

Trampled Underfoot

Sermon on Psalm 8
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First Presbyterian Church
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*“You have given them dominion over the works of your hands,
you have put all things under their feet.”*

Here are some fun facts for you:

Globally,

“The average abundance of native plant and animal life has fallen by 20 percent or more, mainly over the past century.”ⁱ

“More than 40% of insect species are declining and a third are endangered.”ⁱⁱ

“Half of the topsoil on the planet has been lost in the last 150 years”ⁱⁱⁱ

All the major coral reefs in the ocean are projected to be gone in 30 years, based on current trajectories.^{iv}

“An estimated 18 million acres of forest, which is roughly the size of the country of Panama, are lost each year.”^v

“Humanity has wiped out 60% of animal populations since 1970,”^{vi}

“Under a moderate warming scenario, 2.25 billion more people could be at risk for dengue fever by 2080.”^{vii}

According to the World Bank, 800 million people in South Asia alone will see their current living conditions sharply diminish by 2050.^{viii}

If global temperatures rise by 2 degrees, 150 million people are likely to die from air pollution.^{ix}

And “since 2008, an average of 24 million people have been displaced by catastrophic weather disasters each year, and 143 million people could be displaced by 2050.”^x

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Well, happy Father’s Day everyone!

Enjoy the rest of your Sunday.

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Just kidding.

Maybe you, like me, want to brush these facts off with a joke. Maybe you, like me, want to ignore these facts. It’s all too big. It’s all too daunting. It seems too far off.

It’s easier to think about how you might soon be hanging out by the grill on this Father’s Day afternoon, but if your fathers were anything like mine they probably taught you that you don’t get to put your feet up until you’ve put things away in their proper place.

Good fathers don’t take their Sunday nap when the roof is leaking. Good fathers don’t shrug their shoulders when their children are in danger.

Good fathers and good mothers teach their daughters and sons that when something is entrusted to them, they take good care of it. They teach them that when you are put in charge of something, you look after it carefully.

*“You have given them dominion over the works of your hands,
you have put all things under their feet.”*

The truth is, we are in a crisis because something that has been entrusted to our care is being destroyed. Something that is entrusted to our safekeeping is nearly broken beyond repair. And we are to blame.

Now, before I go any further, I want to make something clear. If you don’t want to hear an environmentalist sermon from this pulpit, if you don’t want to hear some political, leftist issue from this pulpit, the good news is you won’t have to. I don’t want to hear one of those either.

This isn’t an environmentalist sermon. This isn’t a conservative or liberal sermon. This is a Christian sermon, because this is a Christian issue. I have a friend who works closely with environmental issues and he says he cringes every time someone calls him an environmentalist.

"I'm not an environmentalist," he says. "I'm a Christian."

We are called to this work because our faith calls us to this work. And we have been negligent as a people in caring for one of our most ancient tasks.

Our Scriptures are steeped with a call to care for creation. We just have been pretending like they don't exist. Don't believe me? Here's a quick sampler:

"The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." (Genesis 2)

"If you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you" (Leviticus 18)

"In the seventh year the land is to have a sabbath of rest, a sabbath to the Lord.... The land is to have a year of rest" (Exodus 23)

"The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants. Throughout the land that you hold, you shall provide for the redemption of the land." (Leviticus 25)

"You shall not pollute the land in which you live.... You shall not defile the land in which you live, in which I also dwell; for I the LORD dwell among the Israelites." (Numbers 35).

"Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet?" (Ezekiel 34)

I could go on, but you get the point.

Christians have, for far too long, been silent on this issue, or, at worst, have exacerbated the problem by misreading our Scriptures and defending the plunder of our world.

People often tell me that God gave us the earth to use however we want.

They are wrong. Nothing is farther from the truth and this is a gross misrepresentation of Scripture.

Take our lesson for today:

“You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.”

So, party on, right? It’s all ours, right? All things are under our feet, so drill baby drill!

Wrong.

To have dominion over something does not mean to abuse it. To be in charge of something does not mean to destroy it. To have something in your care doesn’t give you the right to do whatever you want.

In fact, the same word used to describe dominion in the Old Testament is the same word used to describe how a parent should watch over their family.

Good parents don’t abuse or destroy those who they ought to protect. This is obvious.

Yet our dominion of the earth has not been this way.

All of God’s Creation has been put under our feet and we have trampled it underfoot.

Our heel is on its throat and we do not realize that if we put on any more pressure we’ll destroy not only a great inheritance and gift from God, but the very thing that sustains our neighbors and ourselves.

Here’s the deal. I get it. I’m a big hypocrite when it comes to this stuff. I often do things contrary to what I believe. I know we have to do something about this crisis, but I still drive a SUV and ride in planes and run my air conditioner on full blast.

Wendell Berry, arguably the most important writer and thinker alive today, calls the environmental crisis a “crisis of character.” He is right.

When we know what is good but do what we hate--- that is sin, according to St. Paul.

Our first reading from Romans for today gives us a remedy to this crisis of character. Paul writes,

“Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.”

Character produces hope and hope does not disappoint.

The good thing about good character is that it can be learned. If we are in this environmental mess because of a crisis of character, it must be a change of character that gets us out of it.

Character produces hope, and that hope will not disappoint.

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On the one hand, the fact of the matter is that individual actions on climate change practically change nothing, in the big scheme.

Whether I drive my Jeep or ride my bike or hop a plane or run up my electric bill makes practically zero difference overall in a world of 7.7 billion people.

Individual changes mean nothing on a global scale, and yet, the Christian narrative doesn't let me off the hook.

Because we are not called to be effective, we are called to be faithful. And God willing, God takes our faithfulness and makes it effective.

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I heard a story this week on the radio about a study looking at what motivates people to change their consumption habits.

They asked "4,000 households to conserve power at home. The first 1,000 were asked to conserve power because it's sustainable. It's good for the planet.

The second thousand households were asked to conserve power because they should think about the children, the grandchildren, the future.

The third thousand were told how much they could save in money by cutting their power consumption.

And the fourth thousand were told how much they use compared to their neighbors.

Each time the study is conducted, they found that the largest drop in power use and long - most sustained change is in the fourth group, those who were compared with their neighbors."^{xi}

The fact of the matter is that, for better or worse, communities shape habits.

Our individual choices don't amount to much on their own, but when we are faithful, think what we could do.

The church is supposed to be a model to the world. If our church community began to be model care and concern for Creation as an integral part of its Christian witness, think how that might change Greensboro. And think about how if Greensboro modeled this, how we might change North Carolina. And so on. Think about if churches took this seriously around the world.

Snowball effects don't always have to be a bad thing.

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Maybe this is all too idealistic. Maybe it's all too late.

The Presbytery has recommended that we all read "The Uninhabitable Earth," by David Wallace Wells. We have copies in our library. It doesn't paint an optimistic picture of the future given the realities of climate change.

*"You have given them dominion over the works of your hands,
you have put all things under their feet."*

Maybe God is God entrusting us with too much.

But our trust is that character produces hope and hope does not disappoint--not when God's spirit is at work.

Last weekend I had the opportunity to go on our new elder retreat. In one session, members were asked where they were happiest and most alive, where they are closest to God.

As I listened to their answers, almost every single member said they were happiest when they were in Creation. Walking the beach, being in the mountains, fishing, golfing, running. All in Creation.

We know in our bones how precious Creation is and how it helps us relate to our Creator.

Creation points us to praise.

When scholar Walter Brueggemann writes on Psalm 8, he says this:

"It is *not* naïve to say that the first step in addressing the environmental crisis is to praise God, for praising God is the act of worship and mode of existence that reminds us that human beings are *not* free to do whatever our science and technology enable us to do.

Praise flies in the face of our culture's tendency to unrestrained exploitation."^{xii}

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Perhaps the best thing we can do is be wowed by God's creation regularly, so we remember why we need to take care of such an incredible gift. Today's psalm begins and ends with praise. So, should we.

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It's Father's Day. I think about my father, and how he taught me to love Creation and how he modeled for me what it means to take care of what has been entrusted to you. I think about how, when he was dying of cancer, the way he would find peace was picturing his feet in one of the pristine trout streams he loved to fish.

I think about how much beauty and grace in the world remains, and how important it is that we take care of what God has put beneath our feet.

This Father's Day is also a first for me.

My wife and I are expecting our first child this November. I have to say that when I heard that heartbeat for the first time, I can't explain it, but something within me changed.

And I wonder: what sort of world will my child inherit?

Two weeks ago, I was on a wilderness canoe trip in the Boundary Waters of Northern Minnesota. It is one of the most beautiful places in the world. And as I paddled those chain lakes and took in those sunsets and star filled skies, I thought about our future baby.

I thought about how I hope we can protect Creation so that my child can feel as close to their Creator as I do when I'm in places like this.

I thought about what a beautiful world we have. And I thought about how I hope my wife and I can teach our children what it means to take care of what we are entrusted with.

I hope we can model it.

I hope their church can model it.

"You have placed all things under our feet."

May we be up to the task.

Amen.

References:

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- ^{ix} Uninhabitable Earth, 28.
- ^x <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2018/06/20/621782275/the-refugees-that-the-world-barely-pays-attention-to>
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- ^{xii} “Psalms,” Brueggemann and Bellinger, 61.