

Conviction of the Heart

Genesis 1:1 – 2:4

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Arlington Presbyterian Church, Arlington, Va.

Delivered on April 22, 2007

A ritual in our house is that most afternoons Cooper and I go for a walk—
specifically, we walk to the park which is just the down the street.

For those of you who don't know Cooper,
he is the 7 year old Chocolate Lab that Nick and I share life and attention with.

The park is one of Cooper's favorite places,
and because I choose to believe that my dog has above average intelligence,
he knows the word—
“Do you want to go to the park?” I ask.

And he gets all triangle headed—
you know when a dog's ears perk up—
and rushes to the laundry room so we can get his collar
and the other dog-walking accoutrements.

There are stops for sniffing along the way,
but the park is Cooper's primary destination.

He walks as fast as his legs and the leash will allow;
“he's on a mission” we say.

The park is a wide expanse of grass and trees.
It houses tennis courts,
a basketball court,
a play ground,
a softball field,
and space for pick-up soccer games.

Depending on his mood,
Cooper usually chooses one of two routes.

He will head for the double gate entrance to the softball field
or he will strike out on the path that goes around the outside of the field.

I will confess that on these afternoon walks,
my attention is focused primarily
on making sure Cooper doesn't roll in anything that will be cause for a bath
or eat anything that will be cause for an upset stomach.

This week, however, aware that today is Earth day,
I decided to pay a bit more attention to the park itself.

And quite frankly, I was appalled.
How I missed what is there can only be explained as not taking notice—
there is garbage all over the place.

Just a sampling:
empty plastic tennis cans,

empty beer bottles,
beer bottle caps,
empty Doritos bags,
batteries,
comforter batting,
cigarette cartons,
refuse from fireworks,
and broken glass.

And this is the creation God calls good.

Concerns for the physical world in which we live are not new.
As long as human kind has been around,
the way in which we treat God's created world
has always been an issue.

And I don't know about you,
but I am feeling it more keenly these days.

From movies to decisions by the Supreme Court,
the natural world has been in the news a lot lately
and concern for the natural world
seems more urgent.

As people of faith,
our concern for the natural world is mandated in scripture.

And perhaps no where more so than in the story we read from Genesis.

At the outset,
let me say that I believe this story is true.

Not true in how the world was created,
but why God created the world
and what we as God's created beings are called to do.

For me there is no conflict
with scientific explanations of how the world came to be
and the story of creation as we have it in scripture.

Scripture is not meant to be a science text book
and science is not meant to address issues of faith.

As we read the story from Genesis,
the refrain we hear over and over again
is that God saw that it was good.

The world that God created is a good world,
the light,
the sky,
the dry land,
the plants,
the sun,
the moon,
swarms of living creatures,
humankind.

All are good;
in fact, on the sixth day of creation,
“God saw everything that God had made,
and indeed, it was very good.”

I would even go so far to say that the world God calls good
is also sacred.

And as human beings created in the image of God,
what is to be our relationship with this good, sacred world?

“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.”

Walter Brueggemann,
in his commentary on Genesis,
says that the image of God reflected in humanity
is like a king who establishes statues of himself
to assert his sovereign rule where the king himself cannot be present.

We are God’s statues—
not stone cold or unmoving,
but statues in that we are God’s presence in the world.

As humankind created in the image of God,
we are given dominion over all the other creatures that inhabit the earth.
The creatures that inhabit the earth have been entrusted to our care.

We have been given power,
but it is power as God exercises power—
the creative use of power which invites, evokes, and permits.

The power we have in relation to creation is not coercive or tyrannical.

The dominion we have been given
demands that we secure the well-being of every other creature.

We are expected to care for this earth and all that is in it,
in such a way that everything will grow, flourish, and thrive.

And the dominion we exercise
must be understood in the way of Jesus of Nazareth—
the one who rules is the one who serves.

The task of the shepherd is not to control
but to lay down his life for the sheep.

Our role
is to see to it
that the creation becomes fully the creation willed by God.¹

¹ This is a paraphrase from Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, p. 32-33

So I'm thinking the trash I see at the park
is not the creation becoming fully the creation willed by God.

And I'm thinking that God did not intend for us to turn a profit
at the expense of the natural world.

Strip mining,
air pollution,
non-potable water,
clearcutting

Not what I think of when I imagine exercising the power of dominion.

It is, I believe, time for each of us to reflect upon the ways we live with this earth.
It is, I believe, time for what one person has said called a conviction of the heart.²

One earth
one sky
one with everything in life.

One with everything in life.
I believe the time has come for each of us to reflect upon the way we live with this earth—
with this earth and with every living creature on this earth.

With the dirt beneath our feet and the trees over head
with the water that runs in the stream and the wind that rustles the grass
with the birds of the air and the fish of the sea
with all the other creatures who have been created in the image of God.

The news of late has highlighted not only concerns of the natural world,
but of the tragedy of humankind.

Not only are we called to be stewards of the created earth,
but I believe we are also called to be stewards of one another.

This earth is the only one we have
and we have only one human race.

The tragedy at Virginia Tech this past week
is yet another reminder of how very careful
and how very attentive we must be with one another.

When God created humankind, God said:
"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."

This morning after worship,
we are giving particular attention to the ground of the earth—
being God's presence in the care for the created vegetation.

And God also calls us to care for every living thing that moves upon the earth,
which I believe, brothers and sisters,

² from Kenny Loggins, "Leap of Faith" with thanks to David Gehrenbeck and Michelle Lanier for singing.

means the whole of the human race.

We are called to care for one another,
to be stewards of one another.

Whether in the halls of schools,
or on the streets of Baghdad,
or in the hospital room,
or in the workplace,
we are to be God's presence to one another;
valuing and cherishing the gifts each of us has to offer,
exhibiting concern and involvement when actions seem dangerous or
destructive.

During the season of Lent,
we created the garden now gracing the walls of the sanctuary.

The gifts displayed were offered as those things which bring us joy,
and the ways we have experienced joy within the life of the congregation.

As one tangible way of caring for one another
and being stewards of one another,
I invite you,
before you leave this morning
to take some of the gifts home with you.

Stroll through the garden and take several of the cards with you.
Over the next weeks,
we will be invited to times of prayer
with the gift named on the card as a focus.

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one sky,
one with everything in life.

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