

“An Earth Day Sermon”
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I was about fourteen when I caught my first fleeting glimpse. I am not sure why it happened *then*. But there was something about that particular moment that let me finally see. I don't remember which mountain we were climbing. But, I had been there before and more than once. I knew the place. The hike began like it always had and there was no reason to expect anything to be different on this particular journey. Nothing about the climb or the path surprised me.

Yet, somehow as I emerged onto the summit of that mountain *everything* was different. As I slowly drank in the view, weary yet energized from the ascent, everything seemed *new*. It wasn't that the view had changed. Everything was pretty much the same as always. But my awareness was different.

I was swept up in a sense of wonder about it all. The curves of the hills and mountain laid out around me seemed suddenly to have been sculpted by some unseen hand. The clouds that dotted the pale eastern sky seemed painted just so. The calls of the birds and the forest creatures were composing a hymn. Even the breezes seemed designed to carry just the right mix of fragrances—pine needles, wildflowers, the warmth of summer air. In that moment the possibility of God was made real to me for the first time. I was falling in love with creation, because I was catching a glimpse of the Creator. I felt surrounded by God, at once incredibly large and incredibly small.

Of course, it is easy to feel special on a mountaintop. You feel as though you have accomplished something just by getting there. The broad view can give you an odd sense of power; as though through beholding the expanse around you means you somehow lay claim to it. It's like you own it. Or rule it somehow. The first creation story from Genesis uses language like that about the human encounter with the natural world. “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it” God tells the newly formed humans.¹

These can be dangerous words. People have long used these words to justify actions that have endangered our earth and have caused much human suffering. The doctrine of manifest destiny was supported by this Bible passage. It supported the European and then US plans to subdue all the land they could grab, to kill indigenous people in order to get it, and to use the land without regard for the ecosystem.

¹ Genesis 1:28.

The notion of the North American continent belonging to white settlers was connected to this Bible passage as far back as 1630—a mere ten years after white people settled here in Massachusetts.² The concept of power over creation without consequences is the same sort of thinking that leads to blowing the tops off of mountains in Appalachia in order to mine a few feet of minerals. This sort of mining reaps a low yield amid catastrophic destruction. The processing of the minerals spews more toxins into the atmosphere which settle into the lungs of the poor people who live nearby and create a whole host of diseases.

During my lifetime we have managed to punch holes in the polar caps of our life giving ozone layer. That means that more ultraviolet light is getting through to us and raising our shared cancer risks. All of this has happened simply because we have figured the Earth belongs to us somehow, and we don't need to worry about our impact upon her. We have been standing on a mountaintop, surveying the world and shouting "Mine; all mine!"

People have taken encouragement from the so-called command to be fruitful and multiply to have large families even in the face of mounting global over-population. Sometimes it goes way too far. I cannot fathom that fact that Nadya Suleman who already had six children somehow arranged to be impregnated with eight more. If everyone followed her example, the world population would balloon to about fifty billion in one generation! Westhampton would become a city of 11,900 if we grew proportionately to that. "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it"—these can be dangerous words, indeed!

Now, some people argue that we should understand the call to subdue the earth as a directive to be good stewards, and that this is the proper way to interpret the passage. I wish it were that simple. But, every translation I have seen says either "subdue the earth," or "rule the earth," so the idea of stewardship, while laudable, just isn't present in this part of the text. However, there are two things to consider in understanding this call to subdue the earth, which help to lessen its impact and provide some perspective. The first is context.

Now, friends, this may shock you, but believe it or not, Iron Age Israel was a very different place from internet age twenty-first century America. The idea of subduing the earth was the most distant of pipe dreams to the people of that past age. Their land did not retain enough water naturally to yield sufficient crops, so they had to collect it in ingeniously crafted receptacles. That was about all the subduing they could manage at the time.

The Israelites were a small people surrounded by large Empires who made a habit of regularly oppressing and oppressing them. They needed a sort of pep-talk from their scriptures. They needed to feel like they were standing tall on a mountaintop, surveying what they owned.

² See John Winthrop, "Conclusions for the Plantation in New England," as quoted in Albert K. Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1958), 74. www.nmhschool.org/tthornton/notes_for_notions_of.php

They needed God to say “Go, get ’em Israel!” So, that’s how the priests wrote the creation story.

They simply had no concept of how drastic the human effect on nature could become in the hands of other, more powerful cultures. In their own hands, and in their particular climate, there was only so much they could actually do. However, as different cultures adopted the Hebrew Scriptures the call to subdue the earth met with greater success.

During the Iron Age infant mortality was shockingly high and adults met with untimely ends often. So the encouragement to be fruitful and multiply was a matter of ensuring the continuation of the next few generations, not necessarily an eternal commandment. It is imperative to remember that the original context of the passage was as a rallying cry to help an oppressed people feel more powerful and to simply survive.

The second thing to remember about this call to subdue the earth is that there are a variety of views in the Bible. Our second reading this morning presents another, more balanced view of our relationship to earth and her creatures. When God makes a covenant with Noah following the flood, other beings are also involved. First God says it is between God and Noah “*and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations.*”³

This must involve more than Noah’s human family because Noah and company had just exited the Ark and were surrounded by all sorts of creatures—human, bird, mammal and otherwise. As God continues to describe this covenant, God says that it is with God and “*the earth.*”⁴ God is promising not to flood the world and everyone in it again—the earth is safe from annihilation, and the creatures, including humans, are, too. Then just in case we didn’t get it that God was talking about non-humans, God says *twice* more that the covenant extends to “every living creature of *all flesh.*”⁵

By using these terms together—humans, every living creature of all flesh, the earth—the authors of this story in Genesis are reminding us that we are all mutually connected. God’s caring for one group necessarily reflects on the others. As God loves humanity, so God loves the earth; as God loves other creatures, so God loves humans, and so on. I believe the reverse is also true. Our end of the covenant means that we show our love of God through loving other creatures and the earth. Can you imagine a world where this view of our relationship had prevailed rather than the notion that we should subdue the earth?

The funny thing is such a view is hardly a minority view in the Bible. Several Psalms sing of the beauty and the bounty of the earth, and all the glorious gifts we receive from her through God’s

³ Genesis 9:12.

⁴ Genesis 9:13.

⁵ Genesis 9:15, 16.

hand.⁶ When Job calls on God to justify the torment he famously receives, God arrives and enumerates many wonders of nature to remind Job that humans do not rule the cosmos. And there is another good reason to live gently on this good earth: it is not ours. It belongs to God, not humanity. And God's promising not to destroy the earth does not open the door for us to destroy it instead. This is not the Iron Age. We are not a tiny nation in need of a pep talk to help us feel able to keep up with other countries. Our country is a world power that consumes one fourth of the world's resources while making up five percent of the world's population.

We need a different story to guide us. We need to remember that the earth is not ours, but God's. We need to respect our place in the world without overpowering the world. We need to remember that we are connected to one another, to other creatures and to the world through the blessings of God who crafted us all on this tiny blue bubble in the depths of inky inhospitable space.

If we do that we will no longer be yelling "Mine, all mine!" from the heights of mountains, removed from the earth and above it. We will remember that we are made from the earth. We are, after all, earthlings. This is our home, but also it is *us*, and we are *it*. The Hebrew word for humanity—*adam*—is directly related to the word for earth—*adamah*.⁷ If we truly love our creator, we will also love the creation.

As people of faith, may we be guided to seek out ways to make our church and homes as energy efficient as possible. Let us work together to stop throwing away *anything* we can recycle. By the way, I found several bulletins in the garbage last week, as I do most weeks. The recycling is in the kitchen, not four steps away from where I found them. If it is full, I will take them, please let me know. In the Deacons and elsewhere we have had discussions about using cups from home instead using paper cups which we throw away each week. Might we agree to do this together? As people of faith, we might consider eating less meat to better use earth's resources, and improve our health. Or consider having fewer children per family so we don't overrun earth's bounty.

It may be harder to see the ecological problems of the world in a small and rural place, but that is exactly why we should take action. If we value this way of life, we need to think about our impact on the world, and how we can maintain it.

In anticipation of Earth Day in three days, may we hear and believe that we are connected to one another, God's earth, and other creatures through the gifts of our good God. May we honor our covenant to love one another in truth *and* in action. Let's get busy!

⁶ Psalms 8, 19, 29, 33, 65, and 104 to name a few.

⁷ I am not sure exactly how to transliterate these Hebrew words into English, this is my best guess.

Amen.

Genesis 1:26-28

26Then God said, "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." 27So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. 28God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."

Genesis 9:12-16

12God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: 13I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. 14When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, 15I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. 16When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth."