

How We Speak, How We Think, How We Act
A sermon for Crescent Hill Presbyterian Church, Louisville
February 10, 2013 – Climate Change Preach-In
Psalm 19; Gen 1:24-31
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Many of you know my daughter Claire, who grew up in this congregation, and now lives in Pokhara, Nepal.¹ A couple of years ago Claire and I were in traveling together in India. Our host in the city of Coimbatore, Father Justin Nelson, took us to the train station to return to Bangalore. He was very protective of us crazy westerners. He boarded with us and settled us across the aisle from a nun in full habit, explaining to her in Tamil who we were, where we were going, and perhaps, for all we knew, how ignorant we were, or how I had screamed bloody murder at midnight on the last train, when I found a mouse sharing my pillow.

The sister nodded in our direction. She was wearing the white and blue habit of Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity, and I was enthralled. All my romanticism about Mother Teresa, about nuns, and about travel in India drowned out any apprehensions.

We set out among the mountains. Throughout South India's flatlands, everywhere we went, we had passed masses of people working, walking, driving, biking, sitting, eating, sweeping, bathing, laughing, as if all humanity had congregated on the tip of South Asia to sink it. But here, for the first time in three weeks, we saw open countryside, mountains flying past the windows, big, live beautiful Indian mountains. I smiled at Claire, and then at the sister, who was eating her lunch, a box of chicken. We ate a couple of bananas, and I looked for a waste bin and, finding none, wondered if it was proper to throw the peel from the train. The sister finished her chicken, stood up, leaned over the two people sitting between her and the open window, and tossed box, drinking cup, napkins, fork, bones, the whole litter of a fast food meal, into the mountain, and then sat down and opened a prayer book.

It's tempting to chalk up such an action to cultural differences. But on the north side of the Ohio River near our house in Jeffersonville, thousands of Americans congregate for that annual fireworks display that wakes up all creation, Thunder over Louisville. The trash that strews roads and sidewalks from the river to downtown the next morning puts American manners badly on display. This is something more: a mentality that the earth is our waste bin.

Once I was talking to a colleague, a left-leaning scholar, in her office. She commended some environmental deed or another as she threw an empty, recyclable Coke bottle into her waste basket.

I am telling these tales not because they are so shocking but because they are so common. If being religious, or being in public, or even being verbally committed to ecological causes cannot help us reexamine small actions, what will change us in the large ones? I am just as guilty: if the nun trashed the mountainside, I had trashed the stratosphere by jetting across the

¹ Parts of this sermon, including this story, are adapted from Patricia K. Tull, *Inhabiting Eden: Christians, the Bible, and the Ecological Crisis* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013).

world, even if it was to see my daughter. Ecological awareness has often inspired me to stay put, but it has not led me to cease flying altogether. We are social beings, and while some of us may be more committed than others to improving our ecological behavior, we are limited both by personal habits and by what society as a whole makes possible.

Here at Crescent Hill, I know I'm preaching to the choir, and I'm so grateful for that. But even we who believe in earth care find these ecological changes difficult. We know the problems, or at least the symptoms of the problem. Talk is easy, at least among friends. But meaningful action is very hard.

Recently I asked members of a Sunday school class at Anchorage Presbyterian church to each to name one ecological issue they were concerned about. Someone named light pollution. Someone named the great plastic garbage patches in the oceans. Someone mentioned toxic air, and someone else said factory farming. They talked about peak oil. They talked about species extinction. Several said climate change. By the time we had gone around the room there was quite a list of serious problems.

We observed that what we had was not a lot of separate issues, but many symptoms of one fundamental problem. That is, that humans are living out of whack with our environment. From India to Indiana to the halls of liberal consciousness, we are the species that habitually takes whatever we want from the planet as if it were a candy store, and throws back at it whatever we don't want, assuming it can handle 7 billion people doing the same. It's a bigger and bigger problem for us, and for other species, and for our children and grandchildren.

Today you are celebrating the commitment you have made to become an Earth Care Congregation, that is, to redeem the place of humans in the larger world. To mark this very special day, I want to signpost just a few things you already know. I have three things in mind. Here are the three things I want to talk about:

Number one: How we talk to other people—what we'll call this afternoon “winning the conversation.”

Number two: How we think about ourselves in relation to the rest of creation.

Number three: How our thinking shapes our daily actions.

One, two, three—how we speak, how we think, how we act. ☺ So let's get started.

At heart what we have is not so much an ecological issue as a spiritual one. We don't know what we humans are here for. And we need to teach each other—and ourselves—on this all over again. The Bible gives us far more than we may think on this matter, if we read it carefully. But do you know what? Over and over and over, when people talk about the Bible they almost always cite the same passage, a single verse in Genesis 1, taken way out of context and misunderstood. That's why I chose for us to talk about that problematic verse today. I am sure you have heard the conversation that goes like this: “The Bible says God gave humans dominion, so that means the whole earth is ours, isn't it?” Or conversely: “The Bible says God gave humans dominion, so isn't Scripture to blame for the mess we are in?” Whether people approve of this verse or not, they take it to mean that people are given the earth to use for human purposes alone, to extract whatever we want, waste whatever we like, and dump whatever we no longer desire.

So let's look again at the creation story, and get some talking points, because I have no doubt that if we as Christians do talk to other people about our ecological commitments, this will certainly come up. We don't have to excuse the Bible or ignore it. We just need to read it better, and invite others to read it better too.

There is a whole lot that could be said about this passage, but I will name just three things.

Talking point one. If we read the whole of Genesis 1 instead of just one verse, we see that it describes God's speech, thoughts, and actions, modeling them for us. It describes God's immediate, happy, good relationship with the whole planet, not just us. The creation of light gets a whole day at the beginning, and Sabbath gets a whole day at the end. But we humans share our day with many other creatures. By the time humans are first mentioned, late in the afternoon of the sixth day, the seas, and the skies, and the landscape are already teeming, just teeming, with life, so much so that the earth must have looked like a "Where's Waldo" picture, and the people on it very hard to find, probably unnoticed at first among the crowds.

Here is the forgotten context of the dominion verse. We are much more like the other creatures than like God. We are created, as they are. We aren't even the first to be blessed and told to multiply. We share the same food supply as other animals—the story says we were all—lions, tigers, bears, and Texas—we were all vegans to begin with, if you can imagine that, enjoying our vegetables. We were created as part of a much larger, delightful, good web of life. All of creation is not just scenery. It's our family.

But humans have often ignored this big picture and focused instead on dominion, thinking we are king of the mountain. Yet even that phrase "have dominion" (as in the NRSV) is misunderstood. It's not "dominate" or "have domination." More directly, according to the Hebrew, the command is "rule," or "take charge." What an overwhelming prospect this must have been to scripture's earliest readers, who lacked the numbers and petroleum power we now take for granted.

By the time this passage was written, domestic species had already been cultivated for thousands of years. Scripture's writers could not help noticing that they had inherited management of some other living beings. So they suggested a management theory. Don't dominate, but rule. Rule the way God rules us. Rule as a shepherd. When we say, "The Lord is my Shepherd" we don't go on to say, "God puts me in a factory farm and makes my life miserable from start to finish." Rather we say, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want, God makes me lie down in green pastures. God restores my soul." To take charge on a farm or in a household is to treat the animals with whom we live with respect and kindness. According to Scripture, there is no way you can get legitimately from this verse to "rape and pillage the earth and everything in it for human greed."

So, talking point one, Genesis 1 says we humans live in a much larger blessed family, the rest of creation. All the rest of life is our society. And point two, we rule whatever bits we do find ourselves in charge of not for our own benefit alone, but for the benefit of the whole realm.

And point three. If we read on, we find that in Genesis 2, the author is not at all satisfied with that whole dominion thing, even in a soft way. As Genesis 2 tells the story, the humans' original job is not to rule, but to serve. It's lost in most translations. But it's quite obvious in the Hebrew. In chapter 2 verse 15 the NRSV says that God put the first man in the garden of Eden to "till and keep it." But that's not right. The Hebrew word translated "till" there is not "till" at all. It's from the same root as the noun "servant," or "slave." God put the human in the garden to *serve* it. And not just to "keep" it either, but to *guard* it. Our original job, from which we have not yet been fired, is to "serve and preserve" the ground on which we live. Not domination, not even dominion according to this writer, but service.

This afternoon we'll have more specific talking points about climate change. But for now these are some talking points about the Bible and creation: We are creatures; we are only one of the species God delights in; and we are here to serve the earth and the other species.

Number two. Let's think about how we think. How we think is this: see number one about how we talk to others. Because the conversation we need to win with others is the same conversation we need to win with our own habitual selves. To one extent or another, we were all taught an anthropocentric, a human-centered, world view.

We might think, for example, that recycling is a nice idea. That thought might make us do something different sometimes, when we aren't too busy. But if we fundamentally think differently about our whole relationship to the earth, we'll start thinking not that recycling is nice, but that it is absolutely our job, our role, and our place on the earth, and the least we can do, given what a wonderfully rich and beautiful garden this earth is. If we see our place on the planet differently, if we change our habit of thought, then every single action is affected. We might start building our habits of thought by doing as the Psalmist says, paying attention to the glory that heaven and earth proclaim. Noticing when we look at a tree or hear a bird song or smell a flower and feel so fundamentally delighted. We love the earth, but we need a retraining program, to let this love for creation, this biophilia, as scientist E. O. Wilson calls it, guide our actions. That's a conversion process, day by day.

So number one, how we talk to other people about the human role on earth. And number two, how we ourselves think about our role on earth. And number three, how we act. Here it helps to use what is best and worst about our own human nature. We are creatures of habit, living within systems that aren't made for ecological sustainability. We can't just make ourselves a list of thirty things we will do differently starting tomorrow. It doesn't work. Because our habits are related to our systems. We have to change the systems. And then change the habit to match them. Piece by piece.

When our family set out to change the way our household operated to reflect our ecological commitments, we didn't tackle everything at once. Rather, we started a system-of-the-month club. Literally. One a month was doable. One month we bought clotheslines and installed them, changing the system. Then we changed the habits, and stopped using the dryer. Our gas bills decreased dramatically. Another month we replaced our old water heater with a tankless version. Our gas bills went down dramatically once again. Another month we had an energy

audit, and the next month we followed up by having insulation blown into the walls. This time our gas *and* electricity bills went down. Another month we stopped using paper napkins at the table and made designated napkin rings for each member of the family. And so on. There are a million things, but if we incorporate them one at a time we can get a lot of mileage more quickly than we may think. Last Friday, studying an electric bill, I realized that through a lot of small measures we had cut our power usage by more than half. That's not as impressive as I would like—I'd rather get down to zero—but it's ten times better, four times faster than the modest standards of the Kyoto agreement that our country has spent the last sixteen years not signing. We've all seen the long lists of things we can do to save energy and improve our habits. What I am suggesting is a doable system for changing the path we are on one bit at a time, persistently.

Along these lines, there is an excellent book called *Cooler Smarter: Practical Steps for Low-Carbon Living*, by the Union of Concerned Scientists. I think it's so good that I brought with me ten copies, some new and some gently used, that I will be very happy to sell one to whoever would like one after church or at the lunch and learn.

We can translate these incremental, persistent changes into what we do where we work and worship. Communal changes come more slowly, but the point is to be moving in the right direction. And before we know it, other people are doing it too, and suddenly there are bike paths in Jeffersonville, walking bridges across the river, water bottle refillers on Frankfort Avenue, cornfields full of windmills, smart grids, better cars, better laws, systemic changes that facilitate habit changes. This isn't easy, but it is doable. As the systems change, the habits change. As the habits change, the thinking changes. As the thinking changes, the systems change.

This not only doable. It's our job. We may think our other jobs of raising kids and making money are more important than this one, and we may feel harried and unable to take on one new thing. That's how I felt. Then I realized that there was no inheritance I could give my kids more fundamentally important than a sustainable place to live. If we ruin the earth, it doesn't matter how much money we have in the bank, because it won't buy us another one. But if we serve the earth and live rightly on it, it won't matter how much money we have in the bank either, because we will have what we need to survive, and survive well.

You may have heard the story about a boy in Malawi named William Kamkwamba. When he was fourteen years old he was forced to drop out of school because his family couldn't afford the \$80 tuition fee. So instead he went to the library and started reading a book called *Using Energy*. From this book and from things he found in the village scrap yard he built a windmill to power his family's home. He went on to build two more windmills and a solar-powered water pump to bring drinking water into his village. He ended up giving a TED talk in Nairobi and appearing on the Daily Show.

With our education and resources we can each do at least as well as William. We can figure this out if we care enough. The advertising industry is trying its very best to convince us that our job is to be consumers. But that's not our job. Our job is to serve the planet, and preserve it, and pass it on to future generations. And in that is our greatest joy as well.