On a beautiful Sunday afternoon more than thirty-five years ago, on April 28, 1986, workers in a nuclear power facility in Sweden entered the plant to begin their shift when the radioactive alarms started sounding. Initially the workers assumed that some kind of problem, most likely a small leak had occurred. However, after checking the whole plant they could find nothing wrong. What, then, had triggered the alarms? After further investigation it became apparent that the workers coming into the plant had such high radiation levels that they set off the alarms.

The rest of the world gradually became aware of the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl also. For whatever reasons, Russia had delayed reporting this tragedy, which had occurred a few days earlier. A huge nuclear cloud had, therefore, drifted northwest from the general area of Kiev, across Poland, the Baltic countries and into Scandinavia. Hence, the radiation levels outside the power plant in Sweden were actually higher than they were inside the Russian plant.

During the next few days, more information became public regarding the magnitude of the disaster. In Poland, little children were being treated with iodine in order to counteract the potential effects of radioactive iodine from the nuclear pollution that had swept across the country. Government officials assured people in the West that there was little to worry about if they were simply careful, did not allow their children to play outside for extended periods of time, washed carefully after coming inside and chose not to eat fresh fruits and vegetables for some time. However, as the years passed, those same officials admitted that the pollution levels were actually higher than they had reported and that the health effects of this disaster would only become apparent over time.

We hear very little about this event from 1986 now, but the nuclear leak in Russia had a profound impact on our earth and all living things on this planet. You might say both the land and people were poisoned. The agricultural sector saw the most damage. Large areas of agricultural land were removed from service, and timber production was stopped in many forests. In addition, many farmers could not sell foodstuffs because they were contaminated. 35 years later, Chernobyl radioactivity is still circulating. The land surrounding Chernobyl is still vacant, no animal, plant or human can live on this land. According to the statistics gathered throughout the years, 5 million people in Russia and Ukraine suffered from the nuclear radioactivity.

One of the main goals for our Creation sermon series in the fall is to confront how we, as people of God, have contributed to the pollution of our earth. As people of faith, we confess confidently that God is creator. The whole universe and specifically the earth, our home, is God’s handiwork. We have not made the earth, and it is not our possession, to do with as we please. Rather, the earth belongs to God who addresses our physical needs and sustains our life through water, land and air and all the good gifts these produce. Human beings, who so often view themselves as distinct from the material world, are, in fact, part of that world, dependent on it and connected with it. Humans do not rule the earth, although God has given them a unique stewardship of the earth, they are to serve the earth.

We read in Genesis 1:8, 15, “***And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it***.” Since the nuclear disaster in Russia, we have sought to be ecologically conscious since then and have been supportive of efforts to curb pollution and to care for the earth. Nuclear accidents, nuclear waste, the destruction of the ozone layer, the disappearance of glaciers throughout the world, the melting of the polar caps, the decimation of the rain forests, the warming of the oceans, the loss of evergreens throughout the western United States and Canada, and the fracking of our earth to harvest oil, the effects of pollution throughout the world is long. That is the bad news which some still deny but which is, in fact, undeniable. The evidence is simply overwhelming. However, there is also good news, namely, that it does not have to be this way. Humans have a choice on whether they will care for our earth or whether they will strip our earth of its bounty for personal gain.

The fact is, God declared the planet and people to be good, yet, the reality of human brokenness or sin, has created disharmony ecologically and tragically, humans were not satisfied to be God’s good creation. Rather than letting God be God, they sought to be a god themselves. As a result, they became victims of their own self-centeredness, their perceived needs, their passion to meet those needs over and above all things. They locate themselves at the very center of the universe and view themselves as the rulers. The persistent exploitation, careless abuse and relentless consumption of the earth’s precious resources are all concrete manifestations of the compromise of God’s good creation. Humans have rebelled against God’s good intention for our planet.

But it doesn’t have to be this way if we claim this promise in Genesis that it is through God’s love of the earth and mankind that remains our plumb line on making good decisions to preserving our earth.

Loving what God calls good must start with me and you. Our faith must be evaluated on how we use our earth’s resources. Yet, this is not an easy task. We, too, consume the earth’s resources. We, too, add to pollution, just by driving out of our driveway. We, too, may feel a bit helpless each time we get a message on our computers or printers telling us that it is no longer supported by the manufacturer and you are on your own. And, eventually, you know the outcome, another computer or printer is stored in a garage or recycled way before the machine, itself, stops working.

I feel the angst of Greta Thunberg when she says, “***You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing****.*”

Greta is telling all people, regardless of age, to take a part in caring for our planet. We know from our history that change happens at the grassroots level. The groundswell for adopting better conservation measures, like refusing to remodel a kitchen or bathroom every few years needs to stop becoming the norm. Yes, remodeling does need to take place at times, and while I watch the Home & Garden channel with curiosity and fun myself, I am also horrified by the gigantic waste of materials taken to a garbage dump.

Can we begin to think differently when confronted with preserving our planet. The answer is obviously yes, and starts with us. We are the consumer. We dictate the marketplace. Can we become a servant to our planet? Can these words from our gospel about being a servant influence the way we buy our groceries, travel across the oceans to visit countries, or how we recycle items?

Jesus lived for only 30 +years, but he spoke clearly about becoming the servant rather than the ruler who lords it over other people. Jesus was quite aware how bad power destroys God’s intent for both humans and the planet, so choosing to be the faithful servant does require us to reflect on how we power-up or power-down as we live out our daily lives.

Let us take these words from Philippians with us as we reflect on our stewardship of our planet, “**Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others**.” Amen.