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# Dry Land from the Waters

SCRIPTURE:  
Genesis 1:26-31  
Psalm 46:1-7

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October 25, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

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**Y**ou know the story of Genesis 1. God said: Let there be, and there was. And it was good. It tells the story of creation. It's not a scientific story; it's a love story. It doesn't really tell us *how* the world was created, but rather it is a story that tells us we are not just beings—accidents of the evolutionary process, but rather creatures. Ones fashioned by a creator. As creatures, we belong to the creator. We celebrate that truth every time we celebrate baptism. This story declares that we, as human beings, belong to the one who made us, our creator. But the story also affirms that because we belong to God, we also have a job to do. A role to play in the creation.

When our son Nathan was little, he was into Legos. He had several of those sets where you build the castle or the spaceship, but one afternoon, I found him just putting pieces together out of his own imagination. That's the only way Legos worked when I was a kid. I said, "Nathan, what are you building?" "It's a train, Dad." "Cool. Are you going to build a track?" "No, Dad, see these blocks right here? These are engines so the train can fly." I said, "Nathan, trains don't fly." He looked at me with an expression I have grown accustomed to over the years... an expression that says, "You poor little man." He said, "Dad, I put these blocks on here. I think I know what they are for." Fair point.

If you are the creator, you determine the purpose of the creature. It's true with our creator as well. God knows what we are for and God has given us a job. He says that we are to have dominion. Sounds important. But what is the character of the dominion we have over the earth?

James McBride's book, *The Good Lord Bird*, is historical fiction about John Brown and his abolitionist fight in the 1850s. At one point, Brown is confronted by a Federal soldier who gives Brown a command. Brown declares, as one who submits to the will of God, "I will do as you command."<sup>1</sup> The narrator then states: He was lying, of course. Brown believed that God was on his side so whatever Brown chose to do was, by definition, the will of God. Then the narrator asserts, "Everyone believes that God is on their side in war."

Dominion sounds like we can collapse God's will with our will. We are to use the earth and all that is therein as we see fit, for our benefit. Dominion is to dominate.

Theologian Doug Ottati has said that the historical interpretations of this passage have often taken an anthropocentric view of creation.<sup>2</sup> We read it as if the creation of the rest of the universe was the pre-game show, but the real story begins at verse 26 when we show up. Such an anthropocentric view of creation is what gives room to interpret dominion as domination. We have taken these verses to mean that all of creation exists for us, for our consumption, for our use. But biblical theologian Pat Miller, a saintly man and former teacher of mine, interprets that the dominion we exercise is to reflect on the character of God's rule, of God's dominion. And God's dominion is not a domination, but rather a work of love. Because the world that God so loved is this world, this whole world.

Both theology and science bear witness to this truth. Theologically, the scriptures teach us that humans are only part of the story of creation. And you can't tell the story of belonging to the creator apart

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1 James McBride, *The Good Lord Bird* (2013), p. 94.

2 Douglas F. Ottati, *A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (2020), p. 174, 179.

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from saying that everything else also belongs to the creator. We are part of a whole.

The way science speaks to this truth is to acknowledge that humans live as part of an ecosystem. Our lives are tied to the lives of other creatures we seldom even think about. And like a virus can make the whole body sick, the loss of parts of our ecosystem can skew the balance that is necessary for humans to thrive. The ecosystem in which we live is strong, but not invincible.

Psalm 46 speaks to the fragile places of the ecosystem. It is ultimately a psalm of comfort. God is our refuge and strength. But the psalm claims that that comfort comes in the midst of chaos. Psalm 46 is a picture of Genesis 1 in reverse. The creation story claims before creation, the world was a formless void, chaos... chaos described as waters. Water is often, not always, but often a metaphor for chaos in biblical stories. It is in Genesis 1, as well as Psalm 46. In creation, God draws the dry land up out of the waters, bringing order from chaos—an order that makes life possible. But in Psalm 46, the reverse of creation is envisioned. The mountains shake in the heart of the sea... rather than the dry land emerging from the waters, the waters overrun the dry land. Chaos returns and the ecosystem of creation is out of whack.

We live in a version of Psalm 46 these days. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration tracks what they call “billion-dollar weather events.” Hurricanes, fires, floods, and droughts that have an economic impact of more than a billion dollars. The average number of such weather events over the past 40 years is seven per year. But so far, in 2021, there have been 18 and in 2020, there were 22. The trend is showing greater frequency and greater destruction as a result of the chaotic reality of climate change. Things are out of whack.

There was a scene in the movie “Apollo 13” that is illustrative of our circumstance. The crew is in space and the CO<sup>2</sup> in the space capsule is building and they need to create a fix. They can only use the materials on board the space capsule. Take a look.<sup>3</sup>

It’s a bit of a parallel to our present circumstance. We need to discover ways to address the reality of

carbon and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere using only what we have.

The earth is a great place to live; it should stay that way. In “Apollo 13,” I was inspired as that team pulled together to create a way out of no way. The present situation is threatening because, to borrow the language of the psalmist, the chaos is returning and the mountains are shaking in the heart of the sea. These are not realities about which we can be casual, but there are inspiring folks as well. There are folks who are doing the good that is theirs to do to address the chaos. Let me tell you a bit.

We have a beautiful set of buildings at the Me-neilly Center. They exist for mission. To address hunger and care for children and more. But the mission is not limited to what happens there; the very construction of those buildings was considered in terms of mission. What I mean is that they were built with climate matters in mind. LEED environmental guides shaped the construction. Ground source heat pumps. Natural light. There is a monarch and pollinator garden there to support the preservation of pollinators, which is pretty important for anyone who likes to eat.

And then we arrayed the Child and Family Development Center with solar panels, using the energy of the sun to offset our carbon footprint. I’m grateful for that. We have other buildings that need that same kind of attention now.

I have learned recently that more than 40% of the electricity used in the state of Kansas is derived from wind power. These and other renewable energy sources are diminishing the carbon that is being put into the air. That’s a good thing.

This circumstance touches every aspect of our lives. From the clothes we wear, to the way we shop, to the food we eat and the way it is produced. I know many of you consider the climate as you engage in your own personal diet; I do that as well. The shift to feed lot/industrial food production was launched with the best of intentions—to feed lots of people—but it has resulted in the unintended consequences of escalating the carbon expelled into the atmosphere. But there are farmers who are working to reverse that trend and there are folks,

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3 This clip can be found on YouTube; search on “Apollo 13.”

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many of you, who purchase food with these realities in mind. It matters.

The use of plastic means our oceans are filled with islands of floating plastic. This threatens the ocean life that is intricately tied to the food sources and economic life of so many. When you leave today, we will give you one of these ‘Climate Change Matters’ totes that you can carry groceries or other goods in to reduce the amount of plastic in the world.

Our Environmental Action Committee provides educational opportunities all the time and they are excellent.<sup>4</sup> And if you look on our website, under environmental care, there is a list of other ways you can take steps to help.<sup>5</sup>

Now, what we do won’t change the circumstances. It’s not only a matter of reducing the footprint but to parallel “Apollo 13,” we need to create an

earth-sized filter to begin to remove carbon from the atmosphere. That will take the commitments of nations and businesses and leaders in every aspect of our society. But leaders are often not leaders at all, but followers. And maybe if they see the people doing the good that is ours to do, they will do the good that is theirs to do. And if that happens, the generations to come will look at us like those guys in “Apollo 13” who would not take no for an answer when it came to bringing those astronauts home.

We need to decide: Do we want this moment to be a moment of despair or one of inspiration? A moment of faithful dominion, an act of love, or a moment of continued chaos? We can’t do it all, but we can do the good that is ours to do. And it matters. The Earth is a great place to live; it should stay that way.

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4 [villagepres.org/environmentalaction](http://villagepres.org/environmentalaction)

5 [villagepres.org/environmentalcare](http://villagepres.org/environmentalcare)