

From Consumption to Connection
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Genesis 1:26-2:3

There's a classic motif in Alien Invasion movies. Extraterrestrial envoys are sent in search of new planets to find natural resources for their failing or depleted ecosystems. Somehow or another, these heartless aliens shoot down laser beams that simultaneously destroy skyscrapers and remove precious metals and ores from the Earth's core. The alien leaders stare deeply into the eyes of Will Smith, or Marky Mark, or Rhianna, or those dudes from *Friday Night Lights* and they tell them, "We're going to take it all. All of it. We will consume you. We will destroy you!!!"

And Glenn Close, or Morgan Freeman, or Harrison Ford defiantly resist these threats, motivating average Joes and Janes to do remarkable things: flying jets, confiscating taxi cabs, handling sophisticated weaponry, writing and/or speaking exceptional prose, SURVIVING. REBUILDING. And just when we think all is lost, humanity rises to the challenge, redirecting the laser beam to destroy the mother ship, and all of the worker bees who follow their queen. And the camera pans all seven continents, as humanity celebrates its victory on the tundra, and on the Thymes, in Texas and Toronto, and even Timbuktu.

Yes, such movies are just action-thrillers. But the nerds in the theater would remind us that these movies are also a commentary on our society. Our endless need for consumption will lead to our ultimate destruction unless we learn to cooperate, and live for something greater than ourselves.

Could these aliens represent corporate greed? Perhaps first-world indifference? Could each of us, consumerists, be the very thing we're cheering to have destroyed? And if so, that hurts, because I spent \$10 on the movie ticket, \$12 on the popcorn, and \$32 for a 100-oz Coke.

Theologian Norman Wirzba doesn't write about science fiction, but he is interested in creation care, and particularly the Christian calling for preservation. He laments a "culture of idolatry," that is a culture that's centered on self rather than God. In such a culture, we don't spend so much time thinking about God's intended purpose for the world so much as we spend our time making the world what we would like it to be. And he's right. How often is our natural environment a means to acquiring what we want, or shaping something to our liking? And how often is the natural environment something we view as being connected to, and created as a co-partner in God's world?

Were we really created to be Amazon Prime users – intently focused on finding items that match our specific desires for color, size, cost, delivery date, approval rating, regardless of any external consequences?

Were we really created to find the perfect filter on Instagram – the one that removes any blemish or imperfection in our self-portrait, or our front lawn, or the omelet we made this morning?

Were our farms and our forests and our fields meant to be profit-centers, or were they meant to be a source of daily sustenance?

And to incorporate Elizabeth Johnson's contributions to our discussion earlier this morning: In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries did God really ordain the monarchs of Europe to subdue the other

continents of the world, to enslave indigenous races, and strip the lands of its timber, the earth of its minerals, and the seas of its creatures?

Maybe these intergalactic aliens aren't as grotesque and absurd and as far-fetched as we want to believe. Their spaceships want to suck away our earth's core with no regard for its future, no concern for its inhabitants. But what of the millions of plastic water bottles we pay no mind to, or the billions of gallons of fuel we use to run our automobiles, or the trees we saw through to make homes, paper, pencils, and furniture, all in the name of commerce, as if commerce has some higher purpose.

Elizabeth Johnson argues, along with Wirzba, that this culture of consumption creates a thinking whereby we are atop the natural pyramid, a dominant, more advanced, more robust species. And therefore, the world is ours to subdue, to dominate, to consume, to do with as we please.

And if we think in such a way, then we are given license to use Genesis 1:26 in a dangerous way:

Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

In this line of thinking, the earth and its creatures are not viewed as a gift from God, but as something less. Something that can be devalued, discarded, and dominated. Something not connected to us. This verse gives us license to act like those alien invaders.

But Johnson encourages us to reach back deeper than colonial understandings of royal dominion to a more ancient interpretation. Rulers often gave dominion to others to carry out their wishes for the territories they governed. Dominion in this case is not license to make arbitrary decisions, nor to be reckless and careless with the responsibilities one has been given. It's more like that of a steward, or an executor. If you were the executor of my will and estate, you'd be bound to carry out my wishes. (Johnson p. 203-204)

Therefore, Johnson argues we must first consider God's wishes for creation. And those wishes are pretty evident: "Be fruitful and multiply." Not just humans, but all of the things that fill the heavens, and the earth, and the sky, and the seas. Everything is meant to flourish. Our dominion is not a call for domination. Our dominion is a call for decoration – that is to adorn ourselves in God's love, to thrive among an interconnected creation, to be as gardeners tilling the soil, as potters molding their clay, as bakers kneading their dough, as shepherds gathering their sheep. Do you hear that? There's a connectedness. We're not separate from the substance around us. It enhances us, and we it, and all of it together, the whole thing is God's. (Johnson p. 203-204)

Wirzba describes God's creation and the divine love that inspired it as follows:

Divine love is the action that brings creation into being, which means that God sees each creature and His own love at the same time. Seeing the night and the day, the water and the dry land, the fish of the seas and the birds of the air, the creeping things and the wild animals of earth, God also sees the divine love that desires each and every thing to be the unique thing that it is. In other words, a tree, when seen by God, is never simply a vertical log with varying kinds of foliage or some amount of lumber. A tree is also, and more fundamentally, an

incarnation of God's love – made visible, tactile, and fragrant as a giant redwood or cedar of Lebanon. (Wirzba p. 75).

God's wish for creation is to be a tangible expression of God's love, empowered to be inherently good, to flourish, to dance, to smile, to dream, to dare, to sing, to be God's – a collection of uniquely-created things and beings, being their uniquely-created selves.

Our dominion as humanity is a calling to help make manifest God's intentions for creation here on Earth.

So we are called. Called to ensure this very good creation remains very good.

And maybe those alien movies can help us after all. All those characters, faced with dire circumstances, and a dose of adrenaline, did things they never imagined they could. They suddenly found a calling. They learned how to drive a Mack truck through rubble; they put a taxi cab up on two wheels; they jumped from an airplane; they decoded complex encryptions; they survived a Shark-nado four times!!!!

I would argue that we're faced with pretty dire circumstances, too. We live on a planet that won't be sustainable much longer if we keep doing what we're doing. But maybe a reminder of our calling, keeping this creation very good; and maybe a reminder of who we are, God's beloved with immeasurable gifts, and part of this very good creation – maybe such reminders will inspire us to do things we never thought we could.

Consume less. View our natural environment as a created gift of God. Be caretakers, intent on fulfilling God's wishes. Love. All things. Repeat. Again and again. Tomorrow and the next day.

There's good news, Sardis Baptist Church. This kind of change doesn't have to be imagined in a movie theatre. And it doesn't have to wait till next summer. It can start today. With our hands. And with our feet. And most importantly, with our hearts. I'll bring the popcorn!

May God give us the strength and courage, to identify and implement such changes today! Amen.

Sources:

Johnson, E. A. (2018). Creation and the Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril . Maryknoll: Orbis Books .

Wirzba, N. (2018). From Nature to Creation: A Christian Vision for Understanding and Loving Our World. Grand Rapids : Baker Academic .