

ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

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A Sermon Preached at
Pebble Hill Presbyterian Church
DeWitt, NY
October 9, 2022

Three weeks ago, Karen and I traveled to Vermont to attend a wedding in Jeffersonville, near Mount Mansfield. It was an outdoors ceremony, on a perfect sunny afternoon. The service was lovely, and we were glad to spend a happy time with family and friends. But we will also remember the awe we felt driving through the Adirondack woods, along shimmering lakes, then across the scenic Vermont flatlands, into the aptly named Green Mountains. I'm sure many of you have made that trip and found it as breathtaking as we did.

In July, we visited relatives and friends in Kansas and Colorado. Perhaps I'm biased, but, having grown up in Western Kansas, I'm enamored of its vast blue skies, its long rolling hills, its seas of wheat and corn and grass, and its jutting limestone formations left by a prehistoric ocean. In Colorado, we enjoyed the splendors of the Rockies, especially Pike's Peak with its majestic vistas and the massive red boulders in the Garden of the Gods.

I recount these experiences to remind us that nature—the environment on which our very lives depend—has the power to astonish us with its immensity and to delight us, beyond words, with its beauty. For people of faith, these feelings are not only common human pleasures but are experiences that point to a reality beyond the natural world, reinforcing our belief that nature—in its unfathomable scale and complexity—is God's creation. For us, this world—our world—that can inspire such wonder in us is the handiwork of God, who, on every “day” of creation, pronounced what he had made “very good.”

Pebble Hill's Christian Education Committee has decided that, given the increasing urgency of threats to the environment and issues relating to the unequal impact of environmental harms on different populations, it would be appropriate to devote this year's Sunday Forums to the general topic of environmental stewardship. This sermon is intended to introduce the topic and set the stage for upcoming Forum discussions.

Before going any farther, I want to acknowledge that I claim no expertise on environmental matters, nor can I claim to be as conscientious about protecting the environment as I know I should be. However, I do want to become a better steward of the environment, and, because “we're all in this together,” I hope to undertake this journey with others—at Pebble Hill and beyond—who recognize that possibly our own survival but certainly that of future generations will depend on our acting now to preserve the earth's imperiled ecosystems.

Many—and perhaps most—public discussions of our planet's environmental crisis begin with a recitation of distressing facts that demonstrate that we do, indeed, confront a crisis and that the world must act decisively to address it. I will get to some of those facts in due course because I think we need to keep them top of mind and not hide from them if we are to have any chance of countering them and securing the welfare of generations to come.

But we are Christians, and as Christians we seek to discern and do God's will, particularly on important questions. After all, in the Lord's Prayer, we petition God asking that “Thy will be done,” and we remember that, praying in the Garden of Gethsemane before his arrest, Jesus

prayed that “not my will, but thine be done.” And as Christians in the Reform tradition, we look to Scripture in our efforts at spiritual discernment, convinced that the Holy Spirit speaks to us through Scripture and helps us understand—albeit imperfectly—God’s will for us. We also recognize that the process of interpretation is something that we must do together, that God gave the Bible to the church, and it is through prayer, dialogue, and debate that the church strives to discover God’s purposes and the church’s role in them.

So, our question is: What can Scripture teach us about what God desires of human beings in their treatment of the natural environment? Not surprisingly, when Christians or Jews consider this topic, they usually begin with the Creation story in Genesis, with special attention to Genesis 1:24-31. So, let’s start there.

In that passage we are told that God made humankind “in his image,” that he commanded humankind to “fill the earth and subdue it,” and that he gave humankind “dominion” over the other animals. Moreover, God gave humankind plants and fruits to eat and gave “every green plant for food” to other animals.

As we reflect on these points and what they can tell us about our proper relationship to nature, two questions appear central: What does it mean that human beings are created in God’s “image”? And what is the nature of the “dominion” that God gave humans over the rest of nature?

How is it, then, that we are created “in God’s image”? In his commentary on this passage in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Terence Fretheim notes that “The phrase ‘image of God’ has been the subject of much discussion over the centuries. This language occurs only in Genesis 1-11 (though implied elsewhere, e.g., Psalm 8).” According to Fretheim, it refers to our being created so as to be able to fulfill expectations God has of humankind. He writes, “Fundamentally, it means that ‘the pattern on which [human beings are] fashioned is to be sought outside the sphere of the created. The inner-divine communication, which makes interhuman and God-human communication possible, constitutes one basic element of the pattern. Generally, human beings are given such gifts that they can take up the God-given responsibilities specified in these verses.” In other words, God made human beings *God-like*, having certain capacities they share with God so that they can communicate—or, more broadly, have a relationship—with God and with each other, the way Genesis suggests heavenly beings do.

Expanding on this point, Fretheim observes, “[T]he realm of the divine and the realm of the creature are not two radically unrelated spheres; there are overlapping powers, roles, and responsibilities, to which image language testifies. God is not powerful and creatures powerless In the very act of creating, God gives to others a certain independence and freedom. God moves over, as it were, and makes room for others. Creation involves ordered freedom, a degree of openness and unpredictability where God leaves room for genuine decisions on the part of human beings as they exercise their God-given power.”

In my opinion, this is key: God has created human beings with a nature so that they, like God, could *exercise power*, making choices that affect other people, other creatures, and the world itself that God created. And, as an ethics professor, I repeatedly remind my students that it is a cardinal assumption of morality—across human cultures—that *with power comes responsibility*. That idea is clearly present in this passage. As Fretheim says in commenting on Genesis 1-2 generally, “These chapters imply that divine sovereignty in creation is understood, not in terms of absolute divine control, but as a sovereignty that gives power over to the created for the sake of integrity. Such a view involves risk, since it entails the possibility that creatures will misuse the power they have been given, which does occur.”

Now, to *abuse one's power* is to *violate one's responsibility*, one's obligations. Thus, Genesis 1:24-31 is telling us that God created human beings to exercise *God-like power* over the rest of nature. In fact, many scholars find that "the image of God" suggests that God created us to be *God's representatives* in his Creation. Thus, Theodore Hiebert, in his annotation on the passage in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible*, writes that recent biblical scholarship favors "the functional interpretation of the image of God, viewing that image as identifying a particular role for humans, either as counterparts or partners of God, or as representatives of God in the created realm." Understood this way, the text attributes "royal status and responsibility to human beings." According to Hiebert, then, "[T]he image of God describes humanity's preeminent position in the world and humanity's responsibility to rule in creation as God's representatives. Human beings are thus mediators, as were kings and priests alike, of God's presence in the world." To put it another way, God has *entrusted* us with *authority* over the created world, and with that authority—that power—comes responsibility to exercise that power in line with God's will, taking care not to betray his trust. This leads us to the second question—as to what God expects of us in "having dominion" over nature, as he commanded humankind to do.

On this point, Fretheim notes that "[a] study of the verb *have dominion* . . . reveals that it must be understood in terms of care-giving, even nurturing, not exploitation. As the image of God, human beings should relate to the nonhuman as God relates to them." In a similar vein, Hiebert says, "Because of the growing concern for the environment and the human effect upon it, the word *dominion* (*radah*) in Gen 1:26, 28 has received extraordinary attention. It has been understood by some scholars as granting humans unlimited power and license to exploit nature for their own use. . . . In the context of Gen 1, where human beings are viewed as God's representatives in creation . . . , dominion must be understood as the same kind of rule God would exercise in the natural world, a world God created good in all of its parts."

Incidentally, the theme that God made human beings to *share power* with him and use that God-like power to serve God's purposes in the "good" world he has created is echoed in Psalm 8, when the psalmist writes, in amazement, that the Creator has made humankind "a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor" and that he has "given them dominion over the works of your hands" and has put all things under their feet" Expounding these verses, the commentators for *The New Interpreter's Study Bible*, Tony Craven and Walter Harrelson, write that "[t]he point is that humans' place in creation is an extraordinary gift from God. Human beings, made by God, are like God, who *crowned them with glory and honor*. . . . Dominion over the creation means taking care of it, not exploiting it. Even so, the text seems clearly to warrant and demand human investigation and ingenuity in caring for God's creation." In a fitting summary of Psalm 8, the *New Interpreter's Bible* commentator J. Clinton McCann says, "Psalm 8 . . . is both an eloquent proclamation of the cosmic sovereignty of God and a remarkable affirmation of the exalted status and vocation of the human creature. . . . To fail to take seriously the central importance of humanity in God's plan for creation is to abdicate the God-given responsibility to be partners with God in caring for the earth."

It seems to me that there is little or no practical difference in whether we see ourselves as "partners" with God in caring for the world or as God's "representatives" in carrying out that task. The essential point is that, in creating us in his image, God has *empowered* us to *take care of his world*, to be *good and faithful stewards* of the earth he has placed in our care. Of course, when Genesis was written, human beings had little power to affect the forces of nature. But, in today's world, we do have extraordinary power to change the environment—God's creation—and, sadly, we are abusing that power, engaging in various activities that threaten to destroy not

only ourselves but life on earth. Far from exercising responsible *dominion* over the created world, we are exercising irresponsible *domination*, consuming resources in unsustainable ways, in effect robbing future generations of their birthright—for our short-term interests. In the words of Pope Paul VI, “Due to an ill-considered exploitation of nature, humanity runs the risk of destroying it and becoming in turn a victim of this degradation.”

In his 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si* (Praise Be to You), Pope Francis amplified Pope Paul VI’s concerns about the risks humans are imposing on nature—and themselves, declaring, “The ecological crisis, and the large-scale destruction of biodiversity, can threaten the very existence of the human species.” Francis worries that “[t]he pace of consumption, waste and environmental change has so stretched the planet’s capacity that our contemporary lifestyle can only precipitate catastrophes.” As an antidote, Pope Francis argues, we need to turn our attention to the common good, which includes providing for the unmet needs of the poor. Speaking specifically of the effects of climate change on vulnerable groups, Francis asserts that “growing numbers of people are deprived of basic human rights.” In addition, the Pope says, “The notion of the common good also extends to future generations. The global economic crises have made painfully obvious the detrimental effects of disregarding our common destiny, which cannot exclude those who come after us. . . . [T]he world we have received also belongs to those who will follow us.” And Francis vehemently rejects the idea that we can simply let markets take care of environmental problems, arguing that “environmental protection cannot be assured solely on the basis of financial calculations of costs and benefits. The environment is one of those goods that cannot be adequately safeguarded or promoted by market forces.”

Let me take a moment to identify some of the most pressing environmental challenges humanity faces. According to Creation Justice Ministries, an organization representing and serving over thirty major Christian denominations, “The last five years have shown that the climate crisis is no longer a future worry—it is affecting our communities right now. Record-breaking storms, extreme weather, and the slow violence of sea level rise are tearing at the physical and social fabric of our society. So-called ‘natural’ disasters in the United States have increased in frequency and intensity in the last two decades. In 2021, there were at least 18 weather disaster events in the United States with losses exceeding \$1 billion each, even more than the average since 1990. At the same time, our political leaders and structures have failed to prevent climate change and prepare for its worst effects.”

In addition to damage to the environment and human and animal welfare from climate change—including the melting of glaciers and icecaps, droughts and devastating wildfires—we are destroying vital but fragile ecosystems through deforestation and pollution of the world’s rivers and oceans. As many of you have no doubt read, we are pouring millions of tons of plastic into our oceans each year, with the largest pieces forming gigantic “gyres” or “garbage patches,” the largest one—in the Pacific—covering over 74,000 square miles, which is larger than the State of Texas. Even more alarming is that scientists are seeing rapidly increasing levels of plastic “microbeads” in our oceans, tiny pieces of plastic—some of them smaller than a grain of sand—that are ingested by fish and other aquatic life and which work their way up the food chain, into human beings. In fact, according to a recent report, people eat and drink at least 50,000 plastic particles a year (including from bottled water). Other studies indicate that we are also breathing in microbeads from the air. And just this week, it was reported that, for the first time, microbeads were detected in human breast milk. Scientists tell us that they don’t yet know what effects the plastic particles may have on human organs and bodily functions, but it seems likely that some effects are not benign.

Certainly, as citizens, we can and should work with other citizens to advocate for policies that will stem the degradation of our environment and move us toward a sustainable future. In fact, some of you may have seen an article in the *Syracuse Post-Standard* about a week ago by six local psychologists, who noted that “[n]umerous published studies of the psychological effects of our warming planet on people around the world have identified anxiety and despair as mounting problems, especially for our youth and other vulnerable populations.” The authors urge us not to given to a “sense of helplessness,” writing that “[i]n the past 50 years, we have seen many toxins removed from the environment, including DDT, and as a consequence seen the resurgence of many species, including the Bald Eagles that now soar above Onondaga Lake in large numbers. The lake itself, once a Class I Superfund site, is once again becoming an asset to our community. We now have fishable streams and rivers that were once very heavily contaminated. And we have seen the forests and lakes of the Adirondacks brought back from the brink because we were able to identify and mitigate the sources of acid rain in our Midwest power plants. We were not helpless in addressing these problems. In fact, our leaders—both Democrat and Republican—enacted these conservation measures because citizens pushed them to do so.”

What is more, as a Presbyterian church, we have a resource that can help us pursue environmental stewardship. In 1990, the 202nd General Assembly adopted the policy report, “Restoring Creation for Ecology and Justice,” which “calls Presbyterians to focus on caring for creation as a central concern, to be incorporated into the life and mission of the church at every level.” However, after five years, the report had not been enacted in the national church, so a number of Presbyterians founded Presbyterians for Restoring Creation, a grass-roots organization established to promote “environmental wholeness and social justice” in our churches. The organization, whose name was changed to Presbyterians for Earth Care (PEC), states that it “invites individuals and congregations to participate in the growing earth care movement within the PC(USA) and beyond. PEC is a national eco-justice network that cares for God’s creation by connecting, equipping, and inspiring Presbyterians to make creation care a central concern of their church. . . . PEC helps the church to fulfill its current environmental policies, to create new policies and practices, and to energize and educate church members about eco-justice, the well-being of all humankind on a thriving earth.”

In this year’s Sunday Forums on environmental stewardship, one of the things we want to do is explore how we might benefit—individually and as a congregation— from the support offered by Presbyterians for Earth Care.