



“Exercising Authority over the Works of God’s Hands”

Scripture – Psalm 8

Sermon preached by Dr. Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, April 22, 2018

You may know of writer and philosopher, Wendell Berry, born during the Great Depression on his parents’ farm in Kentucky. He attended the University of Kentucky, was recognized as a gifted writer, and after earning a Master degree, he moved on to Stanford as a creative writing fellow. After a year in Tuscany as a Guggenheim fellow, he taught at New York University. But when he was invited to teach at the University of Kentucky, he heard the call to the land where he had grown up and purchased a farm. For decades, he and his wife slowly and deliberately renewed the land that had been damaged by misuse.

A committed Christian, Berry writes, “The earth is what we have in common, that is, what we are made of and what we live from, and we therefore cannot damage it without damaging those with whom we share it. But I believe it goes further than that. There is an uncanny resemblance between our behavior toward each other and our behavior toward the earth.”¹ I would add that there is an uncanny resemblance between our relationship with God and our relationship with God’s creation.

Psalm 8 is a trumpet-blasting song of praise heralding God as the Creator of the cosmos. This psalm – an echo of the creation story in Genesis – begins and ends with the same celebratory line: “O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!”

On the heels of this opening line, the songwriter declares: “You have set your glory above the heavens.” Today, we might say, “You have strewn traces of your magnificence throughout the universe.”

Displaying the feeling that most of us have experienced, of being an insignificant speck when pondering the vast night sky, the psalmist writes: “When I look at your heavens, the work 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?”

The ancients recognized that the size of the universe is mind-boggling, but they had no idea how truly incomprehensible it is. Today, astronomers inform us that our galaxy – the Milky Way – is 100,000 light years in diameter and there are at least one hundred billion galaxies. God, what are human beings that you are mindful of us? How stupefying that you care for each of us.

Also astonishing is our home – planet earth. We are the right distance from the sun to have liquid water – not too close where it would evaporate, and not too far where it would all freeze. We have an atmosphere with the right amount of oxygen for plants and animals to exist. And what an amazing water cycle!

Quick reminder of what we learned in science: “The water from rivers, lakes, and oceans evaporates and condenses into clouds. Then, the clouds release it in the form of rain, hail, sleet or snow. The water is collected back on Earth to start the cycle again.”² Brilliant!

Of course it is water that enables life to thrive. “Rain falls and the soil stores the water. The nutrients in the soil dissolve in the water and the plants draw this from the soil through their roots pulling it into their stems, trunks, branches and leaves. The sun shines on green plants exciting incredible tiny green engines that convert the solar energy into sugars that are transported through the plants to feed them. This process also releases oxygen into the air. Plants thrive, and then eventually die, returning nutrients back into the soil, which feeds the natural recyclers, the bacteria and insects.”³ Amazing!

God has given us this remarkable planet of blue oceans, green forests, brown deserts, silver mountains, red rocks, and white, ice-capped poles. All of this so that we can not simply exist, but thrive.

Yet, I wonder if we often forget that it is all a gift from God. You may have heard about the scientist who marched out of his lab, looked up at the sky and shouted, “God, you are no longer necessary. We have figured out how to create life out of dirt.”

The scientist turns to march proudly back into his lab, but a voice comes from the heavens. “Really? Show me how you do it.”

The scientist says, “I will.”

He reaches down and grabs a handful of dirt and begins to head for his lab, but God says, “Wait, wait, wait.”

The scientist says, “What’s the matter? Are you afraid I’ll show you that you are no longer needed?”

“No,” says God. “But you have to get your own dirt.”

Returning to Psalm 8, we see another parallel with the creation story in Genesis. God has given us a critical role to play. The psalmist writes, “You have given (human beings) dominion over the works of your hands.” We are placed in charge of the resources of the earth.

Both Genesis 1 and Psalm 8 use the word “dominion.” How do we understand this word?

For most of human history, people viewed the earth as a vast wilderness with an endless supply of resources. To many, exercising dominion over the creation was a green light to grab whatever resources they desired. If they chopped down all of the trees in one area, it was not a disaster because there were plenty of other forests.

However, in the past 100 years, the situation has changed radically. The world’s population has grown so immense and our technology so powerful that nature has morphed from a storehouse of endless resources to a fragile ecosystem that we possess the potential to destroy.

What does it mean in the 21st century to have dominion over the earth? While synonyms for dominion include “rule” and “dominate.” They also include “govern” and “manage.”

If we focus on the context of Genesis 1, “where human beings are viewed as God’s representatives, dominion must be understood as the same kind of rule God would exercise in the natural world, a world God created good in all of its parts.”⁴

Taking a cue from the second creation story in Genesis, humans are commanded to “till it and keep it” (Genesis 2:15). “The Hebrew term means literally to ‘serve’ it.”⁵ Humans are to serve the earth because our very lives depend on it.

We express our love for our spouse or friend by performing acts of kindness. How do we express our love for God?

In the First Letter of John, we read that “those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.” In the same spirit, we cannot pollute or abuse God’s creation and claim to love God.

We play with children for the sheer delight of it. Do we take delight in God’s natural creation?

The earth is waking up after winter – FINALLY!!! And it is beginning to put on quite a show. The forsythia bushes are blazing. Buds are appearing on the trees and soon the bare limbs will be covered with green leaves. Daffodils are standing erect and making themselves known, hosta shoots have begun to rise from the ground. Now is the time to be dazzled by the resurrections happening all around us. Now is the time to be awake to the beauty that surrounds us. Now is the time to help and to heal the earth.

How mindful are you of your footprint? My relationship to the natural environment has changed dramatically from the days of my youth. Growing up, I saw my backyard as a playing field. It was for football or baseball and, in my mind, served no other purpose. I was blind to the flower beds Mom planted and the bushes Dad had carefully pruned. When a ball landed in one of these areas, I did not carefully remove it with an eye toward protecting the plants and flowers. I grabbed it and dashed back onto the playing field, oblivious to any damage I inflicted.

I was both blind and arrogant. I took the earth for granted and acted as if it was there for my pleasure alone. I was blind to its beauty and had no concept of nurturing it.

Thankfully, as my spiritual life began to deepen, I began to appreciate the beauty and awesome nature of the earth. And as I came to understand – not simply in my mind, but in my soul – that everything was God’s creation, I realized that a sense of reverence for God’s handiwork was taking root in me. I’m still working on that.

Throughout human history, people in all lands have drawn closer to God when they stared in wonder at the night sky, when they hiked to the tops of mountains and attempted to grasp the vastness that surrounded them, when they were mesmerized by the waves of the ocean, when they contemplated the intricate beauty of flowers, and when they gazed at eagles gliding on the invisible wind currents.

Francis of Assisi may be the first person to come to mind, but from time memorial, nature has beckoned people of faith into the wild to pray and meditate and draw closer to God. It was in the wilderness that Moses heard God’s call to free his people from slavery. It was in the wilderness that the Hebrew people had close encounters with God and were given the Ten Commandments. It was in the wilderness that Jesus did his spiritual wrestling and discovered the direction of his ministry. The natural world has always been a very special place to brush up against God.

If God created all things and God is present in all things, then the earth is sacred. And Chief Seattle was right in saying, “The earth is precious to God and to harm the earth is to heap contempt on its Creator.”

We can be out of sync with God’s creation or in harmony with it. We can act as if what we do to the earth does not impact us, or we can be mindful that everything is connected.

We can trample the earth or we can treasure it. To preserve and protect the earth, to restore and renew it is a concrete way of loving and worshiping God.

As you leave church today, turn your eyes toward beauty and see what gifts God's creation is offering you.

In the Book of Exodus, we read that God spoke to Moses out of a burning bush and told him that he was standing on holy ground. May you and I hear echoes of God's voice when we see the stunning sights of nature and remember that each day we too are standing on holy ground.

NOTES

1. David McNair, "Easter 3B" April 22, 2012.
2. Natural Resources Conservation Service, United States Department of Agriculture.
3. Michael Stifler, "Earth Day Sermon," April 26, 2015.
4. "Excursus: Dominion or Dependence," *The New Interpreter's Study Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), p.8.
5. Ibid.

Prayers of the People ~ Jennifer Barrington

Dearest Creator,
On this bright spring day
we revel in Your light that fills our world
and our hearts with joy for Your beautiful Earth.

Using the words of Philip Newell we celebrate your creation:

The ageless mountains are full of your glory
the vast seas swell with your might
the shining skies expand beyond our imagining
so we pause to praise
we wait in wonder
we listen to learn
of the mountain glory within us
of the sea force in our veins
of love's shining infinity.
Grant us the grace, O God,
to serve this inner universe of soul among us.

Loving Lord, we give you thanks for the Earth this day,
for this wonderful yet fragile creation
that you perfected in your glory
and entrusted to our care.
Forgive us, God, where we have failed to fulfill this charge,
for the things we have done to cause damage
and the things we have not done to preserve and protect.

Gracious God, you have blessed us in ways too numerous to count. We give you thanks for the gift of life, the gift of love, and the gift of nature as it never ceases to amaze and astound. Thank you for friends and family and kindness of strangers. Thank you for Your wisdom that gives counsel to our confusion. Thank you for surprising moments of joy, for unexpected Peace, for Your Good News we experience daily. Help us to see and hear and acknowledge and remember your presence and your gifts throughout this day, and throughout all our days.

Merciful God, we are a people of needs and doubts and fears. Some of us cannot see the path to follow. Some of us face difficult choices. Some of us wrestle with guilt that crushes our souls. Some of us have forgotten how to love. Some of us feel so much pain we can focus on nothing else. Some of us see the horrors humanity inflicts on your creation, and we feel our hope for the world disintegrating. Remind us, God, that this very world that experiences such confusion, guilt, pain, horror and despair is Your world, the world that You love, the world You lived in as one of us. Remind us that you have hope and bring hope and are hope, and that you call us to follow you in hope.

Just as the sun warms our faces on this beautiful morning, may our hearts, minds, and spirits be warmed by the light of the risen Christ in whose name we pray...**“Our Father...**