

“Co-Creators”
April 26, 2009
Steven M Conger

(Genesis 1:26–2:3 NRSV) Then 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 all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." {27} So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. {28} God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." {29} God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. {30} And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. {31} God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. {2:1} Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. {2} And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. {3} So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

I approach this series with great fear and trepidation. Fear, that a good many of you already have your opinions about creation – ecology and the threat to our planet and will not hear what I have to say. Trepidation, that what I have to say will be so insignificant in light of the crisis that we are facing.

Chief Seattle once said:

“The earth is precious to the Creator and to harm the earth is to heap contempt on its Creator. . . . We are part of the earth and it is part of us.”

I believe that!

Watching the weather the last couple of years has been frightening. Hurricanes are getting larger and more frequent. Tornadoes seem more destructive. And

floods – what were called 100 or 200 year floods now seem to be happening all the time. And every time it rains many of us run to the Little Cal to see if it is rising – because we really don't believe that last September was a 100 year flood.

And so I, with some help from the environmental mission team, am going to attempt to share with you what I see as the problem, and ultimately in a couple of weeks offer to you some solutions.

But we begin – at the beginning – with Creation.

Listen to what the Spirit says to the church:

Genesis 1:26 – 2:3 (The Message)

God spoke: "Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature

So they can be responsible for the fish in the sea,
the birds in the air, the cattle,

And, yes, Earth itself,
and every animal that moves on the face of Earth."

God created human beings;

he created them godlike,

Reflecting God's nature.

He created them male and female.

God blessed them:

"Prosper! Reproduce! Fill Earth! Take charge!

Be responsible for fish in the sea and birds in the air,
for every living thing that moves on the face of Earth."

Then God said, "I've given you

every sort of seed-bearing plant on Earth

And every kind of fruit-bearing tree,
given them to you for food.

To all animals and all birds,
everything that moves and breathes,

I give whatever grows out of the ground for food."

And there it was.

God looked over everything he had made;

it was so good, so very good!

It was evening, it was morning—
 Day Six.
 Heaven and Earth were finished, down to the last detail.

By the seventh day
 God had finished his work.
 On the seventh day
 he rested from all his work.
 God blessed the seventh day.
 He made it a Holy Day
 Because on that day he rested from his work,
 all the creating God had done.

This is the story of how it all started,
 of Heaven and Earth when they were created.

I think one of the mistakes we make is thinking that the doctrine of creation is about how things began.

Stephen Hawking, for example, supposes that if his ideas about the very early universe are correct – which means that time had a very different nature and there is no dateable beginning to the cosmos – then God is left with nothing to do. There is no need for a creator.

The problem with that notion is it is looking at creation wrong.

John Polkinghorne – a theoretical physicist and an Anglican priest – retired president of Queens College, Cambridge England writes:

God is as much the Creator today as God was 15 billion years ago, for the real role of the Creator is to hold the world in being. Only the steadfast divine faithfulness rescues the universe from collapsing into nothingness, the doctrine of creation is not concerned with how things began but *why things exist*.

Meister Eckhart said the same thing:

I have often said that God is creating the entire universe fully and totally in this present now. Everything God created 6,000 years ago – and even previous to that – as he made the world, God creates now all at once.

For most of us – we read the creation story and we hear, and have been preach to over and over again that as God’s special creation we are to have dominion over all of the rest of creation.

The problem is – what does that mean?

The Hebrew word that the King James and the New Revised Standard Version both translate as dominion is “radah” (raw-daw’) which means: to tread down, to subjugate, to prevail, to reign or rule over.

Is it any wonder that for many people when they read dominion they hear that we can do whatever we want to God’s creation – that God has expressly given us that permission.

James Watt, former Secretary of the Interior under Ronald Reagan famously once said: "God gave us these things (natural resources) to use. After the last tree is felled, Christ will come back."

That attitude has long been present in American Christianity.

America – a nation that a majority of the people identify themselves as Christians is the worst polluting nation in the world. And one of the reasons is that we can do whatever we want – because God gave us dominion over the earth.

In Genesis Chapter 9 God tells Noah: “I give you everything.”

It is not surprising that we have taken this vantage point – because it certainly keeps us off the hook.

Lynn White, Jr. writes:

Especially in its western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen. . . .Man shares, in great measure, God’s transcendence of nature. Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia’s religions . . . not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.

But not only is that view short sighted – it is also just plain incorrect.

I think Eugene Peterson translation of the Hebrew word “radah” is better when he suggests – “responsible”.

God spoke: "Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature
 So they can be responsible for the fish in the sea,
 the birds in the air, the cattle,
 And, yes, Earth itself,
 and every animal that moves on the face of Earth."
 God created human beings;
 he created them godlike,
 Reflecting God's nature.
 He created them male and female.
 God blessed them:
 "Prosper! Reproduce! Fill Earth! Take charge!
 Be responsible for fish in the sea and birds in the air,
 for every living thing that moves on the face of Earth."

There is a big difference in having dominion over something or being responsible for something.

In 1986, The Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church issued a Pastoral Letter to all United Methodists entitled: “In Defense of Creation”. In the two years preceding the issuing of this letter, the Church studied the issue. Listen to a portion of that letter:

We write in defense of creation. We do so because the creation itself is under attack. Air and water, trees and fruits and flowers, birds and fish and cattle, all children and youth, women and men

That letter is as important today as it was then. But the interesting thing is, they were not worried about how creation was under attack by pollution. They were concerned about the threat of nuclear holocaust.

Twenty-three years later – we need to rally in defense of creation!

No one has influence my theology of creation more than Matthew Fox. Matthew Fox is so concerned about how we understand creation that he has created what he calls the “University of Creation Spirituality” in Oakland California.

Now I have to be completely honest with you. I am a left brain thinker – I look for the linear, the logical in things. I have a very underdeveloped right brain. I think my attraction to photography is to help me look at the world from the right side of my brain, rather than always from the left.

I say this, because Matthew Fox is a right brain thinker. He sees things, I only wish I could see. I find reading his books an immense challenge, but I also leave (usually after reading them twice) so much richer for his insights.

Listen to what he has to say:

Creation carries us beyond religious tribalism because no ecosystem, river, forest, or ocean is labeled Catholic, Buddhist, Baptist, {Methodist}, or Lutheran. Deep ecumenism, the coming together of the world’s spiritual traditions around spiritual practice and eco and social justice, flows from our interdependence in creation.

To bring creation back to the heart of religious and spiritual practice can assist us to stand up to the seductive myths of consumer society that would substitute consumerism for authentic awe. Rabbi Abraham Heschel warned us: “Forfeit your sense of awe and the universe becomes a market place for you.”

We must take care of creation.

And I believe that the Biblical understanding of how we are to do that is that we are to be co-creators with God. We are to become partners with God caring for all that God has entrusted us.

When Apollo 11 landed on the Moon, a Psalm was read – and it was left on the moon on a disk for anyone who should happen along, 73 additional messages were left from various nations of our planet.

This Psalm reminds us clearly of what God expects of us:

(Psalms 8 NRSV) O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. {2} Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger. {3} When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; {4} what are human beings that you are mindful of them,

mortals that you care for them? {5} Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. {6} You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, {7} all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, {8} the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas. {9} O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

If we don't take responsibility for the earth --- who will? Are we to assume that Jesus is going to return and straighten out our mess?

Or should we get off of our rear ends and begin to search for solutions to the problem?

If we don't take seriously the direction that we are going --- I am afraid that we are going to be in for quite a surprise.

You can jump off the one hundredth floor of the Sears Tower and actually feel like you are flying for 99 stories. But it is the stop at the end that gets you.

It seems to me that if we refuse to wake up - that is exactly where we are headed.

May God help us to accept the call to be co-creators - and may we have the wisdom to figure out what we should be doing to God's creation to bring it back into harmony with God.