

“NABOTH & THE GULF”

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The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it;

O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the Earth!

When we look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established,

we cannot help but wonder:

what are human beings that you are even mindful of them,
mortals that you so care for them?

Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor.

You have placed us on this Earth

and given us dominion over the work of your hands.

The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,

the world, and those who live in it; *(Paraphrase, Ps 8:1, 3-6a + Ps 24:1)*

Well, that's basically my sermon! You see, my premise is that Naboth and his vineyard, in our Old Testament reading, and the Gulf of Mexico in the news today, all belong to God. And all have been plundered.

Naboth was killed. His vineyard was stolen. And the Gulf is just the latest example of humans defiling the earth.

*The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it . . .*

And this is not an anti-BP sermon — at least not exclusively. For without society's insatiable appetite for oil and the products produced from oil, BP would not have found this risky drilling to have been profitable. And we know that BP's motivation is profit. And, of course, they are not alone in that.

But our role has been to use fossil fuels, the rainforest, animals, minerals, etc., etc. with abandon. We are generally removed from the devastation which lies at the point of origin for these resources. We don't depend on the polluted groundwater in Bhopal, India, 25 years after Union Carbide's pesticide leak, and our livelihoods are not caught up in the related lawsuits still pending.¹ We don't see the mutilated carcasses of endangered gorillas, killed for bushmeat in the Congo, nor is the care of their orphans our immediate concern.² We aren't dependent upon fishing in Alaska for our living, so why should the compromised foodchain along 1300 miles of coastline concern us?³ Why should we care that only about 3200 tigers remain in the wild, and that 3 of 9 tiger species are already extinct, as long as there are tigers in our zoos to entertain us?⁴ Not even most ocean-going vessels come across the Great Pacific Garbage Dump floating in the northern Pacific Ocean.⁵ But that garbage patch is predominantly comprised of plastics . . . and plastics are made from oil. Plastic bags, plastic tableware, plastic pens, plastic CD cases, plastic flowerpots, plastic fast-food toys, plastic storage boxes, plastic ink cartridges, plastic fan blades . . . you can complete this list far more creatively than I've begun it.

*The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it . . .*

Ah, but now — the disappearance of our vacation beaches along the Gulf, and our inexpensive seafood suddenly becoming scarce — now those are concerns that begin to come to our attention — even before the devastating thought that the Jersey Shore fishing industry might suffer from the BP oil spill. How many families' livelihoods, traditions, and homes are being sacrificed to our demand for oil? How many species will be polluted by floating “globs of snot” as it's been described? When will the marshlands recover — or will they?

We know that nature has shown the ability to heal herself in the many repeating cycles throughout geological history. However, the resulting biology is rarely the same as before whatever crisis is overcome, and the length of time to achieve renewal is measured not in months or years, and sometimes not even in decades.

To try to grasp the magnitude of these cycles, Kim Winchell has written,

“Here's one way to try to grasp our place in time, in the history of the universe and the Earth. Begin by imagining a ten-volume encyclopedia set. This will represent the 5 billion-year history of Earth (which followed 8-10 billion years of the universe's development). Each volume of Earth's history holds 500 pages; each page represents 1 million years. In such an encyclopedia set, life—in the form of the first cellular life—does not appear until volume 8, with much of that volume devoted to plants, though reptiles reach their peak about page 440. Humans come along fairly late in this story ...page 499, of the last of the ten volumes! In this model (configured to stop at the year 2000), the time of organized human civilization (the past 6,000 years) is represented by **the final two words on the very last page.**”⁶

“The astonishing thing is the last syllable of the last word of the last volume. Here humans turned the great tide against life itself. Here the process of slowly closing down major life-systems began at human hands. ... It is astonishing that an organic world aeons in the making could be so easily jeopardized by the species that claims to master its secrets and care for it as a watchful steward. ... Alongside our miniscule tenure the thing most astonishing is our gargantuan imprint. These are the ten volumes of earth to date. We begin volume 11 as the twentieth century comes to an end.”⁷

*The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it . . .*

A large portion of the responsibility for the recovery of the ecosystem and the economic base of the Gulf Coast does lie with BP and BP's associated companies. They should be held accountable . . . as long as they remain viable entities. And, in the government's role to “promote the general Welfare,” I believe that the government has some responsibility as well, though I wouldn't hazard a comment about precisely what that role might be. ☺

And just as some would argue the role of the government (in either direction), some would also say this is no concern of the church. And yet, scripture speaks loudly that we are stewards or shepherd-kings of God's creation. Hear these 2 passages:

Psalm 8:(6a): “You have placed us on this Earth and given us **dominion** over the work of your hands.”
Genesis 1:26-27: “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;“

“Dominion” in Genesis, especially, should be interpreted as stewardship, nurture, husbandry, and responsibility. (The explanation for interpreting “dominion” in this way involves a lengthy examination of the entire passage in the original Hebrew. And if you’re interested, that will be in the copy of the sermon online. But let me simply say — the most respected scholars of our time would interpret it this way.)

So once again, it falls to us as individuals and as a community of faith, as well as responsible citizens of our city, county, state, and nation. In order to moderate our need for off-shore drilling, for drilling in the Alaska wilderness, and for mining coal in ways that are known to be detrimental to human health, every one of us in the developed countries must take the lead. Just as I’ve said those who can afford to purchase organic, range-fed, pesticide-free food have a responsibility to do so in order to influence the market so that healthy products will become more accessible to our neighbors with less disposable income, I also submit that our country – and her citizens – must take the sacrificial route to diminish our demands on the earth’s resources, especially if we expect the developing nations to make similar hard choices.

As individuals, you know what needs to be done. As songwriter Mary Lu Walker wrote, “Use it up, wear it out, make it do, do without!” Or as someone observed just yesterday at the Bordentown Green Fair, “it’s not such a high-tech thing . . . it’s really very simple . . . to live more like our parents and grandparents did.” Not everyone can wash oil off of a pelican, not everyone can offer alternative work to a fisherman, but we can all do something.

I don’t pretend that it’s easy or that I have it wrapped up myself. I just went on a catalog spending spree for some new summer clothes and some household items . . . and some of them did come in with “made in China” impressed on them, letting me know the environmental standards and working conditions for these items may not have been appropriate or humane. I have a half-dozen reusable shopping bags, but when I get to the grocery or drugstore check-out, I often realize those bags are in the car trunk. I do recycle rather stringently, and I’ve learned that recycled aluminum cans and plastic bottles allow the manufacture of new ones to require far less energy than starting from scratch. Much of my furniture and clothing are from various stages in my “former life”, but the new vinyl bathroom accessories and new fluffy towels and all the pet paraphernalia are recent purchases. I’m sure your stories are variations on mine.

But as a church, as a faith community, this is where there is strength in numbers, and where it is faithful to apply environmental standards to our witness in the community and the world. One of the six “Great Ends of the Church” is “The exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.” I hope that in the days and weeks and months ahead, as we discern our congregation’s evolving ministry, that you will help me seek manageable ways that we can be that witness — environmentally, as well as spiritually and justly. That is the challenge before us.

Notes on Genesis 1:26-28:

Ps 8 - *mashal* - to cause to rule (Youngs Concordance)

to reign, to be superior in power, authority, and dominion, as a governor; dominion, rule, jurisdiction (Wilson's OT Word Studies)

Gen 1:26, 28 - *radah* - to rule, tread down (Youngs Concordance)

To tread, to tread down; to have dominion, to rule, to bear rule, over any one (Wilson's OT Word Studies)

Brueggeman *Genesis (Interpretation Series, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982, pp. 31-33.)*: repetition/liturgy "invites the congregation to confess and celebrate the world as God has intended it." // affirm that God is God of all creation // 1st blessing is for creatures (not humankind) // "The dialectic of closeness/distance applies especially to humankind in relation to God. Human persons are honored, respected, and enjoyed by the one who calls them to be . . . God speaks directly only to human creatures . . . a different, intimate relation with the creator. This is the speech-creature par excellence . . . God has made a peculiarly intense commitment and to whom marvelous freedom has been granted . . . While the terminology for image is not the same in both instances, the statement about the image of God must be understood in juxtaposition to Israel's resistance to any image of God . . . There is one way in which God is imaged in the world and only one: humanness! . . . "The 'dominion' here mandated is with reference to the animals. The dominance is that of a shepherd who cares for, tends, and feeds the animals. Or, if transferred to the political arena, the image is that of a shepherd king. Thus the task of 'dominion' does not have to do with exploitation and abuse. It has to do with securing the well-being of every other creature and bringing the promise of each to full fruition. . . . Moreover, a Christian understanding of dominion must be discerned in the way of Jesus of Nazareth. The one who rules is the one who serves. Lordship means servanthood. It is the task of the shepherd not to control but to lay down his life for the sheep. The human person is ordained over the remainder of creation but for its profit, well-being, and enhancement. The role of the human person is to see to it that the creation becomes fully the creation willed by God." (32-33)

W. Sibley Towner *Genesis (Westminster Bible Companion, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001, pp. 24-30.)*: quoting Douglas John Hall in *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship*, "The whole burden of Hall's exploration of the theme of *imago dei* is to demonstrate that a right relationship with God yields a right relationship with the rest of the creatures of the world. 'Relationship,' says he (107), 'is of the essence of this [human] creature's nature and vocation.'" (27) For a number of years now, critical scholarship has been in general agreement that the "dominion" . . . that God assigns to the first tiny human community flows from the image of God that God places within the earth creature, *adam*, and him/her alone. . . . (better translation of Hebrew conjunction *waw* yields: "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness, so that they may have dominion over the fish of the sea.'" . . . It means that God's image in us is expressed or manifested in "dominion." When you are a living statue of God you are more than just another pretty face! You also have powers and capacities that have implications for all other living creatures. (27-28) Yet the dominion presented here is subordinated to the image of God . . . and . . . is followed not by the strong and adversarial Hebrew preposition *al* ("over, against") but by the simpler *be* ("on, among"). In short, the picture presented need not be understood as one of rape and pillage, of power and lordship, but one of husbandry and nurture. (28) The etymology of the verb *radah*, which we are taking to mean "to have dominion," has a disturbing relationship to a cognate Arabic word meaning "to trample." This warns us not to be too quick to dismiss the traditional understanding of the clause as warrant to exercise power over the other creatures, be it in the clear-cutting of forests, suburban development, or in the shooting of buffalo for sport. However, power need not be exercised in the mode of trampling. If any hint of that root idea still remained with the word when the Priestly writers took it up, they placed it in a context in which the exercise of power is modified in two directions: on the one side, by the source of the power that derives from the God-given image in humankind; and on the other, by the responsible and nurturing mode in which the

power is to be exercised. (28) In summary, then, in Genesis 1 the “dominion” exercised by the creatures made in God’s image is to be marked by a high sense of responsibility toward the things that God loves. Like Joseph to Pharaoh, we are God’s viziers in the world. To other creatures we wear the very image of God. They should feel secure, however, for our lieutenancy means that we recognize limitations on our power. We know we have no right to play God with other creatures, or to commit genocide or “specicide.” To be God’s vizier is to serve at God’s pleasure and to preserve that which belongs to God. It is to serve as mediator and conduit of goodness and health between the source of all goodness and the good creation. In short, the name of the mode and style in which the old narrative tradition of the Bible understands human dominion to be exercised is *stewardship*. (29)

ENDNOTES

1. The Bhopal disaster or Bhopal Gas Tragedy was an industrial catastrophe that occurred on the night of December 3, 1984 at the Union Carbide India Limited (UCIL) pesticide plant in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, India. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhopal_disaster)

2. http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/health/scale-of-gorilla-poaching-in-congo-exposed_100248643.html,
<http://gorillacd.org/?77tadunit=08a74911&77tadvert=3577281144&77keyword=gorillas%20poaching&77tentrytype=s&gclid=C M7-tdqcnKICFY9M5Qod4To-wQ>

3. Because Prince William Sound contained many rocky coves where the oil collected, the decision was made to displace it with high-pressure hot water. However, this also displaced and destroyed the microbial populations on the shoreline; many of these organisms (e.g. plankton) are the basis of the coastal marine food chain, and others (e.g. certain bacteria and fungi) are capable of facilitating the biodegradation of oil. At the time, both scientific advice and public pressure was to clean everything, but since then, a much greater understanding of natural and facilitated remediation processes has developed, due somewhat in part to the opportunity presented for study by the Exxon Valdez spill. Despite the extensive cleanup attempts, less than ten percent of the oil was recovered[15] and a study conducted by NOAA determined that as of early 2007 more than 26 thousand U.S. gallons (22,000 imp gal; 98,000 L) of oil remain in the sandy soil of the contaminated shoreline, declining at a rate of less than 4% per year.[16]

Both the long- and short-term effects of the oil spill have been studied comprehensively.[18] Thousands of animals died immediately; the best estimates include 100,000 to as many as 250,000 seabirds, at least 2,800 sea otters, approximately 12 river otters, 300 harbor seals, 247 bald eagles, and 22 orcas, as well as the destruction of billions of salmon and herring eggs.[5][19] The effects of the spill continued to be felt for many years afterwards. Overall reductions in population have been seen in various ocean animals, including stunted growth in pink salmon populations.[20] Sea otters and ducks also showed higher death rates in following years, partially because they ingested prey from contaminated soil and from ingestion of oil residues on hair due to grooming.[21]

Almost 20 years after the spill, a team of scientists at the University of North Carolina found that the effects are lasting far longer than expected.[20] The team estimates some shoreline Arctic habitats may take up to 30 years to recover.[5] Exxon Mobil denies any concerns over this, stating that they anticipated a remaining fraction that they assert will not cause any long-term ecological impacts, according to the conclusions of 350 peer-reviewed studies.[21] However, a study from scientists from the NOAA concluded that this contamination can produce chronic low-level exposure, discourage subsistence where the contamination is heavy, and decrease the "wilderness character" of the area.[16]

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exxon_Valdez_oil_spill)

4. http://wwf.panda.org/what_we_do/endangered_species/tigers/?gclid=CNOfo2dnKICFRBx5QodOVR0yA

5. What is the Great Pacific Ocean Garbage Patch? A swirling sea of plastic bags, bottles and other debris is growing in the North Pacific, and now another one has been found in the Atlantic. But how did they get there? And is there anything we can do to clean them up? (See <http://www.mnn.com/earth-matters/translating-uncle-sam/stories/what-is-the-great-pacific-ocean-garbage-patch> and innumerable other sites by searching “floating garbage patch in the pacific ocean”.)

6. “Appreciating Our Place in Time” by Kim Winchell, from *Awakening to God’s Call to Earthkeeping*, 2006, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. <http://www.gipl.org/pdf/hscurriculumdraft.pdf>

7. “Time Analogy Commentary” by Larry Rasmussen, from *Awakening to God’s Call to Earthkeeping*, 2006, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. <http://www.gipl.org/pdf/hscurriculumdraft.pdf>