Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

The Fourth Sunday of Easter

Earth Sabbath

April 22, 2018

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STEWARDING THE EARTH Genesis 2:4b–17

Psalm 8

Romans 8:18–25

Matthew 6:25–34

Yesterday, we enjoyed a wonderful and mellow Green Day here at church, complete with *tai chi* and worms and a demonstration of hydroponics and food and plants and fellowship and a waterless car wash. Today is Earth Day, and our service this morning has been designed as a celebration of Earth Sabbath. Today, we focus on our responsibility as stewards of the earth and its people. With the problem of climate change and the lowering of environmental standards by our government, the theme of the human stewardship of the earth is a timely one. It is, I am glad to say, a theme that is more and more bringing together both mainline and conservative Christian communities.

Let us first turn our attention to this morning’s reading from the Second Chapter of the Book of Genesis. Walter Brueggemann, the wonderful teacher of the Hebrew Scriptures, has said that the second account of creation, found in Genesis Chapters 2 and 3, “focuses on human persons as [both] the glory and [the] central problem of creation.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

First, we human beings are described as the **glory** of creation. All of creation points to us as the highest achievement of God’s creative acts in forming the heavens and the earth. Although we know that chimpanzees are able to both think and speak albeit in their own kind of language, and that porpoises can communicate with one another, no other creature can match the intelligence and abilities of the human being. Only the human is given the authority to take care of the things of the earth. In both creation stories found in the first books of Genesis, the entire creation is placed at the service of the human being. In the created order, we are God’s highest achievement. Psalm 8 celebrates the glory God has bestowed upon us.

*When I look at your heavens, the works of your fingers,*

*the moon and the stats that you have established;*

*what are human beings that you are mindful of them,*

*mortals that you care for them?*

*Yet you have made them a little lower than God,*

*and crowned them with glory and honor.* —Psalm 8:3–5

We are wonderfully made. We are the glory of creation, but we are also creation’s **central problem**. Whether it be the greed of Wall Street operatives; or our incessant passion for a rising Gross National Product; or the ignorance of those who believe that climate change is a hoax; or our own consumerism; or the overuse of fossil fuels, which is now being again sanctioned in governmental circles; or the over-fishing that has caused a depletion of ocean and fresh water fish, we human beings are continually overstepping the boundaries God established for us from the very beginning of our existence on the earth. Truly, as Paul wrote to the church in Rome, the whole creation and we ourselves have been groaning in labor pains until now (Romans 8:22f), but still we look to that day when God will make of us the people we were created to be. Then the whole creation will be set free. That is our hope.

A few years back, a conference on the environment was held in Montreal, and a number of theologians and environmentalists presented papers. During a panel discussion, one of the conference participants arose and asked: “Wouldn’t the earth be better off without human beings?” The panelists had difficulty responding to the question because the truth is that the earth *would* be better off without us. If the earth comes to an end, it will be our doing, not God’s. At the same time, God created us as the glory of creation. And so we find ourselves caught between two truths about ourselves. We are creation’s glory and creation’s central problem.

Let’s respond to the dilemma by asking ourselves the key question: “What are humans for?” Why have we been created, and why has God placed us upon the earth? We have been created for a purpose, and if we were to accept and fulfill the purpose for which we were created in the first place, all would be well. In creation, we are given a purpose, a *vocation.* It is summed up in the 15th verse of Chapter 2 of Genesis:

The Lord God took the man and put him in the

garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

The vocation of the human is to cultivate and preserve the earth. We have, more or less, learned what it means to cultivate the earth, but we have done a lousy job in preserving it. We have used it to the point of using it up, but we have failed to protect it.

The vocation to which God calls us is the *vocation of* *stewardship.* No matter what our profession or our work, you and I are called to be stewards, to care for the earth and its people. This is our essential vocation, our essential calling.

In order to fully accept this calling of ours, we are going to have to re-shape our understanding of that troublesome word *dominion,* as found in those verses from Psalm 8:

*You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;*

*you have put all things under their feet,*

*all sheep and oxen,*

*and also the beasts of the field,*

*the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,*

*whatever passes along the paths of the sea. —*Psalm 8:6–8

Usually we think of *dominion* as *domination*, but the root of the word is *dominus*, meaning “Lordship” or better still “Godship.” In other words, *dominion* is a word referring to the way God governs the world. And we believe that God does not govern the world with domination, but with compassion. We are to care for the earth and its people as God would care for the earth and its people, with compassion. That has led Douglas John Hall to say that *dominion* is a word that really means *stewardship*.

As we carry out our calling to be stewards, God gives us permission to enjoy the earth and use its bounty in the service of life. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve are permitted to eat of every tree and plant in the garden, except for one—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God has graced us by giving us all that we need to sustain our lives and the lives of others.

God grants us *permission* to use the things of the earth in the service of human life, in the service of our lives and the lives of others. But there is also the *prohibition—*“but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.” (Gen 2:17). The serpent suggests that by transgressing the prohibition, Eve and Adam wanted to “be like God, knowing good and evil.” We human beings were not created to know everything, like God. We were created to be human. Yet, we do not seem to want to live within our limits. We are always pushing the boundaries. We are always wanting to become more than we are, more powerful, more important, more secure, more certain, more in control. We turn out to be the problem of creation rather than the glory of creation.

Oh, that we could be content to be the stewards of the earth and its people, which is what God created us to be. Oh, that we could be as wise as my nephew Sean, who, when his grandmother offered him an extra serving of dinner, said in reply, “No, grandma, enough is all I want.” Enough is all we need. Oh, that we could find sheer enjoyment in the creation, rather than see it as something to be exploited. Oh, that we could just live by the grace of God, rather than be caught up in the anxiety and fear that comes when we grasp for more than we need. Jesus said to his disciples, “I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear.” (Matthew 6:25) God knows what we need, and God will feed and clothe us.

My friends, let us be the faithful stewards God calls us to be. For this we were created. Let us find joy in the gift of the earth and the gift of one another. Let us find joy simply in being the people we were created to be—humans brought forth from the dust of the earth by a graceful and generous God, and placed in a garden to cultivate it and keep it. May this be our life purpose this day and always. Amen.

1. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982, 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)