Genesis, Revised

A Sermon Preached by Pilar Millhollen, April 22nd, 2018

Readings: from "Reading the Bible in the Context of the Ecological Threats of Our Time," (Richard Bauckham); Genesis 1:20 – 31

My friend Christophe and I used to share a room on tour when we were doing Chicago the Musical. Last season, while we were out on the road for maybe our fourth stint together, Christophe started to notice something and teased me about it: "You are funny, stuffing groceries in your purse and carrying them in your arms. It's not gonna kill you to get one plastic bag!" I responded, "I'm good about packing but I didn't think about bringing my Trader Joe's reusable bags with me on tour, so I don't want to be more wasteful since we're in all these hotels all the time." I would take my coffee mug with me and fill it at the hotel breakfasts so I didn't use a paper cup, and since Christophe preferred to eat with real dinnerware, we used to share a small set and wash it in the sink so we weren't constantly eating off of plastic and paper and tossing it in the trash without considering the waste we were creating going from city to city. But Christophe would roll his eyes every time we'd get to work at a theater and there would be disposable water bottles for the company – he would try to hand me one and I'd go "NO! No more plastic water bottles!" I had developed a plastic bottle aversion that rivaled Joan Crawford's horror with wire hangers in Mommy Dearest. Finally, Christophe said, "for heaven's sake, Pilar, you can recycle them, you know." "Actually, Christophe, you can't," I replied, "which is why I find it so alarming people use so many." See, we've been told for so long that the solution to our excessive amount of waste is recycling that we've forgotten that "reduce" and "reuse" came before "recycle." But like anything material on this tiny blue marble that we find ourselves inhabiting, the recycling that we've come to believe is the solution for our continued burgeoning of population and production is most often a pass-off on the way to becoming regular old garbage, driven by economic systems that believe in continuous growth. So what does that look like in concrete terms? Let's take a peek so we can empower ourselves with a better understanding of our impact. (Show "The Story of Bottled Water")

So that's "The Story of Bottled Water." Since this short film was made, researchers have discovered a new layer: that bottled water now contains twice as many plastic particles as tap water. We've all seen the photos of plastic waste in our oceans, and the effect it's having on wildlife. Plastic waste is of course just one example of many aspects of the global ecological crisis. But it's a crucial one because it gets at something that is not just about the impact of our waste on the planet and its non-human creatures. When we see that little graphic of oil pumping out of the earth to manufacture our plastics, or a bulldozer dumping plastic in the literal backyard of a family in India, it connects us to the theological underpinnings that we must grapple with in this crisis. That a convenience for one of us may be a calamity for another. That the creation of one small object in our age of technology now has an impact akin to what's called the butterfly effect – a theory that uses the example of how one butterfly flapping its wings at a certain place and time can cause a tornado in a distant place weeks later. So what's theological about this? It's scientific, it's dramatic, to be sure – but it's ethical in that we now have the capacity to know the effect we're having; and it's theological in how we respond to it based on our commitment to a divine presence as the ground of all being.

But the call to building our theology to include ecology hasn't really been very obvious in the largest world religions, and it requires some close reading and revising of our old constructs. Traditionally, Judaism and Christianity have been about the worst at this, and I

blame our first Genesis creation story, because as you'll remember there are two, and they vary greatly. What's captured our imaginations in the first story is a command that we believe God has given us, kabash and radah. The Hebrew word kabash is commonly translated as "to subdue," or "bring into bondage," and radah is translated "to rule over," or "to dominate." Hence we have come to the one sentence that has most impacted our vision and treatment of our creation, which is verse 28: "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." But here's the thing: even if we took this verse as our primary guidance in humanity's relation to the rest of creation, say we take it at face value apart from the other parts of the story, we are still left to answer to moral transgression…not against the non-human creation, but against each other. Either way you slice it, our version of subduing and dominating has grossly impacted humans as much as it has impacted everything non-human. So we can no longer read this story without relating it to what we have been and where we are going if we are to be faithful to both history and to our God. So let's return to the text again, and try to understand the entire passage: verse 20 gives us, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky," and then God creates all these creatures. But verse 22 follows up with, "God blessed them, saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.'" Funny, isn't it, that we tend to forget that God told the animals in the sky and the seas the exact same thing God tells humanity after we are created – to be fruitful and multiply. So let's hold this command in our consciousness as we read on to God's creation of us: "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." Okay, so here's our first command that humanity's got more control than any other creature. It's as if God has said, here's the creation, and hey humanity, I'm going to make you upper management, because the divine council and I can't take care of everything. You're also responsible to make sure everything's okay on this planet. So God creates humankind in God's image, "male and female he created them," as the text says – no Eve out of Adam in this version of the story – and the author then repeats God's refrain to the birds and the sea creatures, but adds one thing: "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." It's hard to exegete this sentence any other way in terms of the meaning of those words, kabash and radah. Where our theology has fallen short though is that we have too often held this up as singular in our relationship to the earth – a kind of loose sense of stewardship that has aversely affected our lived impact on how we treat the resources and living things with which we share this planet. But rather than understand this verse as a summation of God's intent for our relationship to creation, if we read the entire story itself, it becomes quite clear that this is one aspect of a much larger reality that God is bringing forth. Listen to what God says immediately following this sentence: "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" – this is to us, the humans – and then God says: "And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, and everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." When I read this this last week, it was as if for the first time. God gives the exact same commandment to us and to the animals, right after telling humanity to subdue and dominate. Hearing this, we must take into account the gravity of what God charges us with: we may be upper management,

but our job is not to exploit, but to protect the rights of every other living thing upon this earth. Richard Bauckham, who wrote the essay from which we heard our first reading, points this out as a theological motif: "We come again and again to that refrain, 'God saw that it was good'" he writes, and continues, "The narrative is telling us: every part of God's creation has value in itself for God. So when we get to the creation of humans on the sixth day and we read God's command to us to have dominion over the creatures, we already know that what God is entrusting to our care is something of priceless value." Something of priceless value. It's something we may have intellectualized but not something we've fully internalized. And it's a weighty charge; even weightier when we consider the last words of the sixth day, which ends our passage. The author writes, "And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good." We begin and end with God's creative intent and production of everything as not just good, but very good. With this complete reading, we begin to crack open a more fully integrated understanding that we are but a part, though powerful, of a creation that has inherent value in and of itself. We cannot call ourselves people born of a creative force that is good and justify our excessive use of plastics. We cannot fully live out our faith as people of justice and liberation when our freedom to consume takes away from the freedom of our neighbors across the globe to have access to clean water, enough food, and basic living conditions. And we cannot expect to usher in justice, equity and compassion in human relations when our way of living treats the non-human creation without regard for its intrinsic value and contributes to the continued degradation of humanity itself.

Here's where the good news lies: in the continued efforts across the globe by ordinary people like us to do what we can, in different ways. When we do look at the problem globally, it becomes so overwhelming it's easy to dismiss that any action we take will have any kind of an impact. Here's what I would say in response to that: yes, individual efforts are NOT enough. But just as the butterfly effect illustrates negative impact, so too can it result in positive impact. It is up to us to claim accountability through the spirit of the living God, who has placed upon our hearts the knowledge that when we act in the spirit of the gospel, the key word here being ACT, we are affecting the whole by responding individually to the interconnected web of existence of which we are all a part. One person can move one other, and that person can move two more, and outward and outward. And it's in that movement that transformation takes place. Last week Global Citizen magazine wrote that after the popular nature journalist David Attenborough urged the public to reduce plastic use on his television series "Blue Planet," three major name brand companies have committed to massively reducing their plastic waste. Waitrose, a major grocer in Great Britain, is no longer treating their loyal customers to complimentary coffee and tea, only offering it to those who bring their own reusable cups. Global accounting firm KPMG is phasing out all plastic water cups and cutlery at 22 of their offices, supplying their employees with free metal water bottles – at a savings of $85,000 a year. Even Nestle, who has been a major contributor to our global plastic problem, has publicly announced their plan to make all packaging recyclable or reusable by 2025. We'll see, but it's actions like these that are responses from consumers, rippling outward by a shift in not just our intent, but our lived behavior.

Transformation of this kind is a spiritual practice. It requires a discipline both internal and external – internally, to pay attention to what the creation needs from us, and externally, to actually do it. But the wonderful thing about spiritual practice is that it is enriched by the shared experience of doing it in community – it becomes easier, and offers greater rewards, when we do it together. Like any other aspect of faith in community, ecological discipline is something we

can help each other with in order to shore up our own commitment to shifts, whether small or large. My friend Christophe isn't a religious person, but we had a remarkable impact on each other through the tour as we started holding the other accountable to our mantra of less waste. I didn't want to let him down, and I started to see that he didn't either – he went home on a day off and proudly brought back bags for each of us to use as we shopped together; we used as little air conditioning as possible when it started to get warm, and he stopped grabbing those Poland Spring bottles at work. He even started to make choices about what he wanted to buy based on packaging, and ate less meat because of the impact of factory farming on climate change. I'm nowhere near where I want to be, but if you'll hold me accountable, I promise to do the same for all of you. It is a promise no different than our commitment to radical inclusion at the table of justice and mercy. It is a promise that we strayed from in later parts of Genesis, when we began to forget who we were: borne out of, inextricably linked to, forever entwined with, the holy creation of the living God. This Earth Day, may we return to God. Return to God by recognizing the ground that holds us up, the water that sustains us, and treating it as though our lives, and the lives of our children's children's children, depended on it. Because they do.