

A Sacred Trust

The Rev. Dr. Scott Ramsey
Genesis 1:26-31; Matthew 25:14-30
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
April 22, 2022 – Earth Care Sunday

When I was in New York, an older adult in the congregation there gave me a copy of this particular New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. It's called "The Green Bible," and it is similar to the red-letter Bibles that some of you may be familiar with. In order to emphasize the words of Jesus, red-letter Bibles put all of the words spoken by Jesus in the New Testament in red. These Bibles have been so helpful whenever a person has been in particular need of hearing the voice of Jesus. You can turn to the New Testament, and very quickly, you can spot the words of our Lord. The Green Bible has done something similar, only it has gone through the entire Bible and has placed any texts that have to do with nature, with the earth, with animals, with anything having to do with God's created world in the color green. There are essays and messages at the front of the Bible by the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu, by Pope John Paul II, by Brian McLaren (with whom my wife, Laura Cunningham, was hanging out in Montreal this past week), by Barbara Brown Taylor, by New Testament scholar N.T. Wright. You can flip through the pages of the Bible, and it is just astonishing how much of the Bible has to do with the natural environment.

In one respect, this is kind of obvious. After all, the Bible tells the story of God's relationship with Israel and the early church, and Israel and the early church both lived upon the earth. So on one hand, you'd expect that there would be a lot of texts about the earth. But on the other hand, the Christian faith has, at times, gotten a reputation for only emphasizing spirituality, to the neglect of materiality, as though matter, dirt, soil, water did not matter. So it almost gives you goose-bumps to read through The Green Bible, and see how much of the Bible is directly concerned with the environment, with the environment's well-being, and with the environment's capacity to participate in songs of praise to God.

It all gets started right at the beginning. The entire first chapter of Genesis is in green. We get the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, the creeping things and cattle, and then in verse 26, 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 every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' In the biblical account, humans were created last, so that all of the other elements of nature are our older siblings, because we all have the same heavenly Father, the same Creator, and we were all created the same way, by God simply saying, 'Let it be.' Let there be light. Let the waters gather. Let there be lights in the sky. Let the earth bring forth living creatures. Let us make humankind in our image.

So, in one sense, we are the youngest sibling in the family of creation. But in another sense, we are the ones who have been given responsibility for the entire thing. We are given 'dominion.' Now that word 'dominion' has caused some trouble

down through the years, as some Bible readers have assumed that having dominion meant that we could *dominate* the rest of creation, taking from it whatever we wanted, and using it without regard for any negative consequences. But of course, we are to exercise dominion the way that God exercises dominion, because we are created in the image of God. We have responsibility for the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and the creeping things that creep upon the earth, just as God has responsibility for us. The way we relate to the earth and to the creation expresses how we think God relates to us. If we care for it with tender mercy, that will be because we believe that God cares for us with tender mercy. And if we treat it recklessly and negligently, then that is telling us something, too.

Caring for the earth is a spiritual issue, and it is a stewardship issue. Stewardship is not just about a fall fundraising campaign. It is about how we care for the responsibilities that have been entrusted to us. Parenting is an act of stewardship, for the children that have been entrusted to us. Financial generosity is an act of stewardship, for the resources that have been entrusted to us. Exercise is an act of stewardship, for the bodies that have been entrusted to us (and we're going to be having a 5K road race here on Pentecost Sunday, which we can now understand to be related to our Stewardship Ministry!). Earth Care is an act of stewardship for the water, the soil, the air, the trees, the fish, the birds, the insects that have been entrusted to us, and for which we have been given dominion.

Matthew 25:14 says that a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves to him and *entrusted his property to them*. When he returned, there was an accounting of how they had treated the property for which they had been given responsibility. Two of the slaves cared for their entrusted property well, so that it flourished. The third did not, but acted out of fear and neglect. In just the same way, we will be held accountable for how we have cared for those things that have been entrusted to us. How have we cared for our children? How have we cared for our bodies? How have we handled our money? How have we cared for the earth?

Religious traditions have a particular contribution to make to the care for our earth. We need scientists and engineers to do their part; we need politicians and economists to do their part; but we need to do our part. And our part is particularly concerned with *why we care for the earth*. Other fields are concerned with *how* we relate to the earth, and we need to partner with them, we need to learn from them. But our particular role is to cultivate an understanding and a wisdom about *why* we care for the earth. We care for the earth because God cares for the earth and has been caring for the earth from the very beginning. "It's good, it's good, it's good," God keeps repeating throughout the days of creation. You can just hear God delighting in the beauty of creation. And just as God cares about it, and gets angry, when humans cause harm to other humans - we may understand that God cares about it, and gets angry, when humans cause harm to other parts of nature. The fact that humans were the ones who were given dominion does not mean that the rest of creation is not important. It means that we're supposed to look after it.

Tim Cole was a Navy seal for 17 years and served in Iraq. He hadn't always cared much about the environment or the climate. But while he was in Iraq, something shifted for him, and after he returned, he became the sustainability officer for public schools in Virginia Beach, where issues of flooding have become more pronounced in recent years. He has been leading an effort to build LEED-certified new schools, and to equip buildings to withstand damage. When asked how he does his work, "You approach it like a special ops guy...You are severely outnumbered and have limited resources at your disposal. So you begin to recruit allies. You nurture these relationships, and you steadily win hearts and minds through your successes."¹

In his essay in the Green Bible, Desmond Tutu writes, "We're made to live in a delicate network of interdependence...I have gifts that you don't have. And you have gifts that I don't have. Thus we are made different so that we can know our need of one another. *This is a fundamental law of our being.* All kinds of things go horribly wrong when we flout this law – when we don't ensure that God's children everywhere have a supply of clean water, a safe environment, a decent home, a full stomach. We could do that if we remembered that we are created to be members of one family, the human family, God's family."²

We have been given a sacred trust, friends. The earth and all that is therein belongs to the Lord, and it has been entrusted to us as a precious gift. We have been given dominion over so much, though we have not always exercised that dominion well. God is inviting the church into a more intentional relationship with our older siblings in the family of creation, to take delight in them, to protect them, to know them and to love them, even as we have been known and loved by God. To God and to God alone, be all the glory, now and forever. Amen.

¹ Andrea Stanley, "Ghost Schools," in *The Washington Post Magazine*, April 17, 2022, p. 34.

² Archbishop Desmond Tutu, "Foreword," in *The Green Bible* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2008), p. I-13, my emphasis.