

“Learning Reverence”
Sermon preached at Church on the Hill
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Texts: Genesis 1:1-5, 24-31

¹ At the beginning of God's creating of the heavens and the earth,
² when the earth was wild and waste,
darkness over the face of Ocean,
rushing-spirit of God hovering over the face of the waters—
³ God said: Let there be light! And there was light.
⁴ God saw the light: that it was good.
God separated the light from the darkness.
⁵ God called the light: Day! and the darkness [God] called: Night!
There was setting, there was dawning: one day.

²⁴ God said: Let the earth bring forth living beings after their kind, herd-animals,
crawling things, and the wildlife of the earth after their kind! It was so.
²⁵ God made the wildlife of the earth after their kind, and the herd-animals after
their kind, and all crawling things of the soil after their kind. God saw that it was good.
²⁶ God said: Let us make humankind, in our image, according to our likeness! Let
them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the fowl of the heavens, animals, [all the
earth,] and all crawling things that crawl about upon the earth!
²⁷ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God did [God] create
it, male and female [God] created them.
²⁸ God blessed them, God said to them: Bear fruit and be many and fill the earth
and subdue it! Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the fowl of the heavens, and all
living things that crawl about upon the earth!
²⁹ God said: Here, I give you all plants that bear seeds that are upon the face of all
the earth, and all trees in which there is tree fruit that bears seeds, for you shall they be,
for eating;
³⁰ and also for all the living things of the earth, for all the fowl of the heavens, for
all that crawls about upon the earth in which there is living being- all green plants for
eating. It was so.
³¹ Now God saw all that [God] had made, and here: it was exceedingly good!
There was setting, there was dawning: the sixth day. ¹

1

Sometimes the clues that are most significant are the ones that are missing.

You may recall a famous bit of dialog from a Sherlock Holmes story, “Silver Blaze,” in which the consulting detective has the following conversation with Detective Gregory of Scotland Yard:

¹ Quoted from Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses*, The Schocken Bible, Vol. 1 (New York: Schocken Books/Random House, 1995).

Gregory: "Is there any other point to which you would wish to draw my attention?"

Holmes: "To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time."

Gregory: "The dog did nothing in the night-time."

Holmes: "That was the curious incident."

Sometimes the absence of something tells a crucial part of the story. What does this have to do with the book of Genesis? A colleague, the Rev. Bert Marshall zeros in on sequence of verses. On the fifth day, God had made all the creatures that fly in the air and swim in the sea. Then, on the sixth day — the culmination of the creating days, before God rests, we hear in verse 25:

God made the wildlife of the earth after their kind, and the herd-animals after their kind, and all crawling things of the soil after their kind.

Next, in verse 26 God formulates the divine intention: to create humankind in God's image, and

Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the fowl of the heavens, animals, [all the earth,] and all crawling things that crawl about upon the earth!

In the next verse God creates the humans as planned. Then in verse 28 God tells the humans

Bear fruit and be many and fill the earth and subdue it! Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the fowl of the heavens, and all living things that crawl about upon the earth!

Did you catch the difference?

There are fish in the sea, birds in the air, and now wildlife of the earth and herd animals and crawling things.

Next, God plans to give humans dominion — a level of control and mastery — over the fish in the sea and the birds of the air and the "animals of earth" and crawling things.

Then God tells the humans, "you will have power to dominate the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all crawling things."

The list of animals changes. Before God had made humans, God announced they would have dominion over "animals of the earth" and crawling things. After God made the humans, one kind of animal in particular, God leaves off of the list for human beings to dominate. The "animals of the earth," sometimes translated "herd animals" or "cattle."

Which is curious. Because of all the things named in the first verse — fish, birds, cattle, wild animals, all crawling things — the only one that humans actually had the ability to dominate was — cattle. Humans could not live in the sea, or in the air — especially not in the ancient days long before anyone dreamed of traveling through the skies or under the water, nor could we keep up with all the crawling things.

We can't know what God was thinking. But in the Bible, the idea that human beings should have heavenly authority to dominate everything changes. Almost as though God realized that human beings might actually turn out to be reckless and less than mature in the way they

interpreted “subdue” and “dominate.” So the final list of animals over which God gave the blessing of domination — were the animals that are mostly beyond the reach of humans.

Notice what else God does not place within human domination: all the rest of Creation. The stars of heaven, the great light ruling the day, the lesser light ruling the night, the waters, the wind over the waters, the light and the darkness, the formation of life itself: all of that is left out.

We can’t know just what was in the mind of God — but it does seem that God knew humans better than we know ourselves.

2

Those words, “subdue” and “dominate,” have accounted for gross and terrible abuses that human beings have made on this fragile planet. Just look around at the way we have exploited the earth. Mountains ripped apart in order to strip out coal, which then we burn, launching tons and tons of dirt into the air. Hundreds of thousands of acres deforested, cutting out the trees that are as critical to the earth’s ecosystem as our lungs are to our bodies. The National Wildlife Federation estimates that as many as 270,000 species of plants and animals go extinct every year, the majority due to the mindless ways that humans populate and develop the planet. The great ice formations of the Arctic that stabilize our weather systems and our climate are shrinking; once-massive glaciers are inundating the planet with water as they melt.

Bert Marshall writes:

We have been fruitful and become many. We have filled the earth with a vengeance. We have built tools and machines and weapons in excess of our needs, and these have now passed beyond our means to control them – and still we cannot dwell in sea or sky, still we cannot rule the wild animals, except by killing or imprisoning them.²

As a species, we’ve proved ourselves a bit too good at subduing and dominating. It can seem as though we, as a species, stopped reading the Bible too early, before all God’s teachings about the responsible and respectful and reverent use of our abilities. As Gen. Omar Bradley said on Armistice Day, sixty-nine years ago:

We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants. We know more about war than we do about peace, more about killing than we do about living.

So why does God do this? Why does God’s Word give humans the gift of dominating or subduing, but only in relation to those things that human beings cannot actually dominate or subdue?

3

I wonder if it has to do with the way we learn our own capacities — often from our parents or teachers or mentors. As we ponder the story of God’s telling human beings that we have a certain amount of power, it brings to mind one of the important lessons that parents and teachers tell children and students:

² Bert Marshall, “Earthly Dominion, Divine Blessing: A Meditation on Genesis 1–2:3.”

“You can do it. You might not think you can do it, but I know you can.”

“You can tie your shoes; ride a bike; drive a tractor; win a game.”

“You can handle this by yourself.”

“You can do it.”

We need to hear that, early on and often. It’s a crucial part of finding our way in the world. When our parent or mentor tells us, “You can do it,” it is their belief in us that makes the doing possible. Without their belief in us, often we would stay stuck, not daring to try. But with their confidence, we learn about capacities within ourselves we’d never before dared to trust.

So perhaps God’s spoken message — subdue and dominate — has as its deep purpose that we should stretch to our fullest capacity.

Once we actually begin to embrace our capacity, we are ready for God’s implied lesson — I will give you dominion only in relation to the things that are actually beyond your reach. Once we have learned that we have power to subdue other living things, the most important thing for us is to learn self-restraint.

First, we learn confidence in our capacity. Then, just as importantly, we learn reverence for all other created things.

4

There are so many reasons to be concerned about the rapid degradation of the Earth’s climate, so many reasons to urgently and actively change the way we are subduing and dominating the planet’s resources. But I’m not here to make an argument from science, even though the science is convincing. I’m here and you’re here to listen for the Word of God — which gives us the capacity to subdue and dominate, and then tells us to back off. We are here for the Word of God that makes it abundantly clear that the heavens and earth belong to the Holy One, they do not belong to us, they are loaned for our use but not given for our abuse. We are here for the Word of God that says “This Creation is good!” and all that is good and all that is Godly is given for us to revere and protect as a part of God’s own self.

Even if the one or two percent of the scientists were correct in saying, go ahead and burn all the fossil fuels you want — even if they were correct, the Bible still tells a different story all together. Our task is to revere the works of God, not deplete and wound the earth and sky.

God says, “You can do it” — meaning that God has placed in us a holy capacity for managing and using the gifts of creation. That’s a good word.

God says, “You can do it” — meaning that human beings get some special, holy ability, but along with holy ability always comes holy responsibility.

God says, “You can do it” — meaning that we become just a little bit like God, holding dominion in relation to some of the creatures of the planet. God makes us caretakers of the beauty and balance of creation.

5

If the early message of God to humans is “dominate,” it is equally clear what the later message is. Once we have learned some confidence in our ability, God sends one prophet and

teacher after another to give us instructions in restraint. God sends prophet after prophet, teacher after teacher to show how to put to use our God-given abilities for Godly purposes: the cause of wholeness and harmony, justice and joy.

So for God's sake — and for the sake of all the generations that will yet be born onto this beautiful, broken, bruised, holy planet — learn reverence!

Reverence for the light;

Reverence for the darkness;

Reverence for the waters;

Reverence for the sky;

Reverence for the growing things;

Reverence for the flying things, swimming things, running things, crawling things;

Reverence for the bodies made in God's image, in a great beauty of black and brown and olive and pale flesh;

Reverence for everything that breathes and everything that supports life.

Revere, and do not damage!

And just in case this is the first sermon you have ever heard, and in case it is the last — go practice reverence, and bring joy to the heart of God!