

September 19, 2021  
Season of Creation—Year A (Word)—Week 2 (Humanity)  
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Genesis 1:26-28  
Psalm 8  
Philippians 2:1-8  
Mark 10:41-45

From 1989 to 1999, I lived in Seattle, Washington. One of the most amazing things you can do in western Washington is visit the Olympic Peninsula. You can actually manage it as a day trip from Seattle, though it makes for a very full day. You just take the ferry from downtown Seattle across Puget Sound, and then drive northwest to pick up Highway 101, a mostly two-lane highway that loops counterclockwise over the north side of the peninsula and then back down the west side. As you go, two short jogs into Olympic National Park are essential. The first takes you to Hurricane Ridge, which offers broad vistas of what might be the most gorgeous craggy snow-capped peaks on Earth. The second takes you to the Hoh Rain Forest, where you can walk in an emerald glow among giant ancient trees shrouded with moss and dripping with moisture. Keep on going, and you reach a stretch of highway that hugs the wilderness coastline of Pacific Ocean. It’s amazing to see so many different ecosystems in such a short time.

The Olympic Peninsula is incredible—and also a little disturbing. That’s because there’s another thing you’ll see along Highway 101: clear-cuts. Actually, there are old-growth forests and clear-cuts along many of the secondary highways threading through western Washington. In my ten years out there, I saw a lot of both, and every clear-cut I saw was jarring. You’ll be driving along, massive, massive trees on either side. Then you round a curve or top a hill, and suddenly, the landscape offers only low stumps and exposed shrubs as far as you can see.

When I lived there, environmentalists around the Pacific Northwest were working hard to the stop the clear-cutting of old-growth forests. It was in the late 1990s that activist Julia “Butterfly” Hill lived for two years in a redwood tree in Northern California.<sup>1</sup> In that entire region, things got pretty ugly between the environmentalists and the loggers. In Washington State, the staunchest anti-environmentalist sentiment came from the small towns on the west side of the Olympic Peninsula. The energy out there always made me a little edgy when I passed through.

Back then, one way that clear-cuts got curbed was through federal protection of the northern spotted owl, which was declared an endangered species. The loggers, concerned for their livelihoods, accused the environmentalists of valuing owls more than people. Owls provided an avenue for preserving old-growth forests, but it was always about more than owls. Spotted owls are also found in Muir Woods National Monument, which is in Marin County in Northern California. I’ve also been lucky enough to visit there. This is from the Muir Woods website:

Vital indicators of diversity, Northern Spotted Owls have been called an “indicator” species because their presence in a forest is a gauge of the ecological health of the habitat. When an area is suitable for the Spotted Owl then it is able to support a diversity of other plants and animals. ... The persistence of the owl population indicates the diversity and vitality of the forest ecosystem.<sup>2</sup>

Time has proven just problematic clear-cutting is. Besides the outright destruction of animal habitat, there's extensive erosion of soils, which degrades the land and the rivers, and makes those rivers uninhabitable by salmon. Now there's also evidence that clear-cutting reduces the forest's resistance to wildfires and contributes to climate change. I woke just this morning to the news that wildfires have reached the very bounds of Sequoia National Park, which holds some of the largest trees in the world. It turns out that, even if you don't care about owls, even if you are concerned only about humans, clear-cutting is still a terrible idea. Way back in the 1990s, scientists knew that northern spotted owls were indicator species of the vitality of the forest ecosystem. Maybe they're indicator species for the vitality of the human ecosystem, too.

In today's reading from Genesis, we picked up where we left off last week. Last week, God created everything except humankind. This week, God creates humankind. With this, God's initial great burst of creativity will draw to a close.

So much of the creation story from Genesis is touchingly lovely. But this part ... this part is complicated. Because we know what humankind has been up to for the last few hundred years, it's hard not to wish that this part was different. These three verses have been used to justify so much harm. All that hinges, of course, on one word: *dominion*. Some Christians have claimed that this conferred dominion allows their widespread exploitation of the Earth's non-human resources. This has been part of the history of North America since its occupation by European people. Some Christians have even gone so far as to categorize some humans as non-human, thus making them also available for exploitation. You can draw a line from there to the genocide of Native Americans and the enslavement of Africans.

*Dominion* is the translation of a Hebrew word used elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures to denote a ruling over, almost always in the sense of governing. Maybe that gives us a little opening: there's a big gap between *governing* and *exploitation*. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures God esteems *righteous governing* and condemns *unrighteous exploitation*. After all, human beings don't belong to those who rule over them; instead they belong to God. Creation doesn't belong to that which rules over it; creation belongs to God. Human beings are supposed to have not their own but rather God's interests in mind. God's interests require honoring and preserving everything that God created and saw was good.

The Season of Creation organizers designate today as Humanity Sunday. The idea is to highlight that humanity is a *part of* creation, and not *apart from* creation. To help make that point, let's turn to Robin Wall Kimmerer, who has been really helpful to me. She turned up in my sermon last year at this time. I've been thinking about her a lot, ever since I read her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, which I can't recommend highly enough. Kimmerer is a biology professor who studies mosses. She's also an enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. Her writing combines two ways of knowing—scientific and indigenous. It challenges accepted thinking about the natural world and the human relationship with the natural world.

In an interview on the public radio program *On Being with Krista Tippett*, Kimmerer said this:

In talking with my environment students, they wholeheartedly agree that they love the earth. But when I ask them the question of “Does the earth love you back?” there’s a great deal of hesitation and reluctance and eyes cast down, like, oh, gosh, I don’t know. Are we even allowed to talk about that? That would mean that the earth had agency and that I was not an anonymous little blip on the landscape, that I was known by my home place.

So it’s a very challenging notion, but I bring it to the garden and think about the way that when we, as human people, demonstrate our love for one another, it is in ways that I find very much analogous to the way that the earth takes care of us, is when we love somebody, we put their wellbeing at the top of a list and we want to feed them well. We want to nurture them. We want to teach them. We want to bring beauty into their lives. We want to make them comfortable and safe and healthy. That’s how I demonstrate love, in part, to my family, and that’s just what I feel in the garden, as the earth loves us back in beans and corn and strawberries. Food could taste bad. It could be bland and boring, but it isn’t. There are these wonderful gifts that the plant beings, to my mind, have shared with us. And it’s a really liberating idea to think that the earth could love us back, but it also opens the notion of reciprocity that with that love and regard from the earth comes a real deep responsibility.<sup>3</sup>

Maybe, instead of *dominion*, the word that we need right now is *responsibility*. And maybe that fits with the new covenant given to us by God in Christ. Consider, for example, today’s readings from Philippians and Mark. I hear in them not *authoritarian dominion* but instead *humble responsibility*.

Aside from a surprisingly bountiful crop of backyard basil, I’m not gardening right now. But I have been trying to get time outside, and to really pay attention when I do. I have especially enjoyed this year’s nationwide bumper crop of wild mushrooms. This summer I’ve also seen a lot of a wild plant I’d never seen before: ghost pipes. It doesn’t even seem possible now that I never saw them before, and they seem to be everywhere this year. If you’ve never seen ghost pipes, I give you permission to use your smart phone to look them up right now, because you’ve never seen anything like it. Ghost pipe plants are white, because they lack chlorophyll. Because they lack chlorophyll, they can’t conduct photosynthesis. So they get the nutrients they need from tree roots via mycorrhizal fungi. It’s all part of that mycorrhizal network that we’ve started hearing so much about.

Native Americans used ghost pipe to treat severe pain, both physical and emotional. Supposedly it *works* for pain, but it doesn't *stop* your pain. Rather it gives you distance from your pain, allowing you to stand beside it, so that you can work with it and deal with it. Yes, in all my years and locations of hiking around the country, I had never seen ghost pipes before. But this year I've seen a lot of them, and I've been wondering why. Maybe it's a little far-fetched, but thinking about Robin Wall Kimmerer, I've started to wonder whether it's possible that with ghost pipes Earth is trying to help us out. We talk about storms like Hurricane Ida having fury, so why not talk about ghost pipes as having care? In this time of trial, maybe the idea is to allow us to stand beside our pain, so that we can understand it and deal with it. Maybe that's one way we can get some traction for moving forward in this time of climate crisis.

All the parts of creation really are interconnected, in complicated and mysterious ways that scientists are telling us more about every day. Maybe all species are indicator species for all the other species. With humble responsibility for all creation, we seek to gain deeper understanding of the interdependencies that bind us—for the sake of humanity, and for the sake of the world.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Julia Butterfly Hill,” *Britannica*, available online at <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Julia-Butterfly-Hill> (accessed September 19, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> “Life of Spotted Owls,” from the National Park Service website for Muir Woods National Monument, available online at <https://www.nps.gov/muwo/learn/nature/life-of-spotted-owls.htm> (accessed September 19, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Robin Wall Kimmerer, in an interview with Krista Tippett, on “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 19, 2021).