



"There Is Still Time"

Scripture – Genesis 1:1-5 & 24-31

Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones

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If you have children, you know that when they are small, parents make most of their decisions for them. We decide on bedtime, what they will eat, and what they will watch on TV or computer. We determine where they will go and who their friends will be. As they grow older, we loosen our grip on the reins and let them make more of their own decisions. As they do, we try to impress upon them that decisions have consequences.

We begin with baby steps. "Honey, there are just two cookies remaining. Would you like to have one after your lunch and one after dinner? If you eat both of them now, there won't be one for after dinner." We try to help them understand that different choices lead to different outcomes.

As our children mature, the decisions they make are not simply the small stuff. They are weightier matters that carry significant consequences. The choices they make impact not only themselves, but spread to others.

I remember when our children earned their driver's licenses. Camilla and I were liberated from our designated duty as chauffeurs. All liberated chauffeurs say, "Hallelujah!" But there was a trade-off, wasn't there? We were no longer providing a taxi service, but we took on a major league worry. The first few months they drove, we held our breath every time they pulled out of the driveway and did not exhale until they were safely back home.

I'm sure we must have tried to impress upon them in 100 different ways the Biblical admonition: "You reap what you sow." What you do today may come back to bite you or to bless you. Decisions have repercussions. The choices you make impact not only your life, they affect your family, friends, and sometimes complete strangers.

Today I want us to think about how the decisions we make impact others. Plus, they not only have an immediate effect, but a lasting one.

Our text comes from the opening words of Scripture; the majestic poetry that weds the stages of creation to the days of the week. The first five verses describe day one. Out of the primordial chaos, God begins to create order. Most of us are accustomed to hearing the first verse like this: "In the beginning, God **created** the heavens and the earth." That is an unfortunate translation because it implies that God did the creating long, long ago and is now enjoying a heavenly retirement.

However, that first verse can also be translated: "When God *began* to create the heavens and the earth." Check out the footnote in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. That is how I read it a few minutes ago, and

doesn't that square with the contemporary understanding of the cosmos? It wasn't created once upon a time. The world is constantly being created.

I like the way the second verse describes the earth: it is a formless void and darkness covers it. But God's Spirit hovers over it and brings forth LIGHT!

On day two, God creates sky. Day three is the advent of dry land and vegetation. Day four brings forth the sun, moon, and stars. Day five we have the onset of birds and fish. And Day six – well, you know day six because that is *our* day. The creation builds one day at a time until day six and God reaches the crowning glory of creation – human beings. Bright, beautiful, lovable us!

At least that's the way I thought of Day 6 for a long time. Then, Barbara Brown Taylor spoiled it by pointing out something she noticed. Day 6 is not reserved exclusively for human beings. We share it with land animals. And, as she rightly points out, the text says we are created along with cows. What an ego deflator! Not only do we not have our special day to ourselves, but the passage points out specifically that we are created when **cows** are created. The least the writer could have done was to say we were created the same day as sleek and speedy gazelles or magnificent elephants. But, no, it's cows!¹

Well, at least the writer said that we are given **dominion** over the whole ranch. God says, "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."

Perhaps this ancient lyrical telling of creation reminds us of something that DNA research has revealed. We are comprised of the same basic stuff as the other animals. Our genetic code is not much different than that of a mouse. It's critical for us to remember that this is the context within which we are created. We are not given our own exclusive day. God brings forth human beings on the same day as the cows and the wild animals of the earth. That serves as a reminder, that while God has given us a special role, the other creatures may be equally as precious in God's eyes. God looked at everything God made on the sixth day – not just humans – and declared that it was all very good.

So, what does it mean to exercise dominion? One form of dominion is a harsh ruler guided only by a lust for control. One form of power is a drug kingpin driven by greed. The biblical image of dominion is a shepherd who cares for those under his/her influence. To be given dominion over the creation is to be given the responsibility for the resources of the planet. Today that entails caring for an ecosystem that we possess the power to destroy.

As one of the world's wealthiest couples, Bill and Melinda Gates, have become two of the world's greatest philanthropists. For years, they have dedicated their time and immense resources to improving healthcare, reducing extreme poverty, and creating educational opportunities. As critical as that work is, something else began to grab Bill's attention in 2006. Now, after years of diving deeper and deeper into this subject, he has just written a new book that will open your eyes. It is called *How to Avoid a Climate Disaster*.

The Introduction begins like this: "There are two numbers you need to know about climate change. The first is 51 billion. The other is zero. Fifty-one billion is how many tons of greenhouse gases the world typically adds to the atmosphere every year...Zero is what we need to aim for...To stop the warming and avoid the worst effects of climate change...humans need to stop adding greenhouse gases to the atmosphere."²

It sounds like a losing proposition and some will be tempted to close his book after reading the first page, but Gates is an optimist. He believes it will be extremely difficult, but doable if a substantial number of people put their minds and wills to it.

In my mind, Gates is a good source of advice because he is a forward thinker. We all know that he made his billions because he had the foresight that not only businesses, but individuals would come to rely on personal computers. In 2015, he gave a TED talk and conducted a number of interviews in which he said a large-scale pandemic like the 1918 flu was a real possibility and the world “needed to create a system for detecting and responding to big disaster outbreaks...Unfortunately, the world did little to prepare”³ and we have been suffering the consequences for over a year.

It seems to be human nature that most people are unwilling to respond to a looming disaster. They wait until it clobbers them. This mindset could doom everyone under the age of 25.

Gates’ book includes numbers and charts, but it is not overly technical. It does not suggest that easy solutions will get us where we need to be. If everyone in the world began driving electric cars tomorrow it would help, but it would not get us anywhere close to where we need to be.

All of us know that greenhouse gases cause the earth to warm, but can you explain how that works? Gates provides an easy to understand illustration. He says, “You’ve actually seen the greenhouse effect in action on a very different scale, whenever your car is sitting outside in the sun: Your windshield lets sunlight in, then traps some of that energy. That’s why the interior of your car can get so much hotter than the outside temperature.”⁴

He provides other such illustrations to help people understand the problem and solutions in terms they can grasp. He also sounds the alarm on the urgency of our task. Did you know that the last seven years have been the hottest seven years on record? That made the past ten years the hottest decade ever. The second hottest decade was the one before it. The third hottest was the one before that.⁵ See a trend?

Camilla and I recycle, use energy efficient bulbs, and limit the amount of water we use when brushing our teeth. We keep a close eye on the thermostat, support earth-friendly legislation, do not eat beef, use an electric lawnmower, and take our own bags to the grocery, among other things. We try to live as good stewards of God’s creation, but I know that many of you have reduced your carbon footprint far better than we have.

Our church family has taken a number of impressive steps to reduce our carbon footprint and, in the process, save a fair amount of money. We have converted hundreds of light bulbs to LEDs. We have put solar panels on Burton and Daughtry houses. We have switched the source of our electricity for our church building from fossil fuels to renewables and we are studying the benefits of installing solar panels on our main building. We have replaced the church’s boiler and windows to more energy efficient ones. We have had numerous classes and newsletter articles to educate our members on how each of us can reduce our carbon footprint.

Millions of individual actions add up to count for something. Unfortunately, they do not add up enough, so we will need innovative breakthroughs and new discoveries so that we can transport people and goods where they need to be, warm and cool our indoor environments, grow food, and create appliances, cars, furniture, clothes – literally everything – without using carbon.⁶

It is an enormous challenge, but it begins with at least these two things: First, we need to take to heart the lesson that parents teach their children – the decisions we make have consequences. And, second, it depends on our attitude. What sort of dominion will you and I exercise over the land and water and air and other living things – including the cows?

NOTES

1. Barbara Brown Taylor, *Always A Guest*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020) p. 20.
2. Bill Gates, *How to Avoid a Climate Disaster*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2021), p.3.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
5. The World Meteorological Organization.
6. *How to Avoid a Climate Disaster*, p.13.

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Creator of the cosmos, who from the beginning has been evoking order out of chaos and arousing life out of death, we give thanks for your breathtaking world that dazzles with vast oceans, challenges with immense mountains, and swarms with remarkable creatures. Grant us vision that peers beneath the surface so that we may perceive the vital lessons your creation has to teach us.

As birds serenade with songs of praise and jubilation, may awe and wonder quicken our soul that we may revere the glory and beauty of the earth.

As flowers flaunt their radiant apparel to attract the attention of passersby, may we brandish the elegance of a grateful heart to remind everyone of the precious gifts of mental and physical health.

As roots of trees probe beneath the surface in search of water, may we burrow down into the wisdom of Scripture and tap into the living water that satisfies our deepest thirst.

As rain perks up shriveled plants before they perish, may your love hydrate the barren places of our lives so that hope may be reborn within us.

Loving God, we pray that we may take nothing for granted –
not sunrises or colors,
not breathing or laughter,
not food or friendship,
not affection or kindness.

Remind us, O Lord, that your creation is a gift –
an amazing and beautiful and sacred gift.

May we cherish it, enjoy it, protect it and preserve it, for we are but temporary stewards of your stunning blue planet.

Now, hear us as we join our voices together in the prayer Jesus taught us to pray, saying,

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.