



“What Does It Mean to Have Dominion?”

Scripture – Genesis 1:24-31

Sermon preached by The Rev. Dr. Gregory Knox Jones

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For the last 14 months of its life the check engine light was lit up in Don’s old Subaru Forester. He would fix one issue that triggered the light, but it wasn’t long before that pesky light would be on again. After a while, he just ignored it.

Years earlier Don says he ignored another looming problem: The amount he owed on his credit card. He avoided checking the balance because he knew it was out of control. He confesses that in both instances he was mimicking a particular animal. Which one? The ostrich.

“Most of us know the persistent myth that ostriches bury their heads in the sand when they are frightened. They believe they are safe if they are blind to the danger lurking nearby. The ostrich effect is a cognitive bias that prompts people to avoid information that they perceive as potentially unpleasant. From a psychological standpoint it is the result of the conflict between what our rational mind knows to be important and what our emotional mind anticipates will be painful.”¹

No doubt the ostrich effect does not apply to any of us, but here are a few examples that occur to others: not stepping onto the scale because we don’t want to know the results of not sticking to our diet; avoiding our doctor because we dread being told that something is amiss; bypassing the news because we fear it will depress us; evading discussions about race because it will make us feel uncomfortable; and sidestepping talk about climate change because we might feel guilty about some of our personal habits.

Collette Battle lives in southern Louisiana. After the devastation of Hurricane Katrina – which many of us witnessed firsthand on our work trips to New Orleans – she spent years helping people rebuild their lives and their communities. She reminds us that climate change is impacting everyone. Whether it is tornadoes, wildfires, snowstorms, floods, typhoons, or hurricanes, everyone contends with some element of nature. And while we know that these events have always been around, it is the intensity of the storms, the frequency of the fires and floods, and the ever-rising temperatures that are sounding the alarm. She says, “I recognize my last name is Battle. What am I supposed to do? I’m supposed to fight, but fight with the tools that build people up...(because) These storms are as much a moral issue as a scientific issue.”²

Just eight weeks ago, Los Angeles was pelted by an enormous rainstorm. They received nearly half of their seasonal rainfall in two days. Streets turned into rivers and there were 475 mudslides.

The United Arab Emirates is one of the driest regions on the planet. Just a few days ago, Dubai received a full year's worth of rain in one day. One of the consequences of global warming is more powerful storms. "As the atmosphere gets hotter, it can hold more moisture, which will eventually make its way down to the earth as rain or snow."³

Unusually hot temperatures in Chile have produced the deadliest wildfires in over a century. Whether started by lightning strikes or humans, it is the dry conditions caused by a changing climate that causes them to spread so rapidly that people do not have enough time to escape.

As we know – having lived through them – hurricanes are rated on a scale of one to five according to their wind speeds. But climate change is producing more powerful storms than ever. According to a new paper published by leading hurricane researchers, they believe Category 5, once considered a rarity, is now becoming common enough that they propose a new category: Category 6.

Congratulations are in order for all of us. Feel free to pat yourself on the back. Why the congratulations? Because we lived through the hottest year on record. Recently, NASA confirmed that 2023 was the hottest year ever recorded. And if you thought last July was unusually warm, you are right. It was the hottest month ever.

Gavin Schmidt, the director of the Goddard Institute for Space Studies at NASA, says that "The exceptional warming that we're experiencing is not something we have ever seen before in human history. It is driven primarily by our fossil fuel emissions, and we're seeing the impacts in heat waves, intense rainfall, and coastal flooding."⁴

However, to our peril, we are living in a time when people are either acting like ostriches or are antagonistic toward science. Peter Marty, editor of *The Christian Century*, writes: "Many Americans today – including many Christians – are decidedly hostile to scientific authority, just as they are enamored with conspiratorial thinking. Contempt for experts is on the rise, matched only by a growing willingness to dismiss the truth and embrace disinformation. Widespread derision of knowledge is commonplace."⁵

As intelligent, compassionate, and concerned people of faith we have our work cut out for us. Caring for God's creation may be the most serious challenge facing our world.

Today's Scripture passage comes from the opening chapter of Genesis – the majestic poetry that weds the stages of creation to the days of the week. We read that on Day 6, God creates the living creatures of the planet including human beings. And the passage says, "Let us make humans 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."

But the critical question is: What does it mean to have dominion?

Seventy-seven years ago, historian Lynn White wrote an article for *Science* magazine that placed much of the blame for the ecological crisis at the feet of Christians. He argued that the abuse of the earth came

from the Christian belief that people are to view themselves as “superior to nature, contemptuous of it, and willing to use it for our slightest whim.”⁶

One of the ways that people of faith have understood “dominion” is that human beings have the right to do whatever they desire with the natural world.

Barbara Brown Taylor points out that in this view, you don’t have to ask a tree before you bulldoze it for a subdivision. You just knock it down, push it into a pile with the corpses of other trees, and set it on fire. Then you are free to scrape the clear cut earth free of green moss, tiny wild iris, unsuspecting toads, and a couple of thousand years’ worth of topsoil before calling the pavers to come cover your artwork with steaming asphalt. If the mountain laurels block your view of the river, just cut them down. The next time the river floods, the banks will collapse without those living roots; the river will silt up eventually, and if the trout die, you can still buy some at the grocery store for just a few dollars a pound. You are Lord over this playground, after all. God said so. It’s all for you.”⁷

But is this really the meaning of “dominion” in the biblical context? Does the creation story grant human beings unlimited power to exploit nature however we desire? Some have certainly interpreted it that way.

However, it seems to me that this understanding is motivated by a selfish desire to take whatever we want regardless of the consequences. Further, it overlooks the fact that this is the handiwork of God, and therefore is to be respected.

The Hebrew word that is translated “dominion” means “rule,” but there are different methods of ruling. The word “dominion” does not define how the power is exercised. One can rule as a harsh taskmaster, a la Pharaoh; or one can rule like a benevolent leader, such as the Good Shepherd. In the creation story, humans are God’s representatives, so we should reflect the type of rule that *God* exercises.

The second creation story in Genesis that follows in chapter two is instructive. The first human “is given the command to cultivate the land. The Hebrew term means literally ‘to serve.’ (Humans) are to be in service of the earth because it is the handiwork of God and because our lives depend on it.”⁸

In addition, as Genesis scholar Terence Fretheim points out: if we are created in God’s image, then our role “must be understood in terms of caregiving, even nurturing, but not exploitation.”⁹

In the Christian tradition, dominion has not always been understood as the right to use and abuse the creation however we desire. Concern for the living creatures of the planet is not a modern notion. Listen to this prayer written by a church leader from an earlier time: “O God, enlarge within us the sense of fellowship with all living things, our brothers the animals to whom thou gavest the earth as their home in common with us. We remember with shame that in the past we have exercised the high dominion of man with ruthless cruelty so that the voice of the earth, which should have gone up to thee in song, has been a groan of travail. May we realize that they live not for us alone but for themselves and for thee, and that they too love the sweetness of life.” What prominent church leader penned these words? Basil the Great in the fourth century.

When I was a Boy Scout, our troop was excited about camping. Our scout leaders seemed only mildly interested in merit badges. Their real passion was heading into the woods, setting up tents, creating a campfire, and teaching us about nature.

I can remember beautiful nights under the stars, getting drenched by a thunderstorm that pelted us with hail, shivering in my sleeping bag when the temperature dropped below freezing, being bitten by mosquitoes, and stung by bees. I can remember eating dinner out of a metal mess kit and roasting marshmallows in the open fire and then mashing them between graham crackers and a piece of chocolate.

I don't remember too much about the various species of trees, but I remember the one cardinal rule that we could never break. Once we took down our tents, packed our belongings, and prepared to head home, we had to clean up our campsite. Every speck or paper and every burnt match had to be picked up. The cardinal rule was this: "Leave your campsite better than you found it."

Can you imagine how much healthier and more beautiful the earth would be today if everyone lived by that basic rule? Leave your campsite better than you found it.

NOTES

1. Don McMinn, "The Ostrich Effect," *Think with Me*, February 27, 2024.
2. Collette Pichon Battle, "Placed Here, In This Calling," *On Being*, March 3, 2022.
3. Raymond, Zhong, "Dubai's Extraordinary Flooding," *The New York Times*, April 18, 2024.
4. "NASA Analysis Confirms 2023 as Warmest Year on Record," www.nasa.gov/news-release/nasa-analysis-confirms-2023-as-warmest-year-on-record/
5. Peter Marty, "The Scandal of the Anti- Anti-Intellectual Mind," *The Christian Century*, February 2023, p.1.
6. Barbara Brown Taylor, *Always a Guest*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), p.21.
7. Ibid.
8. "Excurses: Dominion or Dependence?" *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), p.8.
9. Terence Fretheim, "The Book of Genesis," *The New Interpreter's Bible: Volume I*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), p.146.