



Sermon by: Rev. Dr. Randell K. Bush on May 12, 2024

Text: Genesis 1:27-31

Faithful Paradoxes: Dominion Over / Dependence on the Earth

In an interview around his 50th birthday, Albert Einstein was asked if he believed in God. He insisted he wasn't an atheist, but he believed that the human mind wasn't capable of fully grasping the universe. He then told this parable. "We are like a child entering a huge library, whose walls are covered to the ceiling with books in many different languages. The child knows that someone must have written these books but doesn't understand the languages in which they were written. But the child notes a definite plan in the arrangement of the books - a mysterious order that it does not comprehend but only dimly suspects."¹ Einstein is correct in that we are filled with a sense of wonder when we consider the majesty of creation around us. Whether looking at the mountains, sea and sky or peering through telescopes at planets and quasars, there is a mystery both to the ordering of the universe and deciding what our place is in that order.

Psalm 8 verses 3 & 4 agrees with this view when it says, "When I look at your heavens, the works of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" But where Einstein argued that we cannot understand the ordering of creation, the Psalmist insists that doesn't change the fact that we still have responsibility for creation. Verses 5 & 6 say "You have made [us] a little lower than God and crowned [us] with glory and honor, giving [us] dominion over the works of your hand." In that one word - dominion - we hear echoes of what we heard earlier from the book of Genesis, and we find ourselves in the thick of a paradox confronting all humanity: What exactly is our role as creatures living on earth yet as ones who have dominion over earth?

It is somewhat like the Chopin Etude I played earlier. Being dependent on earth yet told to exercise dominion over earth are like the different meters in Chopin's piece. Four beats per measure and six beats per measure do not easily fit together; but Chopin managed to intertwine them and together they literally create beautiful music. We are fragile creatures who've come late to our planet's evolutionary story - creatures utterly dependent on its resources of air, food and water. Yet we are strangely and wonderfully made, given a responsibility by the Creator to till this earthly garden and continue the work of creation begun long before us. The paradox, the tension is that our dependence upon and our dominance over creation here on earth cannot be separated.

To sort this all out, maybe the first question is to ask what our place is in the hierarchy of life here on earth. Are we the top of the heap, the pinnacle of all existence? Well, that has been the presumption from ancient times. It was slightly challenged in 1735 when

Carl Linnaeus published his classification system of the three kingdoms of nature: minerals, vegetables, and animals. For the first time, human beings were put in the animal kingdom right beside other primates like orangutans and chimpanzees. This did not sit well with scientists and theologians alike, but Linnaeus insisted that was where we belong.² However Linnaeus believed that every plant and animal had a purpose given by God and that they would reproduce in just the right numbers to keep this balance stable for all time. This static view of creation was challenged by another great thinker, Alexander von Humboldt. Humboldt recognized that life on earth was far from stable, as creatures “red in tooth and claw” (Tennyson) struggled for survival on a daily basis. Humboldt not only laid the groundwork for Darwin’s later evolutionary theory, he was one of the first to see all of life as interconnected, moving us beyond Linnaeus’ hierarchy of creation into a real sense of the world as being an interdependent ecology of life.³

So what is our place in this web of life? A lot has been written about what we heard in Genesis 1:28 – that God blessed us, told us to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over every living thing on earth. The Hebrew word translated as “dominion” is *radah*. In other places in the Old Testament it refers to the rule of the head of the house over servants or of officers over soldiers.⁴ But what type of ruler as we supposed to be? Are we tyrants who see the world as a blank stage upon which we have the power to build whatever set we choose, using resources however we deem necessary, and treating the rest of the global theater as a giant trash can to hold whatever we don’t need? While that idea has been prevalent for centuries, nowadays people inside and outside church walls insist that ours must be a benevolent rule of restraint, and that we take better care of this interconnected ecosystem.

As people of faith, we downplay the language of domination and emphasize the language of stewardship, of being trustees over God’s good creation. This also fits with what the bible says. For example, scripture makes it quite clear that we are not the creators of life; God is. Therefore, we are entrusted with caring for something that ultimately does not belong to us – making us clearly stewards and not owners of the earth. Also, if we look at the second creation story in Genesis 2, it is clear that humankind was put in the garden by God expressly “to till and keep it” (Gen 2:15). The language here is that of being caretakers, not controllers; tenders of the garden, not tyrants lording over it.

And to this point, if we profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord, then we should exercise power patterned after his lordship. We should be servants in a world where “the last are made first, the weak are made strong, and even the sparrow is cherished.”⁵

Having said all that, there remains a problem even with the language of benevolent dominion and faithful stewardship of creation. Both options still keep human beings center stage in the drama of life. These are anthropocentric approaches to faith and

ecology. That's why recent theologians have suggested other metaphors for our relation to creation. Some have said we should see ourselves, not as stewards over creation, but as partners with creation – part of a holy democracy of all creatures great and small. Think of St. Francis of Assisi who preached to the birds and spoke of Brother Sun, Sister Moon, and Sister Earth. It is time for stewards and guardians over earth to give way to family partnerships with all creatures of earth.

This idea of partnership fits with another Genesis story related to creation, the story in Genesis 9 of God's new covenant established with Noah. As the animals emerged from the ark and a rainbow graced the sky, God pointed to it and said it is a sign of the covenant made between God and us and every living creature for all future generations (Gen 9:12). There's no hierarchy in this arrangement, just a promise that God will not destroy all life ever again.

While God may have promised not to destroy all life again, the same cannot be said of the modern human race. When Robert Oppenheimer stood with other atomic scientists in 1945 to witness the first nuclear explosion, he quoted a line from the Hindu scripture Bhagavad Gita and said, "Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds."⁶ Given the destruction we've wrought on the planet, the spoiling and polluting of earth, and the mounting perils related to climate change, Oppenheimer's words can sadly be spoken by each of us too. We read about this, argue about this, and worry about this, but in the end we just don't know what to do about this. As people of faith, is there a response to this dependence/domination paradox we find ourselves living out here on earth?

I recently read an interesting article that asked whether we can ever know what animals are thinking.⁷ It invited us to consider whether animals have basic rights that we need to respect. Just as FDR talked about the Four Freedoms: the freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and the freedom from fear – animal-welfare advocates speak about similar freedoms we should extend to God's creatures. As much as we can, we should grant other creatures freedom from hunger and thirst; freedom from pain, injury and disease; freedom from fear and distress; and the freedom to express their normal behavior while they live beside us on this planet.

In light of that, I suggest that the first step forward concerning all of this is to take a step back – to de-center ourselves when considering where human beings fit in the grand scheme of things. We need less of Genesis 1 where human beings are created on the sixth day as the culmination of creation, and more of Genesis 2 in which humans are humbly made out of soil and put in the garden to tend to God's creation. We need less focus on how God seems to only talk to us, and more focus on the covenant God made after the flood with all creatures, flora and fauna and humans huddled together under God's rainbow. If we do choose to speak up, let us not talk so much about our needs but rather speak on behalf of a creation that may be mute but still is God-blessed and Heaven-loved. Let us take a step back from our selfies and center-stage spotlights and

recognize that there is no salvation for us that doesn't include the rest of creation as well.

We began this conversation with Einstein's parable of a child stepping into a vast library whose details weren't comprehensible but whose overall order could be dimly grasped and appreciated. His parable spoke about a sense of humility before the grandeur of the universe. So much of the current debate about climate change goes too far in this direction of humility. It beats us down and makes us feel helpless in the face of our ecological sins of omission and commission. That's why the language of faith is so important in these difficult times because it gives us direction and hope.

We believe we have been made in God's image and called as partners in God's ongoing work of creation. We are stewards of a world we do not own. We are family members toiling in this garden beside all creatures: animals, vegetables and minerals alike. That's why it is time for us to take a step back – to ensure that freedom stops being defined only in human terms; to follow the example of Christ whose lordship of sacrifice and service is both our calling and our inspiration; and to recognize that in the inescapable interplay of a loving dominion over earth and humble dependence upon earth we can make beautiful music for ourselves, for our children, and for all life for generations to come. May it be so.

AMEN

¹ Quoted by George S. Viereck, Glimpses of the Great, 1930

² Cf. Linnean Society of London website, Linnaeus and Race

³ Cf. Andrea Wulf, The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt's New World, 2016

⁴ Theodore Hiebert, "Rethinking Dominion Theology," *Direction: A Mennonite Brethren Forum*, Fall 1996, pp. 16-25

⁵ Larry Rasmussen, Earth Community Earth Ethics, 1996, p. 231

⁶ Cf. James Temperton article in *Wired*, July 21, 2023 et al.

⁷ Bill Wasik & Monica Murphy, "Do We Know What Animals are Really Feeling?", *New York Times Magazine*, April 23, 2024