

Created to Have Dominion?
 EARTH DAY
 Jeff Clinger
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Genesis 1:24-31

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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.

In September of 1969, at a conference in Seattle, Washington, Senator Nelson from Wisconsin made an announcement. The announcement was about a special day to be held the following spring, a day to commemorate the fact that, as Nelson put it, we only have one earth and we need to take care of her. On April 22nd, 1970 Earth Day was first officially commemorated as approximately 20 million activists and students from around the country raised their voices to speak out against oil spills, polluting factories and power plants, raw sewage, toxic dumps, pesticides, freeways, the loss of wilderness, and the extinction of wildlife.

In the years following that first celebration, Earth Day continued to grow. In 1990 on its 20th anniversary, nearly approximately 200 million people were involved in

Earth Day celebrations in 141 different countries. 2007's Earth Day celebrations were the largest to date with an estimated 1 billion people participating in activities in thousands of places across the globe. Earth Day, which we celebrate this coming Tuesday, is an important opportunity for us as Christians to remember our connection to and with all of creation.

Nearly 40 years after the first celebration of Earth Day, to be "green" is an increasingly hip thing to do. An increasing number of products are made in increasingly environmentally friendly ways. We are constantly bombarded by conversation about the greening of our culture and the effects can be seen in our world. Last November NBC's Today Show dedicated an entire week to being "green." To open the show Matt Lauer, reporting from Greenland, proclaimed, "I'm Matt Lauer and I'm reporting from the top of the world." Ann Curry chimed in, "And I'm Ann Curry reporting from the bottom of the Earth." And thus their weeklong conversation about our planet began, with Al at the Equator and Meredith back in New York. This week long feature covered a whole variety of ways that we can live more environmentally friendly lives.

I'm sure I don't need to tell you about all of the ways in which the media is increasingly covering the "how" of being green or of taking care of the environment. All one needs to do is turn on the television or radio, pick up a magazine or a newspaper, and you can see all of the "how to" tips that you need. You've heard them all before: use CFL light bulbs, take your own bags to the grocery store, walk and bike more while driving less, adjust the thermostats in your home. There is no question, each of these are important pointers for how we can live more environmentally friendly lives.

We hear plenty about the “how to” of environmental issues. This morning I want to focus more on the “why.” Why should we be concerned about what effect our actions have on the planet? What responsibility do we as human beings, and more importantly as Christians, have to care for the planet? As we begin to address these questions this morning, I want to begin by providing a brief historical look at how Christians have engaged the environment from the earliest days until now.

When we look at the early church, very little is known about how these first Christians thought and felt and acted in regards to the environment. In the first couple of centuries of Christianity there was little written about the environment and I would imagine very little conversation about it. The issues that we face today weren’t even on the radar screens of early Christians. In fact, through most of Christian history these conversations haven’t even existed. Concern about human consumption and the way in which it affects the world is a relatively new thing, only really an issue since the industrial revolution.

However, following the industrial revolution, two very different answers to the question, “Should Christians be concerned about the environment?” emerged in the 20th century. In summary these responses are “no” and “yes.” Let me elaborate on both of these.

First of all, those folks who would say, “No, Christians need not be concerned about caring for the environment.” The logic of this position is illustrated by an exchange that Jeremy Leggett had with John Schiller, an executive at Ford Motor Company. In an interview Leggett asked Schiller, how he and others could feel that there is no problem with “a world of a billion cars intent on burning all the oil and gas

available on the planet?” Schiller explained that scientists have gotten it wrong when they say that fossil fuels have been sequestered underground for eons. The earth, he explained, is just 10,000, not 4.5 billion years old. Schiller then confidently declared, “You know, the more I look, the more it is just as it says in the Bible.” The Book of Daniel, Schiller told Leggett, predicts that increased earthly devastation will mark the “End Time” and return of Christ. Leggett further notes, many fundamentalists see dying coral reefs, melting ice caps and other environmental destruction not as an urgent call to action, but as God’s will. In this worldview, the wreck of the Earth can be seen as Good News, the worse the world gets the more likely Jesus will be soon to return.

And on the other side of the spectrum there is a worldview that would say, “Yes, Christians need to be concerned about caring for the environment.” The basic argument to support this point of view is that God has created, God has declared that creation is good, and God has entrusted us as human beings to be caretakers of God’s creation. This is, I believe, the most biblical of the options, and we’ll look at it in some more detail in a couple of minutes.

Before we do though, I want to make an observation. I know very few if any people who fall into this first camp, people who would say that the worse the environment gets the closer we are to Jesus coming back. At the same time, I know a fair amount, though not a huge number, of people who would argue that as Christians one of our responsibilities is to care for the environment. My hunch is that most of us are somewhere in between. My hunch is that many people might feel some kind of a desire to care for the environment, but feel overwhelmed and don’t even know where to begin. Or, I would imagine that many of us have just never taken the time to really even ask the

question or to think about how we would answer the question, “Should Christians be concerned about caring for the environment?” And my hunch is, that most of these people, who fall in the middle and haven’t really spent any time talking about or thinking about the question, just live their lives in the most convenient ways that have been structured by the powers that be that surround them.

So really three options exist: we can further destroy the planet in hopes of speeding up Jesus’ return, we can desire to be caretakers for creation and work actively at that, or we can pretty much remain neutral and ambivalent. So, why, as we prepare to celebrate Earth Day this Tuesday, or any day, should we as Christians be concerned about the environment? There isn’t much of a historical mandate to do so, there is even a stream within the contemporary church today that would encourage us to be aggressively destructive of the environment, so why should we as people of faith today, be concerned about caring for the environment?

As we prepare to answer this question this morning, let’s take a couple of minutes to look at the Genesis story of creation, specifically the creation of human beings found in Genesis 1:24-31

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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.

Whether you take this story as a literal factual account of how things happened, or as a metaphorical understanding of God’s creation of the world, they are important words that create and shape meaning for us as people of faith today. So, what do they tell us...? In verses 24 & 25 God creates animals and declares that they are good. In verses 26 & 27 God creates human beings in God’s image so that they can have dominion over creation (we’ll deal with that word in a minute). In verse 28 God speaks to the people and says, “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.” And in verse 31 we read, “God saw everything that had been made, and indeed, it was very good.”

God created animals and plants – and thought it was good. God created humans – and thought it was good. God told humans to have dominion over plants and animals and stepped back to look at the whole system declaring – it is good. The big question for us then, seems to be, what do we mean by dominion? What does it mean for human beings to have dominion over the rest of creation? What does it mean that we were created to have dominion?

Often times we have understood the word dominion in a way that best suits our interests as humans. Crosswalk.com provides the following definition – to rule, have dominion, dominate, tread down. When we, as Christians, have understood the word dominion in such a way, it has led to a very negative treatment of the environment. If we

are the masters, and we dominate, and we control the rest of creation, then it doesn't matter how negatively we treat the world around us. When we understand the word dominion in such a way, we can kill, eat, pave, burn, harvest, whatever we want, whenever we want, because we're the bosses and we have control.

Unfortunately, this understanding of dominion doesn't fully jive with the original Hebrew found in this Genesis story. The Hebrew word *radah* is the word that is used in this text. The word *radah* appears only about a dozen times in the Old Testament and is unique in its meaning. Andrew Basden, a professor at Salford University in the UK speaks of it in the following way. We have often understood the idea of dominion to mean something like the way in which a medieval ruler would dominate over his subjects, using them for his own end, his own pleasure, his own prestige, his own wars, etc. But an examination of *radah* shows that this is not the type of dominion that we are called to have over creation. Our *radah*, of the creation, is not to be with harshness and cruelty and selfishness. Our *radah* is to be, not for our own sake, but for the sake of the one ruled, that is for the sake of creation. We should heal those parts of creation that are sick, bind up those parts that are injured, bring back those parts that are straying, and search for those parts that have become lost. Basden argues, we *radah* creation to represent God to it, to develop and define and beautify it for its own sake, rather than for ours.

As I thought about this idea of dominion this week, I wanted to come up with a simple tangible illustration that I could share and I found myself thinking about sibling relationships. My sister and I are only two years apart in age, but growing up some of my friends had siblings much further from them in age. I think especially about the

Hughes's. Scott was a good friend of mine who was my age, he had an older sister Amy, who I believe was two years older than us, they then had a much younger brother, Jeff who was five or six when we were in middle school. Scott and Amy were often charged with caring for Jeff, their younger brother.

You know how siblings can be – they would often pick on Jeff and make him do things for him. It was like this game they would play, they would see how much they could manipulate Jeff to do things for them because they had the power and they were in control. They would dominate over him for their own benefit, much like the understanding of dominion that we discussed earlier. However, there were other times when they would get it, when they would nurture and comfort him, encourage and inspire him, when they would share love with him that helped him grow. These times were beautiful illustrations of what it truly means to have dominion, to *radah*.

Our call to have dominion over the rest of creation, to *radah*, is much the same. There are and there will continue to be times that we manipulate and use creation for our own good and to our own ends. However, it is my hope that we will all come to more fully understand and embrace our call to *radah*, to care for and nurture creation, to work as extensions of God's love and care.

The Good News for us, as we prepare to celebrate Earth Day this week, and always, is that God created us and saw that it was good, that God entrusts the care of creation to us and calls us to partner with God in caring for the world.

As individuals, as families, and as a church, we have choices to make about how we're going to participate in God's work in creation. This Earth Day will you consider buying a reusable bag and supporting environmental missions, will you consider

participating in next Saturday's clean-up day at Centennial Park, will you consider implementing any of the different steps to care for the earth, as a way of partnering with God and answering God's call to *radah*?