

The Responsibility and Expectations of Dominion
A Sermon by Rev. Martha (Missy) Shiverick
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
Earth Day Sunday
April 23, 2006
Text: Genesis 1- 2:3

The creation text for this morning's sermon is familiar to all of us. Poetically it is beautiful, and the mental pictures we dream up as we read the text are better than any science fiction movie. Putting aside the evolution vs. creationism debate that still occurs, what we have here is God's greatest symphony, the creation of God's world as we know it. Volumes of theological texts have been written on this account, and sermon series lasting whole church seasons could be given on it. But for this morning I only wish to raise up 3 important statements gleaned in the Bible text.

The first and most important is, of course, that God is the author of creation and the foundation for all life. In the beginning WAS God and it is through God's actions and only because of God's actions that the world exists.

Although I might fall into the same speech pattern that most American's do using the personal possessive pronoun when describing my life and surroundings, the passage clearly tells us that things are not ours but God's. I might refer to MY garden, My cute husband, MY children, My street, MY favorite walk to take, the reality is that these things are not mine, but all are God's. God has entrusted the world to us and I have no place in claiming sole possession, ownership, or control of any of it. The world, the creation, the planet, are all God's.

The second very important statement made about the world in this passage is that God's creation is good. God did not make a creation that was barren, polluted, and ugly; but a very good creation with a clean sky, with a bright sun, and with twinkly stars. God made a creation with fresh water and wildlife, and a creation characterized as abundant, green, and living. God made a balanced world where the planet can sustain its inhabitants and where plants and animals can flourish and multiply. God's world is one of balance, harmony, and interrelated ecosystems which need and are used by each other. In the Hindu and Buddhist religions, this balance is part of there theology. Life is in a balance and we are part of a great system. Indeed God's creation is good. God's creation is very, very good.

The third and last theological statement we will pick out of this first chapter of genesis for today is that humankind has a unique place and responsibility in God's creation. Clearly our creation has a great special-ness in God's whole creation. We were the only part of God's creation that was made in God's image. We were made in God's image and told we would have dominion and use of every living thing, plant and animal. We are told that animals and plants may be used for our sustenance and nourishment. This unique place God has given us also carries an important responsibility. We are not just to use, subdue, and dominate, but we are also to replenish and make flourish that which has been given to us. God specifically orders our role in creation to be fruitful, to multiply, and to replenish the earth. This gives us a mandate to be conscious of our environment, a role in the stewardship of God's creation. Here and you probably thought that stewardship was something we only talked about when it came time to turn in your annual church pledges!

God has entrusted into our care the environment and health of our planet, and we must be good stewards. An example of people who truly understand this are the Amish. When we moved into our new home three years ago, the ultimate fix-er-up house, the contractor we used was an Amish man, Abner Hirshberger and his sons. We were impressed with his ethic and practice of reusing materials and finding use for things other contractors would throw away. New was not particularly better. A good piece of wood in a part of the house being taken down could have another purpose and use in a part that was being built. This stewardship of resources permeated his whole life style, not just his contracting business, but his farming, his maple syrup making, and his deer hunting to sustain his family. In a book, the Unsettling of America, the Amish method of tilling and keeping the earth in a responsible way is described. The author writes, "I stood on a hillside that had been used and cared for by three generations of Amish farmers. It was steep and of the sort, more often than not, worn out under the old American agriculture and simply unusable by the new. This hillside had been cropped by alternating strips of corn and sod... When I was there the cover crop was coming up to safeguard the ground over the winter. I looked for marks of erosion. There were none. It is possible, I think, to say that this is a Christian agriculture, formed on the understanding that it is sinful to misuse or destroy what they did not make."

Exploitation of the environment or not caring for the land properly out of ignorance are sins against God and God's creation. To sin against the land by polluting, stripping, or not replenishing is to sin against the good life which God created for us and put within our reach. As inhabitants of this planet we are stewards of what might be the limitless bounty of God. Scientists have been telling us for years that there is no reason for hunger. The planet can produce enough food to feed its population. God has given the earth the answer to the

petition, 'give us this day our daily bread', however if we are indifferent to the waste and destruction of the earth's resources, we could simply blight God's promise of a fertility that is meant to bring forth an abundance for all.

Scientists say we are in a crisis situation with our environment. We are raping God's creation and things look bleak. In an editorial that appeared in the Plain Dealer this past week by Washington Post columnist Richard Cohen, Al Gore's movie documentary "An Inconvenient Truth," was discussed. Cohen says that this documentary on the crisis of Global Warming is worthy of sleepless nights. The movie, which is scheduled to open in Cleveland in June, shows the Arctic and Antarctic ice caps melting, the pollution of green house gasses which block the heat from escaping, and you will see how high the oceans might rise. Much of the state of Florida and New York City will be under water. The National Council of Churches asked that this Earth Day we discuss the climate changes brought on by human pollution. They are holding regional training events all year about the crisis. One was held in Toledo last fall.

The NCC also asked that this year's Earth Day raise questions about the eco-justice issues in our Post-Katrina world. Scientists are studying if global warming is a cause for the intensification of the hurricanes the past few seasons. But whether or not that is true, there are HUGE environmental issues that are products of the hurricanes last summer. The toxic contamination of the gulf region is still not contained. There were 575 spills of toxic chemicals or oil that took place in Hurricane Katrina. There were 8 million gallons of oil alone spilled. This poses health risks for returning residents. One industrial area between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, nick named Cancer Alley, bore the largest percentage of the spills. The cost of debris removal has already cost more than 2 billion dollars and the clean up has not finished. Even before the hurricane we had lost most of the natural wetlands and coastal marshes through decades of erosion and industrial use. These wetlands serve as nurseries for wildlife and filter out pollutants and are being lost. And of course as Christians, the other issues of concern to us in our post-Katrina world are environmental racism and injustice. While Hurricane Katrina and Rita impacted everyone in the areas they struck, communities of color and low income populations bore the brunt of the storms impact both immediately and in the long term.

The Presbyterian Church has long been concerned with the eco justice issues and The General Assembly of our church recently requested a study to be done spelling out environmental concerns. It states that acid rain, global warming, depletion of our fresh water supply, municipal and hazardous waste, and the danger to other creatures in God's creation should be our concern. It's kind of over whelming! So what is the Christians role in this environmental crisis? Dr. William Gibson who headed up the Presbyterian eco justice task force says that

many changes will be mandated out of necessity. An example is that in a few years, all Americans will recycle. The several pounds of trash that each American produces each day just can not continue to be thrown out. Laws will have to be made about other environmental issues as well. And the Christians role in this is the same as it has been throughout the centuries. That is to create and live out the ethics which enables society to live with our responsibility to the world. We need to start thinking in a way that promotes the tilling and replenishing of God's creation, not just the usage. We need to own our responsibility to the care and nurture of every creature and everything in God's world.

And God said, Behold I have given you every plant yielding seed which is upon the face of the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And every beast of the earth, and every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breathe of life; I have given every green plant for food. And it was so. And God saw everything that was made and it was very good.

It was very good. And with God's guidance and continued support we will learn to live in a way that will keep it very, very good. And we will live in a way that was meant for us in God's creation as the stewards, the keepers, and tillers of all that is good. Teach us, Oh Lord, to be good stewards. Amen.

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