

You CAN Change The World
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In the beginning . . .

So begins our Bible. As we hear the stories of how the world came to be created.

The stories tell us that God is busy creating
stars and moons,
lakes and rivers,
mountains and plains,
plants and animals — and then. Then God gets busy making
humankind. And in the midst of creating us — God gives us a charge.

(Genesis 1:26-27 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.

The key phrase and the one that has been a stumbling block for humankind ever since is DOMINION.

What does it mean to have dominion over the earth?

That may be the most important question facing humankind today.

Dominion, as I understand the word, means to have sovereignty or control. The problem with that word choice of the translators of the Hebrew Bible is that it does not designate whether that control should be positive or negative — or even neutral.

The word used in Hebrew is “radah” — which means to tread down, or subjugate — which seems to me to be a rather negative understanding of dominion.

To add even more confusion. In verse 28 the story goes on:

(Genesis 1:28 NRSV) 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."

Subdue's definition is even stronger than Dominion — "to bring under control by force." The Hebrew word that was translated subdue is "Kabash" which means to conquer or subjugate.

Why am I giving you this Hebrew lesson?

I am doing this so that you can see the conflict that has long brewed between conservative Christianity to see this injunction one way, and progressive Christianity that is trying to help us look at this passage in a new way.

Historically, Christianity — particularly American Christianity has interpreted the injunction in Genesis 1:26-28 as permission to use the world and it's resources however we want. In whatever way we want.

That has run the gamut from cutting down the ancient forests, to strip mining, to dumping of chemicals into streams and rivers, too, well, just about any way that you can imagine.

We can do this — this line of thinking has argued — for two primary reasons.

- 1) God gave us permission
- 2) Jesus is coming soon, so what difference does it make.

Does anyone remember James Watt, Secretary of the Interior during Ronald Reagan's presidency?

Ronald Reagan was quoted as saying:

"A tree's a tree. How many more do you need to look at?"

For someone who didn't seem too fond of trees, it should have come as no surprise that Ronald Reagan would appoint James Watt to be his Secretary of the Interior. James Watt was, according to the Audubon Society, "arguably the most anti-environment secretary ever." Testifying before Congress in February 1981, Watt was asked if he agreed that natural resources should be preserved for future generations. His response:

"I do not know how many future generations we can count of before the Lord returns."

So what difference does preserving the environment make?

Eugene Peterson in his translation of the Scripture called *The Message* suggests a new interpretation to the traditional rendering of this passage from Genesis. As you listen to this passage — think of what the impact might have been if this were the traditional reading.

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."

Instead of have Dominion over, or Subdue — Peterson has translated “radah” and “kabash” as BE RESPONSIBLE.

In my mind that is a huge difference, but in reading the whole of scripture one could easily argue that it probably is a better translation of God’s intention for creation.

What difference does it make?

We can argue back and forth whether or not Global Climate Change is real, or whether it is scare tactics to get at ??? — I am not sure who they are trying to get at.

All I know, is that the science is alarming!

I don’t know how many of you have taken the time to watch *An Inconvenient Truth*. Our environmental team put together a couple of showings of the movie, followed by discussion a couple of months ago — and I am sure, would do it again if there is interest.

Even if the science is only partially correct — don’t we as Christians have a MORAL obligation to be responsible for the earth.

The National Council of Churches delivered an open letter to: Church and Society in the United States. I want to share with you the beginning of this letter,

God’s creation delivers unsettling news. Earth’s climate is warming to dangerous levels; 90 percent of the world’s fisheries have been

depleted; coastal development and pollution are causing a sharp decline in ocean health; shrinking habitat threatens to extinguish thousands of species; over 95 percent of the contiguous United States forests have been lost; and almost half of the population in the United States lives in areas that do not meet national air quality standards. In recent years, the profound danger has grown, requiring us as theologians, pastors, and religious leaders to speak out and act with new urgency.

We are obliged to relate to Earth as God's creation "in ways that sustain life on the planet, provide for the [basic] needs of all humankind, and increase justice."^[1] Over the past several decades, slowly but faithfully, the religious community in the United States has attempted to address issues of ecology and justice. Our faith groups have offered rich theological perspectives, considered moral issues through the lens of long-standing social teaching, and passed numerous policies within our own church bodies. While we honor the efforts in our churches, we have clearly failed to communicate the full measure and magnitude of Earth's environmental crisis—religiously, morally, or politically. It is painfully clear from the verifiable testimony of the world's scientists that our response has been inadequate to the scale and pace of Earth's degradation.

This is nothing new.

On earth day 1971, the national Ad Council released a TV commercial that is burned into my psyche and changed me.

It featured a man named Iron Eyes Cody, a Native American, and challenged the prevailing notion that it was no big deal to litter.

Prior to that — I was one who when finished eating a candy bar, would just toss the wrapper. Where the litter went — I didn't know, and to be honest, I really didn't care.

But with that Ad campaign, I became aware that I could make a difference — that I could help **Keep America Beautiful**. And like I said, it changed my life and my attitude.

And I know it is easy to say — WHAT CAN I DO?

This weekend, SOS Live Earth has been trying to make all of humanity aware of this crisis that we are facing.

As a part of their campaign, they are inviting people to pledge

LIVE EARTH PLEDGE
7 POINTS. ONE POWERFUL MESSAGE.
ANSWER THE CALL.
I PLEDGE:

To demand that my country join an international treaty within the next 2 years that cuts global warming pollution by 90% in developed countries and by more than half worldwide in time for the next generation to inherit a healthy earth;

To take personal action to help solve the climate crisis by reducing my own CO2 pollution as much as I can and offsetting the rest to become “carbon neutral;”

To fight for a moratorium on the construction of any new generating facility that burns coal without the capacity to safely trap and store the CO2;

To work for a dramatic increase in the energy efficiency of my home, workplace, school, place of worship, and means of transportation;

To fight for laws and policies that expand the use of renewable energy sources and reduce dependence on oil and coal;

To plant new trees and to join with others in preserving and protecting forests; and,

To buy from businesses and support leaders who share my commitment to solving the climate crisis and building a sustainable, just, and prosperous world for the 21st century.

On the SOS live Earth Web page are tools that you can use to make a difference.

But unless we believe that this matters, unless we believe that we can make a difference — we are wasting our time.

A couple of weeks ago, I went to Hope United Methodist Church to share in my dad’s last Sunday with that congregation.

Hope UMC is a struggling Church on the outskirts of Joliet. They have seen

one bad appointment after another, and barely have enough people or resources to stay open. As my father talked about the “Hope” for the future he shared a powerful illustration that I think can remind us of our task at hand.

In 1854, a Cholera epidemic broke out in Chicago — caused by the pollution that flowed from the city into Lake Michigan which was the source of their drinking water. Estimates of how many died are hard to come by. Some say as many as 90,000, but that is way too large a percentage of the population. Most suggest about 5 ½% of the population died.

In 1871 Chicago was devastated by a great fire. As a result of that fire, many amazing things took place. One of the events following the Great Fire was the Columbian Exhibition that ran from May - October 1893. If you have never read *“Devil in the White City”* you need to pick up that great novel of this time period.

The success of the Columbian Exhibition and the fear of more Cholera epidemics convinced the city fathers that they need to seek a solution to the water problem.

Do you know what they did?

They reversed the Chicago river.

Originally, the Chicago River flowed from West to East carrying the waste of the city into Lake Michigan.

In 1900, the river was reversed by a series of locks that changed the flow with the river now flowing into the Mississippi River basin.

What’s the point of this story?

To remind us that we can do amazing things if we put our minds to it.

We can change the direction that water flows.

We can solve the Global Climate Change problems — if we want to, and if we are willing to make changes in our lives. But the reality is — it is up to us (as Christians), to lead the way making changes so that the rest of the world can follow.

Because if we — who have been called to be responsible over the earth don’t do what is right and necessary — who’s going to?

