

“Was God the First Environmentalist?”

Genesis 1: 1 – 2:3

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“Be fruitful and multiply.” “Fill the earth and subdue it.” “Have dominion over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” Those are the words from one of our most ancient scriptures, our tradition’s creation story.

I think we can all agree on one thing today: the environment is a hot topic. And I don’t just mean because of global warming (bad pun!). You can’t get through a day without the issue of the environment touching you. When we go shopping we are encouraged to bring our own reusable bag. At home we are supposed to have separate bins for trash, recycling, and composting. If we get in our car to just drive one block the shame police will show up in our conscience. At church we have been trying to avoid the use of disposable paper products.

Like I said I think we can all agree on one thing: the environment is a hot topic. Where we may disagree with each other is on what is actually happening with our environment. Some feel passionately that global warming is on an irreversible trend while others dismiss it as another passing fad. When you go to the store some will say you should never use plastic grocery bags to which others respond, “*So, chopping a tree down is better?*” And even here at church an argument could be made whether wasting water washing dishes is any better than wasting paper products.

Today we are observing Earth Day in our service, which may be the first time in this church for us to do that. It’s not an official church tradition. But, the church has been accustomed to honoring a few of our American holidays. We celebrate Independence Day, Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, Thanksgiving, and Veteran’s Day. To that long list it is becoming more and more important that we add another one—Earth Day.

Isn’t it interesting that our scriptures have not changed on this subject for over 3000 years, yet in recent decades we are witnessing a sudden interest in environmental issues? If our scriptures haven’t changed, then what has? What is interesting to me is that even in my short time on earth I have seen this shift take place. Growing up in Colorado, I felt like nature was at my disposal. I fished pretty much where I wanted and when I wanted. I hiked in the mountains sometimes on trails and sometimes by compass. I put my tent down on just about any flat spot I could find. Nature was just something I took for granted. It was something that was there for me to use.

Now enjoying nature is like scanning the entertainment section for a good concert. I need to make reservations days and sometimes months in advance. I need register, get a license, and pay fees. And then, even when I get there I need to follow strict rules about what plot of soil I get to walk on and what plot will get me a stiff fine. And the days of going out to catch a fish for dinner has become highly complicated. I may catch a fish, but before I can clean it I need to make sure it’s the right species, the right length, and caught with the right bait.

Our scripture hasn’t changed. So what has changed? I read an article yesterday about the current conversation going on about Forest Park. There is a heated and contested debate about the proper use of this city treasure. Some want to keep it pristine and as close to wilderness as possible. Others want to make it recreation mecca where walkers, runners, hikers, birders and

bikers all co-exist. At the end of this article the author, biologist Marcy Houle, said, “*We are not entitled to this gift. We are entrusted with it.*”

That comment is very close in language to our own scripture in Genesis. We just read the account of the seven days of Creation. It was the sixth day that is so important in how we understand our relationship to the rest of creation. After God had created the earth and the heavens, after God had created the seas and the rivers, after God had created the birds and the animals, God then created humans. In relationship to the rest of life we have this language from Genesis, **‘God blessed (humanity), and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”**

Like I said our scripture has not changed for over 3000 years. Yet, in the last 40 years since the first Earth Day in 1970 there has been a dramatic shift in our focus on the environment. So what changed? What changed is that, if we use the language of Marcy Houle, we went from thinking that we are entitled to God’s earth to thinking we are entrusted with God’s earth. We went from thinking that the earth was given to us for our use to thinking it was given to us to protect.

It’s interesting to look at the language of Scripture because the language sounds more like “entitlement thinking.” Wouldn’t you agree? “*Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.*” “*Subdue the earth and have dominion over all life.*” I have an occasion during almost every sermon to make the case that context is everything when reading scripture. If we take the words literally without understanding the context of the writing we are left with entitlement thinking. We know something has changed because we can’t hear these same words and feel the same way we used to. Who can hear the words about being “fruitful and multiplying” in this world of overpopulation and feel good about it? I don’t know anyone who says what we really need are more people. And in a time when we list new endangered species on a daily basis who can hear the words, “Subdue the earth” and think we are on the right track? We’ve subdued the earth alright...and in the process we have lost species, polluted our waters, and filled our sky with smog. We have subdued it and now it is begging for mercy.

Like I said context is everything. When these words were written they were written in a world where survival was really difficult. Infants regularly died before reaching childhood. Diseases killed off whole families. Wild animals were more than just a Kodak moment; they were something to be feared and respected. And droughts could force a whole tribe to die off or at least wander into new lands. Life was brutally hard. So when you hear “Be fruitful and multiply” in that context it makes all kinds of sense. And when you hear “subdue the earth” it sounds completely reasonable because you know that if you don’t subdue the earth, it’s going to subdue you.

So, on this Earth Day how do we reconcile what seem to be the needs of our world today with the puzzling words of Scripture? I am going to submit to you that what our scripture is really saying is, “You have to find the right balance between the needs of humanity and the rhythm of nature.” I will submit to you that God is actually the first environmentalist and that God’s needs haven’t changed over the course of history. God still wants a balance between humanity and nature. The difference is that the balance has changed. When this creation story was written nature had the upper hand and God wanted humans to find their place in it. But, that has all changed. Now it could be argued that humanity has the upper hand and now we are faced with not with subduing nature, but with protecting nature.

The words of scripture say “subdue the earth” but what is really being said is, “Subdue to the earth so that you can find your place in it.” I really believe that if this same story was written in our time it would say, “Protect the earth so and find a balance between all living things.”

I will close with a few words from Chief Seattle in a letter he wrote to the U.S. Government after they inquired about buying tribal lands. He wrote this:

“The President in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land. But how can you buy or sell the sky? The land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them?

Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every meadow, every humming insect. All are holy in the memory and experience of my people.

We know the sap which courses through the trees as we know the blood that courses through our veins. We are part of the earth and it is part of us. The perfumed flowers are our sisters. The bear, the deer, the great eagle, these are our brothers. The rocky crests, the juices in the meadow, the body heat of the pony, and man, all belong to the same family.

This we know: the earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.

One thing we know: our god is also your god. The earth is precious to him and to harm the earth is to heap contempt on its creator....One thing we know: there is only one God. No man, be he Red Man or White Man, can be apart. We *are* brothers after all.”