

26 April 2015
Earth Day

On Subduing the Earth
Genesis 1:26-31

Genesis 1:26-31. Then God said, '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.'

*So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.*

God blessed them, 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.' God said, 'See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.' And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Today we celebrate God's good creation. We celebrate the earth in joy, in song, in praise, and in imagery. We celebrate in the chiming of bells, in the voices of children, and in laughter. We thank God that upon creating the earth, God said, "It is very good." And I thank Worship Design and Susan Hamilton for planning this service. I thank them also that, in their planning, they decided to let me say a few words too. I think I have seven minutes.

The first place in the Bible that speaks of humanity's relation to the earth comes right away, in the creation chapter of Genesis 1. In verse 28, God speaks to freshly-minted humanity, saying, *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.* Subdue the earth. Have dominion. Well, we've certainly done that. We have forced our will on the planet, dredged it for its resources and filled it with our waste, blasted its contours into the squares and rectangles of our city-scapes, driven species into extinction, coated its fertile fields with concrete for our parking convenience, drained wetlands and emptied desert aquifers to make golf courses, and filled the skies with our industrial bad breath. We've subdued the heck out of earth. Well done, I guess.

But perhaps there's more to this verse than just a command to show the earth who's boss. It might help to read back a couple of verses, to the creation of *Adham*, human beings. Verse 26: *God said, '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.'* So God created humankind in his image. The command to have dominion over the earth is tied from the beginning to the very peculiar statement that we, human beings, are created in the image of God.

And that really is a peculiar statement. Every Ancient Near Eastern culture had its own creation story, but this one is so different from those as to be from another planet. In other creation accounts of that time, the creator was a tyrant imposing his will on others, and humans were created either as slaves or as accidental debris that occurred in the creator's struggle for power. Only in the biblical account do we meet a Creator who creates in joy and love, and human beings that are created with dignity and are given a spark of the divine – designed to be friends of God. When you connect that to the idea of “having dominion” over the rest of creation, you get a very different picture. We are to be God's agents, caring for a world that God loves and that God describes as good. God is not a tyrant over us, but a partner in relationship. As God's agents, then, we are not to be tyrants over the earth, but earth's partner in fruitfulness. We are to subdue the earth in the same way that good parents “subdue” children. Good parents neither leave their children to do whatever they want all the time nor force their children to become only what *the parents* want them to be. The former is neglect, and the latter is abuse. In the same way, we may not just leave the earth to its own devices all the time, but neither do we abuse it by making it something it is not. Our goal, as God's agents over creation, is to love it as we are loved and help it to become what it was created to be from the beginning, a place of life and fruitfulness.

Now, some of you regular viewers of this program may have noticed that this sermon doesn't really the sermon series I'm in the middle of, “Reflections on Life and Death.” That's true. The Earth Day service has been in the works for a lot longer than my sermon series, so I had to work around it. And yet . . . and yet there *is* a connection. We Christians believe that this life and this earth are not the end. There is life after death, and there will be a new heavens and a new earth. Well, there is a branch of the Christian tree that takes that to mean that therefore this life – and this earth – don't really matter. They are both disposable, because after all, we're going to spend eternity in heaven. Who cares if we destroy the earth, these Christians seem to say, because we're going to be Raptured out of it anyway. But as I suggested last week, when I talked about living well in the presence of death, we do *not* teach that this life is irrelevant. Quite the opposite, in fact. This life is a time of growing in love, shaping our character, and preparing ourselves for the rest of our story. From that perspective, it matters a great deal whether we take seriously our role as God's agents in good creation. In Luke 16, Jesus says, *Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the riches of this world, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?* (Luke 16:10-12)

We have been given a great gift in the gift of life and breath. But we have been given more. We have been granted a reflection of God's own image, and with that gift the responsibility of serving as God's agents over the rest of life. I think it's safe to say that we could do a better job than we have been. Remember, in the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth and looked out over all that he had made, he saw that it was very good. It is left to us, in this life, to keep it so.