

To Serve And Protect

TEXT: Genesis 1:26-2:9, 15-17

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on August 13, 2023

When we began doing more in-depth Bible study during worship a year ago, one of the first things I pointed out was that the chapters and verses of the Bible were not original to the text. They weren't added until the 13th century when the archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton, took time off from crafting the Magna Carta to make sure people could use his Bible commentaries more easily. And it has been only in modern times that Bible publishers have added subject headings to different sections. When we talk about Scripture being inspired by God, none of that is part of it.

Which is not to say they're not helpful. The chapters and verses are, I think, a necessity in an age where new Bibles come out almost daily and any group gathered for Bible study might have six different versions of the Bible in the room. But they can also be misleading, subconsciously telling our minds that a break between sentences represents a change of subject or location or something else in the text, when it does not.

I've said this before, but it bears repeating. The earliest biblical texts that we have—not a single one of which are “original,”—do not have any punctuation or even spaces between words, let alone chapter and verse divisions. And, of course, none of them are in English or in any living language.

Every translation of the Bible into any language—is an interpretation. Every subject heading is an interpretation. Every marking of a new chapter or a new verse is an interpretation. And the kinds of issues they can cause sit front and center in what I want to talk about this morning.

What Pam just read for us began toward the end of Genesis chapter one and ended partway into chapter two. But here's the strange thing about this very first chapter break in the Bible: Chapter one ends at the conclusion of Day 6 of creation. The summary verses of that first chapter, the verses that proclaim creation finished and tell us that God rested on the seventh day and blessed and hallowed that special day of rest, begins chapter two instead of ending chapter one.

It's not until four verses into chapter two, that we get the beginning of the more folksy version of how the world was created—with Adam and Eve, and the first surgeon general's warning about a certain kind of fruit. I can't say why Archbishop Langton decided to break the chapter at the end of Day 6 instead of after God's day of rest and the summary of what has come before. But the break does serve as a kind of punctuation mark that can make it sound like once human beings are created, nothing more needs to be said.

That emphasis can feed our inability to keep the Sabbath commandment, while also making it seem like the whole creation project is building toward turning it all over to God's greatest achievement—the creation of human beings. That last section of Genesis 1, where God gives dominion over all living things to people and tells them to fill the earth and subdue it, has led to what I believe is the most dangerous strain Christian theology today.

The theology is a dangerous blend of religion and politics, powered by billions in dark corporate money, called Dominionism. It's mostly, but not entirely, a United States brand and began in the 1970's. I have watched it unfold, grow, and metastasize across my lifetime. It's mostly Protestant, but there are some Catholics. Wikipedia defines Dominionism as “a group of political ideologies that seek to institute a nation that is governed by Christians and based on their understanding of biblical law.” It is the theological root of Christian Nationalism, which—should it be implemented—is antithetical to democracy and would be a violation of the US Constitution.

Cornerstones of the movement include ending marriage equality, abortion, and secular education and rolling back any regulation to protect or restore the environment. One look around the country will easily show you the many states waging battles on exactly those issues and, in states with elected officials in critical roles, who either espouse or want to profit from the goals of Dominionism, they are winning; often overriding popular majorities that stand opposed to that agenda and changing state laws to preserve minority rule.

Anne, why do we have to hear about politics in church? Agreed. I wish I didn't have to talk about it. But when a corrupt version of Christianity, based on a flawed understanding of the Bible, is ascendant in the United States, has already taken the reins of power in some states, and has a very real chance of taking over the country, it is on the church to reject and denounce it. And it's therefore on me and my clergy colleagues to make sure that those who listen to us week in and week out have the understanding necessary to recognize a wolf in sheep's clothing.

If Dominionism and Christian Nationalism are left unchallenged, we will head further into the darkness that has characterized every other time in history when Christians have joined the power of the church to the levers of government: Crusades, inquisitions, oppression, genocide. The Nazi movement claimed—and still claims—Christianity as its mantle.

Today, fifty years of funding and spreading Dominionism, has built up additional barriers for those trying to save the planet. Again, that is on purpose and has created a powerful and unholy alliance. True Christian Nationalists believe that setting up the Christian Nation will bring the Second Coming of Jesus and that bulldozing our current planet is necessary to make way for the New Jerusalem promised in the Book of Revelation. If you point out that their policies are literally destroying the earth, their attitude is, "Bring it! The Bible says that the old earth will pass away. Hastening that process will just make Jesus arrive faster."

It's sick; but it's powerful, because there are billions to be made by simply ensuring that the status quo remains in place. Those who worship profit easily join forces with Dominionists, if that's the train that will allow them to keep their billions. They can lobby against any environmental regulations and outright buy the votes of members of Congress, either by targeting those who are easily bought, or by playing to those who fell for the allure of a theology that said God gave over the earth and all that was in it for people to do with as they pleased.

We have a huge political problem in this country in part because we have a huge religious problem—very specifically a Christian problem—and, even more specifically, a Protestant Christian problem. I'm not convinced that we have the luxury of 50 years to fix it; but we certainly won't fix it if clergy who know better don't educate their congregations. There's a reason these movements always go after education. It's protection from getting sucked into fear, which shuts down critical thinking skills, which allows authoritarians to gain power unchecked.

Dominionism and the various theological and political movements it spawns draw their biblical support from Genesis 1:28. 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."

Dominionism and Christian Nationalism use that to argue 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, even a divine mandate, to use every bit of the created order however we see fit. We humans have full control and can subdue whatever we want, however we want. If we subdue it out of existence—no problem, that needs to happen anyway to make Jesus come back. And I will note here that they also believe Jesus coming back means eternal positions of power for themselves. More biblical malpractice, but that's for another day.

When you combine all that with the Dominionist penchant for taking a very literal view of the Bible, you wind up with every bit of this planet being viewed as a commodity. We believe we have the right to use everything in, on, above, and under the earth to enrich ourselves in one way or the other. That God created it all to serve us. If we can be convinced to see some people as less than human beings, then guess what? We can profit off of them, too—they become new commodities that can be made to serve the "real" humans and disposed of should they object. Christian Nationalism likes this idea very much, lumping women, children, and people of color into that less-than-human category.

The unwarranted and unbiblical leap made by Dominionists is that human beings are given dominion over the earth and everything in it to use as WE want, rather than as how God wants—that the word "dominion" means a use of power consistent with how human beings have exercised power across history, rather than the way that God has exercised power, even in Genesis 1, let alone as modeled by Jesus.

But we don't have to wait for Jesus to respond. The rejoinder to that we-can-do-what-we-want interpretation comes just a few verses later and could be easier to see if Archbishop Langton hadn't put up a chapter break at the end of day six.

If we tear down the wall between chapters one and two, we move right back to remembering that God took just one day off, not the rest of eternity, and then we immediately get a second version of how the world was created that helps to clarify any confusion that might have arisen from the first.

In Genesis 2, human beings are very much not the pinnacle of creation. The minute there is land to hold our feet, human beings enter the picture. The word *adam*, from which we get the name Adam, simply means red earth. In Genesis 2, Adam is, quite literally, the earth—the ground, the dirt, the red clay, shaped into human form, and then given life by the breath of God.

Adam is the first thing to be made as soon as there is dry land. There are not yet trees or plants or animals or anything. There wasn't even any rain. Why are humans created even before there was food? Seems a rude thing to do to the capstone of creation. In Genesis 2, Adam is created to solve a problem. Most English translations describe it by saying, "there was no one to till the ground." Adam is the answer to that problem. Immediately after creating Adam, God plants a garden, and puts Adam in it. Chapter two verse 15 says, "The Lord God took Adam and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it."

Remember how all translation is interpretation? The English word "till" in that verse is "abad" in Hebrew. A farming term like "till" isn't a wrong translation, but it's an uncommon translation for what is a pretty common word in the Old Testament. The King James Version translates abad as "till" or "dress," just eleven times in the entire Old Testament. It's translated as the more general "work" or "labor" seven times. Five times it's translated as "worship." But a whopping 231 times, the Old Testament translators in the court of King James used the English word "serve" or "service" when translating the Hebrew word "abad."

When I first noticed that discrepancy about five years ago, I checked 49 different English translations of Genesis 2:15 to see if any of them could see their way clear to using what is by far the most common meaning of the word for Adam's work in the garden. Only one did—ironically, it's Young's Literal Translation, which renders Genesis 2:15 as "And Jehovah God taketh the man, and causeth him to rest in the garden of Eden, to **serve** it, and to keep it." The word "keep," by the way, means "to have charge of—to protect." Kind of like you would if God gave you dominion over something.

Genesis 2 is the definition of what Genesis 1 means by dominion. If Dominionists were actually serious about taking the Bible literally, they would be leading the environmental movement and fighting to save the earth. Because the entire human vocation, as spelled out literally here in Genesis, is to serve and protect the earth, of which human beings are made. What is done to the earth is done to human beings because we ARE the earth.

Humans are given "dominion" in Genesis 1 because we are gifted with the ability to organize global stewardship efforts and invent sustainable ways to shape and protect the garden God created. If you take out the chapter break, that is perfectly clear. In the realm of God that Dominionists are so eager to have arrive, having dominion means service and protection, not commodities and profits.

Indeed, indigenous peoples managed exactly that for tens of thousands of years. And in virtually every nation across the globe, they have been slaughtered, in large part so that the land they were serving and protecting could be exploited and sold for profit, and all too frequently in the name of Christ. Dominionism is nothing more than human greed and lust for power dressed up in a Bible verse. And saying, "Oh, but we believe the Bible. It is the literal, inerrant Word of God!" is just the height of hypocrisy.

You insist on taking the Bible literally? Okay, that's not my style, but I'll play. Let's turn to Young's Literal Translation. "Serve and protect the earth." Prove to me you take that literally. Join the Sierra Club. Start donating to the World Wildlife Fund. Use your billions to fund clean air and water and toxic cleanup. Give wildlife a sustainable habitat. Stop trophy hunting. There was no day in creation when God created trophies to hang on your wall. Stop clear-cutting forests and smearing the oceans with oil. Regulate emissions, including the emissions coming from abused cattle. Fund sustainable, renewable practices. What part of "serve and protect" is unclear to your literal minds?

And if “serve and protect” is somehow still murky, does Adam get to do what he wants with the bounty God provides in the Garden of Eden? No! He can’t even eat all the fruit!

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 the version of creation 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.

What does God’s idea of dominion look like in the real world? I’ll close by reading you an example from the Washington Post this past Friday, August 11. The story comes out of the horrors of Lahaina, on the island of Maui in Hawaii where over 80 people have now lost their lives to a raging wildfire, now the deadliest natural disaster in the history of Hawaii.

The headline and subhead read: **“This Maui center houses some of the world’s rarest birds. Staff saved it from the flames.** The Maui Bird Conservation Center houses critically endangered Hawaiian birds found nowhere else on Earth, including some currently extinct in the wild.”

The article tells us, “Early Tuesday morning, Jennifer Pribble, a wildlife care supervisor at the bird sanctuary, and a neighbor saw smoke billowing across the road from the bird center. When the pair noticed the fire had leaped the road, Pribble ran to grab fire extinguishers, hoping to put out the flames before they spread up the grass and to barns with critically endangered birds. The grass was so dry that it could have taken minutes to reach them. There was no way to evacuate the birds in time.

“In that moment, our instincts kicked in and we knew what we had to do,” Pribble said. “The goal was to keep the fire from spreading toward the aviaries.”

Pribble and the neighbor used a hose to further douse the flames before firefighters arrived, according to security footage the center shared with The Washington Post. Firefighters, Pribble added, have been “out front keeping the fire at bay so we can continue to focus on the birds.”

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“To mitigate against disasters like fires, the zoo alliance keeps members of rare species in different spots — some at the Maui facility and others at a similar sanctuary on Hawaii’s Big Island.

Bryce Masuda, the group’s conservation program manager, said his team doesn’t want to keep “all of our eggs in one basket.”

So many trees and branches were knocked down by the winds that other staffers had to use chain saws to get up the road and join Pribble at the bird center, high in the mountains on Maui. Since putting out the fire near the sanctuary, the priority has been to move the birds to barns away from trees that may fall.

“They’ve just fallen everywhere,” said Emily Senninger, a spokeswoman for the San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance who is in Maui...A tree fell on one aviary but didn’t cause significant structural damage.

All of the birds are safe, she added.”

And that’s where the article and this sermon ends. That is what “dominion” in the realm of God looks like. Literally. Amen.

Link to full article:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2023/08/11/hawaii-fire-bird-center/>