

## “Earthlings”

September 15, 2024

Scripture: Genesis 1:24-27, 2:4b-9; Revelation 21:1-5a

Did you know we have two creation stories in the Bible? I think most folks realize that, but it can come as news to some people. Our tendency is to mash them together as if they come from the same source. But actually the first story in Genesis is later than the second one probably by several hundred years. Today because we’re focusing on Creation care, I thought it would be a good idea to hear parts of both those stories alongside each other. I chose the part in each story when humans are brought on the scene.

In the first story, which is the later story so not as old as the second one, humans are created through an act of divine imagination. The whole story is presented that way from the beginning. God creates everything out of nothing, *ex nihilo* is the technical term for it. So, light, darkness, sun and moon, air and water, plants and animals, and humans all spring up from nothing. They are all the result of God’s willing them into being. Humans come last in that effort as the sort of pinnacle of creation. And we’re told it’s all put there to sustain them. Humans are to have “dominion” over all of it.

Now, that word dominion is controversial. Does it mean to actually dominate and coerce the rest of creation, bend it to our needs? Or, does it carry more the meaning of tending and cultivating creation? I think for the generation that created these stories it would have been the same thing. They could not have imagined, I suspect, human activity capable of really depleting the environment which was so much more powerful and dominate, really, than humans could ever be. They lived in a historical snapshot, with a very limited awareness of human activity before them.

We have the advantage of being able to trace human migration over the last 100 thousand years or so, from our origins in Africa, north into Asia and Europe and eventually into North America and from the other direction west from Africa across the Atlantic to South America and the various islands in the Caribbean. The dispersal patterns sort of go all over the place and there were attempts that failed, so there are some remnants of those in various parts of the Middle East that date back even further. The point is we know that humans spread across the earth and have had an immense impact on the environments they inhabited. Everywhere humans have gone we bent the environment to our needs. That’s possibly our greatest evolutionary talent. We’re unique among all the species on the planet in our ability to shape the ecosystems we inhabit by out-competing other large mammals and controlling the resources for our own needs. That’s what humans do. We dominate the world by coercing it into submission.

The writers of our creation stories didn’t see this as a point of pride but as a simple fact of life. Being given “dominion” over creation is really just a description of the way things are. The question these stories raise is, given that fact, what is the human role in relation to the Creator of all this? We aren’t the same as God, obviously, but we have a unique responsibility as partners with God. When God says, “Let us make humankind in our image,” what those writers probably meant was to establish humanity as God’s representative on earth. Usually that term was

reserved for kings and rulers; they were understood as their gods' presence in the world, but our writers applied to all of humanity. We're all charged with this responsibility; we're all meant to reveal God's presence through our actions in the world.

And that's why I think it's so important that we have a second story, a more ancient story, to learn from. In the first story humankind springs directly from the mind of God, but in the more ancient story humans are formed, crafted, from the earth itself. One of my Hebrew professors in seminary liked to refer to the human God shapes from mud not as Adam but as Earthling. Because we are formed from the mud, from the soil itself, we are part of the earth, not some alien dropped into a garden from the heavens. We spring from the soil like all the other species around us. Our life is tied to the earth itself and its fate is ours.

Awareness of that connection can help us think differently about our responsibilities for the earth. In other spiritual traditions, especially Native American but also Celtic, we find a relationship between humanity and the earth as a central value. Humans don't just occupy the planet; it's not just a backdrop for our endeavors. We receive wisdom and insight from the earth and have an obligation to preserve the earth because we recognize it as the source of life. That may not be the understanding Judaism has, but even in Jewish scripture we find the earth participating in praise to God, joining in as the sea that roars and the trees that clap their hands and the hills echoing forth. The earth isn't a passive actor in God's drama; it's dynamic and reactive to God's presence. But Christianity seems to have severed that relationship. There's an undercurrent in our faith of duality that separates the spiritual from the material and creates a sort of hierarchy of significance that elevates the spiritual to the detriment of the material.

I don't think that's intended in New Testament scripture, but as the church gains power in the world it becomes easier and easier to adopt the values of consumption that are characteristic of empires. So, we've in a sense lost our connection to the earth, even lost our identity as earthlings and believe we should exist on some other plane.

That belief has led us to seeing the planet as something to be exploited. Whatever riches it holds, liquid, solid or gas, we want to extract it and use it for our benefit. And with over 8 billion of us vying for those resources, we're actually able to deplete the planet and harm it through carbon dioxide and methane emissions in our atmosphere trapping the heat and causing the planet to warm up. Even though the ocean is able to absorb much of the carbon dioxide, we've saturated its capacity causing the acidic balance to change killing off certain plant life necessary for the ecosystems of many fish and other aquatic life. A warmer atmosphere holds more moisture for longer periods of time causing droughts and then torrential, flooding rains. A warmer ocean contributes to the intensity of tropical storms and hurricanes, so often when they make landfall they are much stronger than in the past and do a lot more damage to homes and communities. Rising sea levels caused by the melting of glaciers at the poles are affecting water levels on inhabited islands and peninsulas, like much of Florida and in the south Pacific. Also life in the Arctic is becoming more precarious as freezing periods are less solid and reliable. There may be some cyclical feature to these changes, but there's no doubt among climate scientists that human activity has driven most of it, building up more and more emissions over the last 250 years.

An attitude that sees the earth as a limitless resource intended for our consumption rather than the source of our life and a sacred gift from God is unsustainable. We are of the earth, created from the soil, our stories tell us, meant to be partners in God's creative activity and we cannot afford to neglect that responsibility, not if we hope to have a future. We hear all the time that we're in danger of destroying the planet. Actually, we're in danger of making the planet uninhabitable for us. The planet itself will survive us, but it might eventually shake us off as it has other species over the last 4 billion years. In other words, we need the earth more than it needs us.

So, we have to find a vision of our relationship to the earth that doesn't make us dominant but acknowledges our need to sustain it. I think that vision in Revelation is a good place to start. So much of our theological imagination pictures us departing the earth, as if we're trapped here and our faith is meant to set us free of it. But in Revelation we find heaven and earth coming together, the New Jerusalem descending so that God's home can be among mortals. In his book *Surprised by Hope*, the New Testament scholar N. T. Wright raises the question of what sort of earth God might descend to if humans continue to damage it. By changing the direction of our expectation from our departing to be with God to God coming to live among us, we might think differently about our need to care for the earth.

Our place on the planet is unique because we're the only species that can really do it harm. And that's a reality every faith tradition wrestles with to some degree. Ours seems to have given up worrying about it, but more and more we're learning we can't go on that way. Christians have a responsibility like everyone else to seek ways to care for the earth and sustain the planet for future generations. That's why here at North we invested in solar panels to help generate electricity about 10 years ago. It's why we've partnered over the years with Congregation Shir Shalom to celebrate Earth Day and help educate folks around the need to care for the earth as a fundamental value in both our traditions. We may not be able to reverse the damage on our own, but we can help create awareness of the need and help change attitudes about our responsibilities. Just as our theology has been a part of the problem, it can also become part of the solution.

There is hope on the horizon for our relationship to the earth. There are traditions we can draw on and learn from to instill a deeper appreciation and reverence for creation. And there are actions we can take by advocating for more sustainable practices and changing our own habits toward more responsible uses of our resources. And we can embrace our own creation stories that depict us and all that's around us as God's good creation. We can help in healing the earth and maybe forestall its depletion, even reverse the damage. As God's image on the planet, formed from the earth itself, we're called to care for the earth, our only home and the place where, in the end, God will dwell among us to wipe away all tears and make us one with each other and with the earth.

Amen