

As Old As Dirt
Creation Care Sunday
Saint Mark PC 2021

As part of the Biblical reflection for this Sunday after Earth Day, I chose some verses from the account of creation from Genesis 1 and 2, which contain two parallel descriptions of the creation story, which we read in theological terms.

The 2 chapters describe an idyllic creation, created and blessed by God. A marvelously ordered world, a life-giving earth with suitable habitats for every kind of living creature. Abundant vegetation, fish and birds blessed by God and commanded to fill their respective regions of the earth. Land animals sharing the soil with humankind.

The problem is when it comes to care for this magnificent creation, often these two narratives have been interpreted over the centuries as a kind of carte blanche for any and all exploitation of the environment and its creatures at the pleasure and whim of humans.

I think I mentioned last year that I was fortunate to have as a professor at PTS, George Kehm, one of the early members of the Presbyterian Eco-Justice Task Force from the 1990s.

Dr. Kehm wrote this:

"Part of the folklore of this country is that the Bible teaches that God gave humanity dominion over the earth. This is something everybody knows. Dominion is taken to mean sovereignty, the absolute right to dispose of everything on earth any way humans want. The realm of humankind's rightful dominion is often stretched to include all lower species and even all of nature"

But then he adds:

"in recent times biblical scholars have shown that these ideas are a gross misrepresentation of what the Bible actually teaches about the place and responsibility of humans in the created world. From start to finish, the Bible teaches that God is the creator of all things, so that the earth and even human kind belong to God."

("Whose world is it?" George Kehm. Pp 9-11)

Let's just take a look at some of these verses to see what the implications of that might be. Because God as the creator has given humankind a responsibility in that creation.

Genesis 1 and 2 creation stories.

We read in Genesis 1, that humanity is "to be fruitful and multiply, and till the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over ...every living thing..." 1:28

The words subdue and have dominion have a harsh sound to them. This verse comes after a dizzying sequence of creative acts, filling the earth with vegetation, and living things of all kinds, which were in place, according to Genesis prior to the coming of humankind. And God declared it to be very good.

So in that context the command given to humanity is to care for and protect that which God has declared to be good. To have dominion is likened to that of a Royal Steward over the wholeness of creation and the delicate balance of creation.

But the parallel story in Genesis 2 is even more plainly stated. Here, "adam" in Hebrew is literally translated earth man, is called to "till" and to "keep" the earth. So not only to use his agricultural skills, but also conservation skills to keep the soil and not deplete it, or destroy it for future generations.

No less than the Reformer John Calvin commented on this passage nearly 500 years ago:

Calvin on Genesis 2:15: "Let him who possess a field, so partake of its yearly fruits that he may not suffer the ground to be injured by his negligence, but let him endeavor to hand it down to posterity as he received it, or even better cultivated". Calvin concludes by saying that humankind cannot allow the earth to be marred or ruined in neglect.

This is the idea of Biblical stewardship of the earth. That subdue, and dominion and till and keep are not about exploitation and ruin, but about care and stewardship.

So I mentioned that the Hebrew word "adam" literally means earth man - the Hebrew word for dirt or soil is "dama." Some think it is a play on words in the Hebrew.

According to the Anchor Bible commentary: Adam and soil (dama) are closely linked. Gen 2:7
(Anchor Bible commentary on Genesis, p.24)

So you could say, we, as humanity
are literally
"As old as dirt."

Adam and dama. We are linked to the soil in a Biblical and theological way.

I highlight this, because Alison Bennett brought to our attention last week an interesting film, called
"Kiss the Ground."

I am not a climate scientist, but if I followed the gist of the film, one way to begin to heal the earth of too much carbon in the air, which results in climate crisis, is through the soil. We always think in terms of the carbon in the air, but it seems that our soil, the dama in Hebrew is capable of absorbing a great deal of carbon.

They call it regeneration of the soil. Healthy soil is able to absorb carbon. The trouble is much of our soil is made unhealthy by too many chemicals.

But healthy soil can absorb carbon. Technically they call it "soil sequestration of carbon."

It could have a very positive effect on climate change.

One key line in the film is that perhaps a solution to the climate crisis is:

"as old as dirt"

It is a big challenge, and more complex than we can imagine, but the goal of soil regeneration is:

"We can get the earth back to the Garden of Eden that it once was."

By obeying God's very first commands from Genesis to till and to keep the soil.

In our congregation we have found many ways to support God's commands in Genesis to care for creation. Of course we are an

Earth Care Congregation, I think one of 276 in the PC(USA). (Of course that is out of 10,000)

So there is a place for people of faith in this effort at climate justice, but much more to be done.

The good news is that people of faith are becoming more involved in activism for stewardship of creation. The current Rolling Stone magazine has an article in their current climate issue, entitled "A Matter of Faith."

(Rolling Stone Magazine, April 2021)

Alex Morris writes that young people of faith, even young evangelicals, "are waking up to the threat of climate change and working to bring their church along with them"

One young person named William, began to take a holistic view of Scripture from Genesis all the way through to the gospels.

He asked, "wouldn't loving one's neighbor mean protecting their habitat?" Making sure they could grow food, have clean air and water, not be subjected to forced migration or the threat multiplier he knew climate change to be?"

These young people of faith know God goes with us when we seek to heal our earth, liberate those who are oppressed, and in general bring wellness and balance to our world.

One young person had integrated his faith with his environmentalism, as the article said.

And particularly with respect to his own evangelical church, he reasoned:

Before the world could be healed by the church, maybe the church needed healing through its engagement with the world.

Adam and dama

as old as dirt.

James Nash, in his book *Loving Nature*, challenges every church to draw on its rich theological heritage and ethical tradition, to confront the challenge that was put to us on that first Earth Day, in 1970. And put to us from the very beginning in Genesis 1:

He writes this:

"The Christian faith, despite the historical ambiguities in its ecological credentials, has the impressive potential to become an indestructibly firm foundation for ecological integrity."

(Nash, James, *Loving Nature*, 1991 p.93)

A firm foundation. To till and to keep. To have dominion.