

Care, Not Control

Genesis 1:1 -2:4a

June 7, 2020

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In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

And God said, “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

And God said, “Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, “Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.” And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

And God said, “Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.” And it was so. God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

And God said, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.” So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.” And it was so. God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

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.”

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. 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.”

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. 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.

God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. 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. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

Like so many other people I was fascinated to watch the launch of the SpaceX Crew Dragon capsule last week. It was an emotional experience in many ways as there have been both majestic and tragic liftoffs on that very same site. This launch, the first since 2011, was an inspirational reminder of what we can do and who we can be in stark contrast to the racial injustice, climate crisis, wealth disparity, health care costs, immigrant detention and the ongoing global wrestling with the political, medical, economic, and cultural implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, that we do to one another and to the earth.

Watching the launch now in 2020 brought me back to a launch in 1968, the launch of the Apollo 8. This was the very first trip to orbit around the moon, and everyone was paying attention. I remember seeing the grainy TV images and hearing the crackly radio sounds in mission control. On that Christmas Eve, astronauts, Frank Borman, Bill Anders and Jim Lovell, celebrated the extraordinary scientific achievement and human accomplishment by reading some ancient religious poetry. Even though the poetry was 3,000 years old, they were very familiar words that expressed joy, awe and wonder. Through the Apollo window earth was a giant ball of swirling blue, white, brown and green. This was the first time anyone could see the ‘vibrant, delicate, blue and white globe framed by the velvety blackness of space.’ Our home looked so beautiful, so mysterious, as they read these words:

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

And God said, “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

And God said, “Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.

Through the window of Apollo 8, through the bible reading shared by the astronauts, we all saw earth as God sees earth. We could imagine the breath of God sweeping across the void and blowing darkness into a shape, we could hear God calling Day and Night, Sky and Land, Earth and Seas into being. We could hear them all being called “good” as God created each of them one by one.

The astronauts did not read more of the Genesis passage of the creation story, but the view of earth from space could easily continue the passage for us. We could imagine God calling forth vegetation and trees, the sun, moon and stars, and the creatures of the water, land and sky. We could imagine rhythms of wildness and tenderness shaping all living creatures into being, including humanity created in the image and likeness of God, and as humanity was being blessed with dominion of all the earth. God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good. God saw *everyone* that God had made in the divine likeness, and indeed, it was very good.

Humanity is indeed blessed with dominion, a responsibility that all too often is misunderstood to be domination, power over rather than to care for. We are tasked with stewardship for all the earth, yet all too often we exploit rather than protect, conquer rather than nurture. In the original Hebrew of the Jewish Scriptures, the word that has been translated as ‘dominion over’ is not quite what *radah* means. According to Ellen Davis, a professor of Bible and Practical Theology, and environmental activist, a more accurate translation might be ‘they may exercise skilled mastery among, or with respect to.’ We forget that on the fifth day—before humanity existed- God created all the creatures of the water, land and sky, and called them to be fruitful and to multiply because God valued them. “We fulfill our role in the created order only when we recognize our responsibility to help perpetuate other creatures’ fruitfulness.” How we care for and respect the earth is also how we care for one another. We are all connected. This misunderstanding of dominion is not new, although our science to understand our impact is certainly and increasingly new. Augustine, a fourth century theologian and philosopher declared that ‘what God sees as wondrously good, humans should also see as wondrously good; they should move beyond their greed and value natural beings intrinsically for themselves and their place in the orderly scheme of creation.’

Created in the image of God we have the moral choice to place science before balance sheets, to be attentive to our consumer consumption, to decrease our carbon footprint, to see our role in decreasing the dangers of climate change. ‘Dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth,’ is about our care, not our control. A side effect of the Covid-19 pandemic is this wake-up call, as even in the three months that earth has been just about closed, the earth has shown signs of healing and restoration. We have a renewed opportunity to accept our God-given blessing to care for, not control over, all that God created and called good.

We now have constant images available from the international space station. What might we be inspired to care for as we see earth from a distance, as we see earth as the astronauts saw it in 1968 when they read those ancient words,

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters?

I want to close with a ‘Prayer for the Earth’ by writer and civil rights activist Barbara Deming. Will you pray with me.....

Spirit of love
That flows against our flesh
Sets it trembling
Moves across it as across grass
Erasing every boundary that we accept
And swings the doors of our lives wide—
 This is a prayer I sing:
 Save our perishing earth!
Spirit that hears each one of us,
Hears all that is—
Listens, listens, hears us out—
 Inspire us now!
Our own pulse beats in every stranger's throat,
And also there within the flowered ground
beneath our feet,
 And—teach us to listen!—
We can hear it in water,
in wood, and even in stone.
We are earth of this earth,
and we are bone of its bone.
 This is a prayer I sing, for we
 have forgotten this and so the
 earth is perishing. Amen.