

September 13, 2020
Season of Creation—Year A (Spirit)—Week 1 (Forest)
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Genesis 2:4b-22
Psalm 139:13-16
Acts 17:22-28
John 3:1-16

Let's begin with a short excerpt of a poem by Wendell Berry:

Stay away from anything
that obscures the place it is in.
There are no unsacred places;
there are only sacred places
and desecrated places.¹

On Wednesday afternoon, I was perusing the New York Times online and saw this photograph:²



It's a photo of the Bay Bridge, taken in San Francisco, on Wednesday morning at 10:42 a.m.

Most of the western United States is on fire. This week brought a load of disturbing news from California, Washington, and especially Oregon. Apparently Northwest Oregon is no longer too soggy to burn.³

Today is the first Sunday of our four-week observance of the Season of Creation. It's sadly appropriate that it happens to be Forest Sunday. I'd intended celebration, but today feels more like lament. We Americans are finally getting a harsh dose of the calamity that had already begun to affect poorer, browner people around the globe. One would forgive them for thinking that it's about time we shared in the suffering. After all, we Americans are vastly disproportionately responsible.

Yes, the science has long been clear: climate change is real, and it is caused by human activity. This is a fact that we no longer have the option to ignore. And yet, somehow, many Americans remain in denial. Embarrassingly, irresponsibly, American climate change deniers are disproportionately Christian; and those Christian climate change deniers are disproportionately evangelical.⁴

This week I did some Googling on evangelical Christians and the environment. The results made me want to laugh and then to cry. I found not only simple denial that humans cause climate change, but also disturbing scare-mongering around what most of us would consider mainstream attitudes toward the environment. Consider, for example, a video series released in 2010 called “Resisting the Green Dragon.” It was endorsed supported by the likes of Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council,⁵ groups I’d previously associated primarily with anti-LGBTQ activism. Let’s take a look at the advertising trailer for that series.⁶

[Show Trailer for “Resisting the Green Dragon.”]

I could but won’t address that point-by-point. I will say that the book accompanying that video series is titled *Resisting the Green Dragon: Dominion, Not Death* [emphasis added].⁷ The word *dominion* comes up a lot when conservative evangelicals talk about the environment. Of dominion, they’re still quite proudly claiming an interpretation long viewed by many as woefully problematic. The source of is, of course, Genesis 1, the story of the six days of creation. We happened to hear it in its entirety back in June, on Trinity Sunday. The text says that on the sixth day God created “living creatures of every kind,”⁸ and continues with this:

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.”⁹

That passage has been used to prop up colonialist activity around the globe and expansionist activity across our nation. It has been used to justify the subjugation not just of land but also of creatures, including even other-than-white humans conveniently judged not to be actually human. I would argue that, when the biblical authors described human dominion, they could not have imagined either such historical exploitation or today’s potential for the complete destruction of God’s good creation.

Of course, as we know, it’s easy to read into a biblical text exactly what one wants to hear; the scriptures have been used to justify a whole lot of bad behavior. The problem might not be Genesis or Christianity; it might be the misuse of religion by the forces of wealth, something the Bible clearly and frequently condemns. For social media purposes, Zion National Park observed last week as Parasite Week. Because I follow the park on Instagram I saw photos and tales of horrific creatures that bodily inhabit their hosts, consuming them from the inside out. It seems a fitting and maybe even helpful image, and with that diagnosis, maybe it’s not too late to seek treatment.

I've mentioned before my appreciation for the weekly public radio program *On Being with Krista Tippett*.¹⁰ The program's website says this: "*On Being* ... takes up the great questions of meaning in 21st-century lives and at the intersection of spiritual inquiry, science, social *healing*, and the arts. What does it mean to be human, how do we want to live, and who will we be to each other?" In each episode, Tippett (a Yale Divinity School graduate) interviews an academic, writer, artist, or activist. In the last five months, at least three of those interviews included at least brief conversation about Genesis 1 and its disastrous result for the natural world. The three were: Christian theologian and Hebrew Bible scholar Ellen Davis,¹¹ primatologist and anthropologist Jane Goodall,¹² and biologist and essayist Robin Wall Kimmerer.¹³

Each of these interviews was thought-provoking in its own way, and I commend them to you. But here's the bigger picture they have helped reveal: though I consider myself to be environmentally aware, the default orientation toward creation that I inherited remains myopic. I want and need to be shaken loose. Because we are in a crisis, I need to be shaken loose in a big way. Here's a reminder of the shaking loose that we all need: the scientific consensus long was that only humans can make and use tools. Jane Goodall was the first person to challenge this, as a result of her observations of chimpanzees in the 1960s. Now we take it for granted that some animals make and use tools. Scientists continue to upturn what we think we know about nature; we can use that to upturn what we think we know about God.

Speaking of being shaken loose, I became a fan of Robin Wall Kimmerer over the summer, after reading her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Kimmerer is Professor of Environmental and Forest Biology at the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry. Most particularly, she's a bryologist—she studies mosses. So she has her science credentials. In addition—and this is important to her work—she's an enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. Her writing combines two ways of knowing—scientific and indigenous. *Braiding Sweetgrass* describes an entirely different way of thinking about the natural world and the human relationship with it. I found much of it to be revelatory.

I want to play a clip from *On Being*. First you'll hear Krista Tippett's voice, and then Robin Wall Kimmerer's voice. It's a little long, but let's give it a try.¹⁴

[The On Being interview with Robin Wall Kimmerer, from 12:50 to 19:05]

Even non-Christian perspectives like Kimmerer's can shake us loose, setting us from a lot of accrued detritus. That's helpful and even necessary as we redeem Genesis 1 on the path to redeeming all creation. Christian theologian/scholar Ellen Davis describes Genesis 1 as a "liturgical poem."¹⁵ We might also turn to the Genesis text that we heard today, which is from Genesis 2. I don't know how the biblical literalists explain it, but there are actually *two* creation stories in Genesis, each stemming from a separate oral tradition. Today's reading was from the second of the two. In that story, God creates the first person "from the dust of the ground."¹⁶ In the original Hebrew, God creates *adam* from *adamah*. God places that earth human in a verdant garden—a garden that, interestingly for today—contains trees. God's great story of salvation is God calling us to return to that garden. We do so by participating in the redemption and reconciliation of all God's good creation.

Earlier I mentioned our celebration turning to lament. Today we grieve lost human life, lost animal life, lost forest life. We are not done losing the innocence of that original garden. Let our lament also be celebration, because we lament that which we love. Even in grief, creation sings. With open eyes and open hearts and open voices, we more fully join its symphony.

Notes

¹ From Wendell Berry, “How to be a Poet.” The complete poem is available online from the Poetry Foundation at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/41087/how-to-be-a-poet> (accessed September 13, 2020).

² This image was in the story by Thomas Fuller, “Wildfires Blot out Sun in the Bay Area, *The New York Times*, September 9, 2020, available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/09/us/pictures-photos-california-fires.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article> (accessed September 13, 2020).

³ Christopher Flavelle and Henry Fountain, “In Oregon, a New Climate Menace: Fires Raging Where They Don’t Usually Burn,” *The New York Times*, September 12, 2020, available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/12/climate/oregon-wildfires.html?&moduleDetail=top-news-2&action=click&contentCollection=Science®ion=Footer&module=TopNews&version=WhatsNext&contentID=WhatsNext&pgtype=Blogs> (accessed September 13, 2020).

⁴ See “Religion and Views on Climate and Energy Issues,” Pew Research Center, October 22, 2015, available online at <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2015/10/22/religion-and-views-on-climate-and-energy-issues/> (accessed September 13, 2020).

⁵ See “Sounding the Alarm about Dangerous Environmental Extremism: Explosive New DVD Series, Resisting The Green Dragon, Now Being Distributed Nationally And Abroad,” a press release from the Cornwall Alliance, November 10, 2010, available online at <https://cornwallalliance.org/2010/11/sounding-the-alarm-about-dangerous-environmental-extremism-explosive-new-dvd-series-resisting-the-green-dragon-now-being-distributed-nationally-and-abroad/> (accessed September 13, 2020).

⁶ The trailer for *Resisting the Green Dragon* is available on the film website, <https://www.resistingthegreendragon.com/> (accessed September 13, 2020).

⁷ James Wanliss, *Resisting the Green Dragon: Dominion, Not Death* (Burke, VA: The Cornwall Alliance for the Stewardship of Creation, 2010).

⁸ Genesis 1:24, NRSV.

⁹ Genesis 1:26-28, NRSV.

¹⁰ See the website for *On Being with Krista Tippett*, available at <https://onbeing.org/series/podcast/> (accessed September 13, 2020).

¹¹ “Wendell Berry and Ellen Davis: The Art of Being Creatures,” an episode of *On Being with Krista Tippett*, available at <https://onbeing.org/programs/wendell-berry-ellen-davis-the-art-of-being-creatures/> (accessed September 13, 2020).

¹² “Jane Goodall: What it Means to be Human,” an episode of *On Being with Krista Tippett*, available at <https://onbeing.org/programs/jane-goodall-on-what-it-means-to-be-human/> (accessed September 13, 2020).

¹³ “Robin Wall Kimmerer: The Intelligence of Plants,” an episode of *On Being with Krista Tippett*, available at <https://onbeing.org/programs/robin-wall-kimmerer-the-intelligence-of-plants/> (accessed September 13, 2020).

¹⁴ Kimmerer with Tippett.

¹⁵ Kimmerer with Davis.

¹⁶ Genesis 2:7, NRSV.