

## DOMINION

### Can This Bible Verse Be Saved? Genesis 1:28

*Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on August 23, 2020*

Last week we got a little more comfortable with the formless void in Genesis 1:1 that heralds the beginning of all things. But I also threw a flag at Genesis 1:28, which I think is broadly misinterpreted and used to justify the destruction of everything that was so beautifully and perfectly created in the verses that come before it. So, this week I want to revisit that problematic verse and see why we might be going off the rails with it and how we might come to a better understanding. Think of it as a spin off from the old Ladies' Home Journal column called "Can this marriage be saved?" only for Bible verses. Can Genesis 1:28 be saved? I aim to try.

So, what does that verse say again? In the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Genesis 1:28 reads, "God blessed them [that is, the newly-created humans], and God said to them, '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.'" The two words that cause the problems are "dominion" and "subdue."

What problems, you ask? Those verses have been used to develop a theology that human beings were created last because we're the most important and God made everything else to serve us. That then means we have a divine right to use every bit of it however we see fit. We have full control and can subdue whatever we want, however we want. If we subdue it out of existence—no problem, if that serves us in some way. Or so says that line of thinking.

And because we see the earth's natural resources as commodities that can be bought and sold, the way we define "serving human beings" typically revolves around what will make a profit. What is the best way to profit from a mountain? Leave it wild? Useless. You get a bit from hiking if you charge a trail fee—maybe put up a restaurant, maybe more from skiing, but chop off the top and mine it? Cash cow.

Well, but, Anne, nobody doing that is thinking about Bible verses. Ahem. I beg to differ. Right this moment environmental and energy policies are being shaped by that specific "God made the earth to serve humans" interpretation of this tiny section of Genesis. How? Through weekly Bible studies run by a group called Capitol Ministries. Yeah, but who goes to those? Members of both Houses of Congress and the Cabinet for the President of the United States. The studies are sponsored by the current Vice President, Secretary of State, and the President's Chief of Staff along with a number of other current and former members of the Cabinet, Senators, and members of the House. They're also in 45 of our 50 state legislatures, including here in Boston. It's not a secret conspiracy. You can find them easily online, see all the congressional and cabinet sponsors, and read the Bible studies each week for yourselves. And of course there are many pastors across the country preaching that same message.

Now maybe you agree with their interpretation of the verse. Or maybe you disagree so strongly that you want to toss the Bible out the window, believing the Bible can't coexist with environmental stewardship. After all, the interpretation does seem to be logical on its face. "Dominion" and "subdue" are not mistranslations of the original words. But I want to invite you to a different interpretation by helping you read not just that verse, but the entire Bible in a different way. If we back up to review the nature of the Bible itself, I think that Bible verse can be saved.

The interpretation of Genesis 1:28 by Capitol Ministries is the logical extension of reading the Bible as a literal and legal text. It's the equivalent of combing through the detailed language of a law to find a particular justification or loophole. In this case, it's pulling out the words "dominion" and "subdue" and saying, "See? It the Bible says we can. In fact, it's written like a command. We not only can, we should." But I don't think the Bible is, at its core, a legal text. I think the Bible is fundamentally narrative—literature—story. We approach stories very, very differently than we approach a book of laws or a legal contract. So, what would this problem verse look like if we saw the Bible as a carefully-crafted collection of stories instead of a book of laws?

In our hymns and in the way we speak about the Bible, we already do that. We call the Bible, "The Greatest Story Ever Told." We talk about "Bible *stories*." We sing, "I love to tell the *story*," or "Tell me the *stories* of Jesus, or "We've a *story* to tell to the nations." Sure, the stories tell us about laws, but so does *To Kill a Mockingbird*. That doesn't make it a legal document. What would happen to our Bible reading if, before we even opened it up, we were saying to ourselves, "I'm going to settle in with a good story" instead of "I'm going to try to find out the rules."?

When we read stories, even if they're accounts of real people or events, we expect to be taken on a journey. We expect to learn something in the end, but we know we will have to experience the whole journey through the eyes of its characters to understand those lessons fully. We grow as the characters grow, we watch them struggle, and we see themes develop from their first mention in the early chapters to the frequently complex and nuanced way that those themes are intertwined and lived out as the story winds its way.

We never read legal texts that way, nor should we. In the legal world, definitions of terms are spelled out at their first mention, and if you're confused about a reference on page fifteen, you look back to the beginning to see what you missed. In a sense, legal readers look backward in a document for meaning while story readers look forward. So, take that distinction and let's go back to Genesis 1:28.

The story reader has already had their curiosity aroused by verse 27 that says humans, both male and female, are created in God's image. What could that possibly mean? Legal readers are anxious and need to come up with a definition of the image of God. Story readers know that it's just the introduction of a theme and if they keep reading, they'll find out more. In 1:28 the legal reader wants to know immediately what the words "dominion" and "subdue" mean. But the story reader just sticks a pin in those words and says, "Hmmm...it sounds like the stories of the Bible are going to teach me something about the nature and use of power. And if people are made in God's image, chances are the way human beings should use power will reflect how God uses power. I wonder where this is going? Who is this God that has already shared power with humans by giving them charge over the world God just made? The Babylonian gods would never do that. The Egyptian gods would never do that. What kind of God is this God of Israel?"

Story readers turn to chapter two to find out more, and here they get a second version of the Creation story. In this version, Adam is created first, not last, and God immediately makes a garden and puts him in it with some pruning shears. So much for the pinnacle of all Creation interpretation. Adam is not king of all he surveys. He's the gardener. In the NRSV and many other translations, what Adam is charged to do is to till and keep the earth. The Hebrew words for till and keep mean to serve and protect. So within 18 verses of giving humans "dominion" and telling them to "subdue" the earth, it's clear that in the story of Israel's God—in the story of the Bible—those words don't mean do what you want, and it they certainly don't mean that everything in and on the earth is created to serve people. In fact, it's exactly the opposite. In this version of the story in Genesis 2, humans aren't the pinnacle of creation, but the necessary caretakers and guardians of it. We're the maintenance and security team.

Moreover, the job is so big that Adam can't do it by himself. The animals are created in Genesis 2 not to *serve* Adam but to *help* Adam do his work of serving and protecting the garden. And when Adam and all the animals still can't do the work, God figures out that, if you're going to get it done, you need a woman. Hello, Eve! And then finally, in this chapter we learn that whatever else "dominion" might mean, it isn't total control. For heaven's sake, you can't even eat all the fruit! You can't even eat all the fruit.

As the story moves on, it becomes clear that the caretaker aspect of dominion doesn't just apply to the earth itself, but also to our families. "Am I my brother's keeper?" Cain asks God after killing his brother. The answer is plainly, "Yes. Yes, you are." The story marches on. "Love your neighbor as yourself," says Leviticus 19:18. The legal reader thinks this is a new concept that needs new definition and looks backward to try to define the word "neighbor."

But for the story reader, the answer isn't back there, it's just a few verses ahead in Leviticus 19:33-34: "When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God." We've now expanding the scope of care beyond just our own tribe to the foreigner in the land.

Moving on, we hear the prophets rail against the people when they fail to live up to God's standards and abuse their power, sometimes even in God's name. But the story also shows us God's vision of what human community could be like if we acted justly and with kindness and walked humbly with God instead of marching around like it was all about us: Streams in the desert, mourning turned to dancing, "the wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them." That's what the fruit of dominion in God's world is supposed to look like.

But the story still has twists and turns to come. The characters still face danger, the prophets are killed, and that vision is still in peril. So in come the Gospels and a Jewish rabbi named Jesus to show us in the flesh how God wants us to exercise the power and authority God has given us, teaching that we truly reflect God's image when we take the least not the most important place at the table and that if we want to live we have to be willing to die.

The stories of Jesus remind us that God's definition of dominion isn't about the world serving us. It's about us serving the world. And if there was any question, Jesus teaches the lesson about how God uses power by tying a towel around his waist and washing the feet of his disciples, including Judas, who would betray him to death in a matter of hours. And in those hours and days that follow, the lesson that the story of the Bible gives us—the lesson begun in Genesis 1:27-28—becomes clear. Being made in the image of God means using power the way God uses power: that is, by taking up a cross out of love for even the ones who nail us to it. As it turns out, when dominion is exercised through love and service, even death is subdued and the stone is rolled away. Or, as the story told us much earlier through the prophet Zechariah: "Not by might, not by power, but by my Spirit," says the Lord of Hosts."

In John's gospel, when Mary Magdalene encounters Jesus after the resurrection, they meet in a garden, bringing us back to the place where the story began. The garden theme is a clue that this story is tied to that very first story, because that's how stories work. When Adam and Eve thought dominion meant "do what you want with whatever you see" they were kicked out of the Garden. Serving and protecting the earth required a different attitude. In Philippians 2, Paul calls that different attitude the mind of Christ, "who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross."

The final chapter of the Bible in the book of Revelation ties it all up by taking us back again to where we began: “Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.” Now, here, at the end of the story— after countless chapters of violence and cruelty, where people experimented with their own definition of “dominion and subdue” until the world ended up in flame and ruin—here, in the realm of God where the first are delighted to go last and dominion means service—we are at last allowed to eat all the fruit.

Can Genesis 1:28 be saved? Yes, it can. In fact, it must for the story to make any sense. We just have to recognize that it’s not a law to be defined on the spot. It’s just the introduction of one of the key themes of the *story* of God’s people. Like the characters in the Bible, we can try our own definition and take a few thousand years of death and devastation to figure it out. Or we can, you know, read the story. And learn. Amen.