

18th Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 22, Year A

A Sermon Preached by Nia Starr

and Fr Ian M Delinger

on October 4, 2026

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20 / Psalm 19 / Philippians 3:4b-14 / Matthew 21:33-46

*Turn now, O God of hosts, look down from heaven;
behold and tend this vine; preserve what Your right hand has planted.*

Today marks the last day of the Season of Creation. Several denominations came together to encourage us to honor the period from September 1 to the Feast of St Francis (October 4) by reflecting on our biblical mandate to care for Creation.

We have a parishioner whose career is to encourage people to care for Creation. I have invited Nia Starr into dialog about what today's scriptures tell us about our call to be stewards of Creation.

Nia, you work for ECOSLO. The Vision and Mission are very simple. ECOSLO's Vision is that *Nature and community thrive in San Luis Obispo County*. And the *Mission is organiz[ing] our community to protect San Luis Obispo county's environment*. When you think of the vineyard in our story as Creation – or San Luis Obispo County's environment – what are your first thoughts?

When I think about the vineyard, the first thing that comes to mind is that it's a gift. One of the things I love about living in San Luis Obispo County is how close we are to Creation. We have these beautiful rolling hills, oak trees, the coastline, our creeks. It's hard not to feel that we've been given something really special here.

And the thing about the vineyard in this story is that the tenants didn't plant it. They didn't create it. They were invited into something that already existed, something that had been prepared for them. I think that's a

beautiful way to understand our relationship with Creation. **We didn't make any of this. We arrived here and found ourselves in a world that was already full of abundance.**

And yet we have this tendency to act as though it all belongs to us. We start thinking about what we can extract from it, what we can build on it, how much it can produce for us. Through my work at ECOSLO, I think a lot about how we can help our community remember that we're caretakers of something we've been given.

And for me, that begins with gratitude. Before we talk about everything that's wrong with the environment, I think it's important to remember that Creation is something God called good!! It was good before we ever did anything to improve it.

The theological underpinning for me is that: Gift precedes obligation. Stewardship is a response to grace, not a means of earning it.

You told me that you got into climate change work not just to save the planet, but to save the people, too. We often talk about people and planet as if they are separate entities, but aren't people part of planet? Aren't we part of the vineyard?

Absolutely. And I think that realization is really what brought me into environmental work in the first place. I was living in New York City during Hurricane Sandy, and I remember the lights going out. There was this very strange experience of seeing a city that normally feels so powerful and self-sufficient suddenly become incredibly vulnerable.

And what became clear to me was that the storm didn't affect everyone equally. Some people had the resources to leave, stay somewhere else, or recover quickly. Other people didn't. They were dependent on the buildings

they lived in, the public transportation they used, and the infrastructure around them.

That experience stayed with me, and it eventually helped lead me toward studying sustainability and working on climate resilience. Sometimes when we talk about environmentalism, we talk about saving the polar bears or protecting the forests, which are important things. But I became interested in the people living in the “vineyard”, too.

People who can’t afford to cool their homes during a heat wave. People whose homes flood. People who are already struggling to pay their utility bills. Those people aren’t separate from Creation. They’re part of it. And I think as Christians, this becomes a question of loving our neighbors. **If I say that I love my neighbor, but I’m indifferent to whether they have clean air to breathe, safe water to drink, or a home that’s livable, then I have to ask myself what that love actually means.**

My parents came to this country from Cambodia and Vietnam. My mother was a refugee, and my biological father immigrated to the USA in the 1980s after the Vietnam War. So I think I’ve always been aware that where you’re born and what resources you have can dramatically shape your experience of the world. Climate change has made me think about that on a global scale. The people with the fewest resources to adapt are often the people who have contributed the least to the problem.

If we are part of the vineyard, then why would we allow the tenants to behave in that way? What is our role in protecting ourselves?

I think the uncomfortable thing about this parable is that I would really like to imagine myself as one of the good tenants. I’m the sustainability person! I should be one of the people taking care of the vineyard.

But the truth is, I participate in the very systems I'm trying to change. I forget my reusable cup at the coffee shop. I buy things I don't need. I take long haul flights. I like having a comfortable home. I like convenience – I'm a former New Yorker after all.

And I think that's where the Christian understanding of grace becomes really important for me. Because if Creation Care is just about dividing the world into good environmentalists and bad polluters, I don't think we get very far. And I don't think it's particularly honest.

At the same time, our responsibilities aren't all equal. A family trying to get to work and put food on the table doesn't have the same power as a corporation making decisions about how resources are extracted or how much pollution is produced.

That's one reason I love working with businesses through ECOSLO. We can help change some of the systems that people participate in every day, rather than putting all the responsibility on individuals. To me, protecting the vineyard means recognizing that we belong to one another, that our actions have consequences for our neighbors, and that we have an opportunity to care for what we've been given. Not because we're going to get it perfectly right. But because it's worth caring for.

I spend a surprising amount of my professional life talking to people about reusable cups. And I love reusable cups! But I don't think Jesus is standing at the gates of heaven with a checklist asking whether I remembered my reusable coffee cup every morning. The cup is not the point. **The point is whether we're learning to see the world, and the people we share it with, as something worth caring for.** The law exposes our desire to justify ourselves through our good behavior, while grace frees us to do the good without making it our identity.

Our Old Testament reading was the 10 Commandments. We've made many idols for ourselves that have led to the Climate Crisis. I would say that oil is one of those idols, and the almighty dollar is another. Our covetousness has also led to the Climate Crisis, always needing what someone else has and amassing stuff. At the end of the 10 Commandments, Moses tells a fearful and trembling people:

Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.

What's our biggest test in striving toward adequate and effective Creation Care?

I think one of our biggest challenges is that we're constantly being told that a good life is a life where we have more. A bigger house, a newer car, more things, more financial security, more independence.

And I think the American Dream has a lot to do with this. We imagine success as having our own house, our own yard, our own car, and not having to depend on anyone.

But when I think about the vineyard, I wonder whether we've confused having enough with having everything for ourselves.

One of the things that really influenced me was traveling to Japan and studying sustainable development there. I was struck by how much of daily life happens in shared spaces. Public transportation, public parks, neighborhood businesses. There's a different experience of moving through the world when you share so much of it with other people.

Of course, Japan has its own environmental challenges. But it made me think about how much of our environmental impact is tied to the way we've designed our lives around individual ownership. And I think there's a spiritual question there, too. When do the things that promise us comfort and security become the things we organize our entire lives around?

I don't think the answer is that everyone needs to give up their homes or their cars. I think it's about recognizing that none of these things can

ultimately give us the security we're looking for. And maybe the biggest test is learning that **we don't have to possess everything in order to enjoy what God has given us.**

I also think there's a temptation in sustainability to create a new set of commandments. In the environmental community we do this all the time. Thou shalt not use plastic. Thou shalt not fly. Thou shalt compost correctly. And those things can be worthwhile practices! But I know how quickly I can turn them into a way of measuring whether I'm a good person. I think the Gospel interrupts that. It reminds me that my worth isn't determined by how environmentally responsible I am. And maybe **being freed from having to prove that I'm a good person actually makes me more available to love my neighbor.**

What are your thoughts when you consider that the son figure in the story is Jesus, and the tenants kill Jesus? Where is Jesus in this particular Creation Care conversation?

I think this is the part of the story that really changes everything for me. Because we've been talking about the vineyard and our responsibility to take care of it, and I think it would be easy to conclude that the message is simply that we all need to become better tenants.

But then Jesus enters the story.
And the tenants kill him.

There's something incredibly revealing about that. God gives us this beautiful vineyard, and rather than receive it as a gift, we want to possess it. We want the inheritance for ourselves. We want to be in control. And when the son arrives, we reject him.

I think this illustration is a pretty honest picture of humanity. We have an extraordinary capacity to take the gifts we've been given and turn them into things that serve ourselves, even when doing so hurts other people.

But the Christian story doesn't end with the death of the son. It ends with the resurrection.

And that's where I find hope in this work. Because if the future of Creation depended entirely on our ability to become perfect stewards, I think I would be pretty discouraged. I work in sustainability. I know how difficult it is to change systems, how complicated the problems are, and how often our best intentions fall short.

But the hope of the Gospel isn't that humanity will finally get everything right. It's that God has not abandoned us or the world he loves. And I think Jesus meets us right in the middle of our failure, including our failure to care for Creation. He doesn't wait for us to become perfect tenants before he loves us.

And I also think Jesus is present in the people who are suffering. When I think about Jesus identifying himself with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, and the person in need, I think about the people whose lives are being affected by environmental problems right now. The family that can't afford to cool their home. The elderly person living through a heat wave. The child breathing polluted air.

I think caring for Creation is one of the ways we care for Christ in our neighbors. The hope of Creation Care isn't that we're going to save the world through our own goodness. It's that God hasn't given up on the world, even when we have failed to care for it.

Jesus ends the parable in a very dramatic way when He says:

The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.

Who are those people, or who will those people be?

I think the first thing I want to say is that I don't think the people who produce the fruits of the kingdom are necessarily the people who have figured out how to be the most environmentally responsible.

Because that would just be another way of dividing the world into the good tenants and the bad tenants. I think **the fruits of the kingdom are what happens when people begin to live out of the love they've already received.** And I see that happening in really ordinary ways.

I see it in the people who show up every month to cook and serve at People's Kitchen. I see it in the people who plant trees and clean up our creeks with ECOSLO. I see it in small business owners who want to do something good for their community but don't necessarily have the time or resources to figure out how.

And I see it here at St. Stephen's as we work toward California Green Business Certification. That work might involve something as ordinary as changing how we use energy, reducing waste, or switching to reusable dishes at coffee hour. None of those things are going to save the world on their own. But I think they can be expressions of something much bigger.

They're ways of saying that **the people who come after us matter. That our neighbors matter. That the world God has given us matters.** And I think it's beautiful that we don't all have to contribute in the same way. Some people are called to cook. Some people are called to teach. Some people are called to plant trees. Some people are called to organize. Some people are called to care for children. We bring what we've been given, and somehow God uses all of it.

I think what I've come to appreciate about Creation Care is that it's really an invitation to pay attention to what we've been given. I have a little daughter, Kana, and becoming a mother has changed the way I think about the future. I think about the world she'll inherit, and of course I want it to

be a beautiful and livable one. But I also want her to know that the world is a gift. That she doesn't have to earn her place in it. That she belongs here, and that the people around her belong here, too. I think that's ultimately what I hope my work communicates. **That we belong to one another. That we have a responsibility to care for each other.** And that we can do that imperfectly, with the gifts and talents we've been given. I don't think God is asking any one of us to save the world by ourselves. But I do think we're invited to love the world he made. And that's a pretty beautiful invitation.

We belong to one another, and we have a responsibility to care for each other.

Amen!