not yours to sit on? ...that one day there will be a return of the King?

Can you let go of the ring that has been precious to you and throw it into the fire?
Or have you already lost your true self in the illusion of being in control of your life?

Those are hard question, but their important question. Because at the heart of them is the Christian question:

Is Christ the Lord of your whole life?

Because if he isn't Lord of your whole-life,
then he isn't your Lord... at all.

Prayer:

And so, God, we confess that there are moments when we try to sit on the throne of our lives. There are moments when we live in the delusion that this life, given to us, is ours to do with as we will.

We ask that you would heal us from the lies that have slithered their way into our hearts and minds. Heal us, so that we might find ourselves in you.

*Through Christ we pray,
Amen.*