

A Sermon Preached by Mary Whitcomb at
Clarence Presbyterian Church on June 25, 2023

HAVE WE FORGOTTEN WHO WE ARE?

Scripture: Genesis 1:26 – 2:9, Psalm 8, Matthew 25:34-40

I'm using the Genesis text for the sermon today. There's a lot going on in Genesis, as you know. Out of formless void and whirling globs of rock and water, God created all that we know. In addition to establishing all species and all the elements of an environment that supported them, He created humans – a unique specie – fashioned in His own image. God also outlined the elements of the unique relationship we would have with Him forever.

When God said humans were created in His image, I believe He proclaimed us to be co-partners with Him in the work of creation. We were also given the knowledge of having been so designed. I think it is implied that with that knowledge and privilege came the obligation to care for the planet with the same concern and care that God took in creating it.

Have we forgotten who we are? This wonderful relationship we see between man and God is confirmed by the role God gives Adam in the garden. It is a managerial role, one of a gardener. He says to till it, to tend it. Now, depending on which translation is used, Christians have at sometimes gotten stuck on the terms "have dominion over" and "subdue." Other terms such as "teem over the earth" or "till it" also appear.

I've indeed heard people suggest that these terms somehow mean that we as humans are entitled to use whatever we wish in any way we wish – that because of this superior relationship with God, we have permission to dominate our environment without regard for "lower" forms of life.

The Oxford dictionary offers a definition of "domination" as "acquire a knowledge and mastery over his material environment." Mastery sounds more to me like a combination of understanding and responsibility. More than one source gives the word "subdue" an alternative meaning as "bringing land under cultivation." Genesis supports this by telling us Adam was put in the garden to till it.

To even suggest that these terms offer any justification for the exploitation of the environment is a complete distortion of the truth. God gave all that was needed for food and life, but not just for humans, certainly not just for Americans, but for all people and all creatures. Our role in the partnership is to help sustain that support.

So -- Back to Adam. God sees that Adam is lonely. He had already introduced the birds, the wild beasts and the creepy crawly things and he asked Adam to name them all – a pretty special assignment.

Yet – Adam is still lonely. He still needs a companion or a helper – someone who is more fitting – someone who can be **his** partner – someone in **his** image. Eve is then added to the scene. The task they both now have is unique to their specie: that of caring for all life in the garden and enjoying it, and that of growing food for the animals as well as themselves.

It is a garden very capable of sustaining life and of offering great joy and beauty. Now, how do they handle this stewardship task?

Well, you know the answer to that as well as I do. Even knowing the rules God has spelled out for this life in Paradise, they make a decision that reflects more what they want, rather than a choice that would insure sustainable life in Paradise.

Not only did they make some very self-serving choices, but they were very quick to blame them on someone or something else. Life would never be the same again, either for them or for the garden.

But it wasn't their fault! "Well the serpent made me do it." was Eve's lament. Adam defense was, "Eve gave the apple to me." And the facts don't change whether you are talking about original sin or basic irresponsibility.

It really didn't take long for them to realize they had goofed. They had forgotten who they were! They would no longer be gardeners in Paradise.

Believe it or not, things get worse.

God becomes increasingly unhappy with the generations that follow. He is angry with what humankind has done. Gen. 6:5 says, "the Lord saw how great was man's wickedness on earth, ... how every plan devised by his mind was nothing but evil all the time...and the Lord had regretted what He had made on earth and His heart was saddened."

The details of what happened to make Him so upset aren't really clear. He just generally refers to it as lawlessness.

It sounds like something drastic is planned for the human race. Indeed. God identifies Noah as a righteous man in his age, and then declared Noah to be the one on which rests the future of the human race, as well as other life forms.

You know the story – that of Noah and the flood. God is determined to destroy everything and everyone and by doing so, give humans a second chance.

Noah gets his assignment, including the construction of this massive vessel. He is to gather a male and female of each specie of animal, bird and creepy crawly thing. He packs in food for them and for his family, for God only knows how long.

I hadn't thought much about how long Noah was in the ark until I started to prepare this sermon. We are familiar with that part of the story that tells us of the 40 days and 40 nights of rain. But that was only the storm. Peak flood level was much longer, of course. Many indicators point to the fact that the ark was afloat for about a year. That's before anyone saw any land at all!

No one could leave until well after the first bird was sent out. They spotted land, but the **important thing to remember** was that there needed to be some botanical recovery before the bird could perch, nest, and find food. In other words, the planet needed to be able to sustain life.

If you look one way at what happened, it looks a little like an environmental disaster. Not so really. If total destruction was the goal, why would Noah have been asked to partake in this massive attempt to save representative pairs of all species?

One of the most important points in my mind – God, in all His power, could have just recreated everything. **But God has not given us, either in history or in contemporary experience any indication that He would recreate lost species if they didn't survive.** It was true for Noah's time and true for us. Instead, He establishes in the events of this story a very significant role for all of us.

Upon disembarkation, God issues the same directive to Noah as He did to Adam. "Be fruitful then, and multiply. Teem over the earth and subdue it."

Noah is entrusted with the preservation of all living creatures. Listen to what follows. God says "I am now establishing my covenant with you and with your descendants to come. And with every living creature that was with you and I will set my bow in the clouds." The rainbow, symbol of that covenant, was a promise that He'd never do that again.

As descendants of Noah, **we** are entrusted with the same responsibility. The covenant is with us as well.

But what does it mean for us? The issues of stewardship for us are different than they were for Noah, or for Adam. In many ways we know as clearly as Adam did what we have done, or perhaps more important, what we haven't done. We can no longer ignore the facts regarding assaults on our planet such as global warming. We have been told for years how damaging our dependency on fossil fuels is, both in terms of maintaining peace and preserving the environment. We have been encouraged to recycle, conserve, support alternative energy sources; all choices Adam didn't have, choices that fall well into our responsibility as caretakers and gardeners.

Stewardship of this planet is more complex than just trying to preserve a specie, feeding the birds, or hugging a tree. Plus, preserving and caring for the resources is even more critical given a population that far exceeds what Noah could have imagined!

The late Carl Sagan, an astronomer and scientist from Cornell University, and incidentally, one of the first to warn us of global warming, had this to say at the 1990 “Caring for Creation” Conference. “The preservation of the global environment is essential for our children and grandchildren. If we were to invest the environment with a vision of the sacred, which is a constant with many religious traditions, this would be a most important way to help preserve it. A thing you consider sacred you do not casually destroy.”

Our theology must include some understanding of our connectedness and interconnectedness with the earth as sacred. Native American spirituality expresses a true reverence for the earth, believing that we have a responsibility to preserve the earth’s health and resources with a vision of sustainability for seven generations. We certainly have a scriptural basis for that sacred connection.

I read a book many years ago called, “Radical Simplicity: Small Footprints on a Finite Earth.” One focus is our connectedness to all life on the planet. The opening metaphor in the book is one of a potluck buffet:

“You are the first in line. Imagine that this spread includes not just food and water, but also the material needed for shelter, clothing, healthcare and education. What will put on your plate? **Look again — there are 6 billion people behind you** — what will you put on your plate? What will you leave for them? Along with them are giraffes and kangaroos, spiders and bluebirds, cats and guinea pigs, and behind them, soon-to-be-born generations of children. **What will you put on your plate? What will you leave for them?”**

Have we forgotten who we are? Have we forgotten our role as caretaker, as gardeners? Have we misunderstood our assignment as co-creators?

There are remnants of Eden left. I see them every day in my backyard. It is up to all of us to care and nurture our planet as though it was our back yard. It is time to remember the covenant that claims us as partners with God. Our responsibility to care for God’s Creation must be taken seriously, regardless of our political loyalties, contemporary rhetoric or the latest hot environmental issues.

I want to share one stanza of a song titled “Song for the Earth” from the “Concert for the Earth” by the Paul Winter Consort. It was performed live at the UN in 1985. You can imagine the environmental issues were different than today’s issues. The whole song is quite beautiful. The sentiment in these lines goes beyond specific issues. In a way it’s consistent with the terms of our covenant with God to respond to the needs of our planet and its inhabitants — all of creation.

**All of life is a chain,
when one is hurt we all feel its pain.
What do we gain, for what it’s worth,
I’m offering this song for the earth.**