

WGUMC November 17, 2013 "maker of heaven and earth"
Genesis 1:26-2:3 and Romans 1:18-25

A few minutes ago every tree was excited, bowing to the roaring storm, waving, swirling, tossing their branches in glorious enthusiasm like worship. But though to the outer ear these trees are now silent, their songs never cease. Every hidden cell is throbbing with music and life, every fibre thrilling like harp strings, while incense is ever flowing from the balsam bells and leaves. No wonder the hills and groves were God's first temples, and the more they are cut down and hewn into cathedrals and churches, the farther off and dimmer seems the Lord.
[John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*]

I have a hard time believing that there are any atheists in the mountains. Anyone who has ever spent time above the tree line knows that they have spent time with God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth. We don't know *how* God made the mountains, but we don't really care. Like the trees waving their branches, we are there to worship and to wonder.

But when we come down from the mountain, we might have a few questions. So let's go back to the beginning, to the Book of Genesis, "when God created the heavens and the earth." [Genesis 1:1] While we don't get any geology or history

in these first few chapters, we do get a good story, a true story about God the maker and human beings, the caretakers.

Our reading today starts on the sixth day of creation, the making of human beings in God's image. Now to be in God's image means that in some ways we are like God. For instance, we are powerful, because God gave us dominion over all the living creatures in the sea, in the air, and on the land.

Get this: our almighty, all-powerful God actually gave us some of that power, essentially trusting us to take care of the Creation. But look at that Creation! Look at our dirty air, pick up trash along the creek, dig into the mud at the bottom of the bay and measure the mercury in our fish. All we can do is shake our heads and say, "God, what on earth were you thinking? Why did you give dominion to us? Didn't you know you can't trust us?"

We've been exercising dominion all right. Made in the likeness of God, we like to think we are gods. After all, it's our

manifest destiny. We can thank a man by the name of John O'Sullivan for coining that phrase. Back in 1845, he wrote an article promoting westward expansion. And according to him, God was giving us a whole continent for our exploitation. It was our manifest destiny. [July-August 1845 issue of the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*]

Well, that idea spread like a wildfire in Wyoming. In my home state of Montana, gold and silver were discovered in the 1880's, but copper would be king. Butte, Montana would one day claim the largest open pit copper mine in the world; the neighboring town of Anaconda, the largest smelter. Copper King Marcus Daly went about making his own version of manifest destiny. He smashed miner's unions, bought up the state's newspapers, and put his Anaconda Copper Company in a position to virtually run the state and its legislature for 75 years. With the bottom falling out of the copper market in the 1970's and 80's, the mine finally closed.

Ever since then, the pit has been slowly filling with water laden with heavy metals. In 1995, a flock of migrating snow geese landed in that water and 342 of them died. Today, the town of Butte has a new claim to fame. It's one of the nation's largest Superfund sites. And engineers are hard at work trying to keep those toxins from seeping into the ground water.

That's the problem with manifest destiny. By exercising our dominion over every living thing, we've been busy destroying the conditions of life for all beings. All in the name of God or just plain greed.

What an irony! For almost the entire history of the human race, we have needed protection from nature. Storms, high seas, floods, earthquakes, plagues, famine, fire—they all reminded us of our great vulnerability. So we prayed to God, "our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."

[Psalm 46:1]

But then, in the last century, it became increasingly clear to us in the industrialized West that we didn't need protection from nature as much as nature needs protection from us. Nature is no longer just a power to subdue. It's a lifeline to preserve.

We didn't get the message soon enough, and in the new century, nature is giving back what we have dished out. As we continue to burn fossil fuels and the planet continues to warm, we will see increasingly violent hurricanes, higher storm surges, more severe drought, more extreme wildfires. The typhoon in the Philippines is just the latest reminder that nature is putting us in our place again.

To put this all in the perspective of our faith, let's turn from Genesis 1 to Romans 1. The Apostle Paul sums up what happened in the Garden of Eden and has been happening ever since. Though we knew God, we didn't honor God. And when we turned our backs, we darkened our minds so that we could

no longer see God in the things that God has made. There, in that darkness, the wiser we thought we were, the more foolish we became. We created all sorts of idols. We worshipped all kinds of false gods. But most of all we worshipped ourselves. Without even knowing it, we "exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator." [Romans 1:25]

And so God let us go. God let us reap what we sowed. In Paul's words, God gave us up in the lusts of our hearts to impurity, to degrading ourselves [Romans 1:24]. But we didn't just corrupt our human nature. In a way that Paul could not possibly predict, we also violated Nature. We chopped it down. We dug it out. We dammed it up. We paved it off. And what God had entrusted to us we sold to the highest bidder. So here we are, as Paul says, "without excuse." [Romans 1:20] But we are not without hope.

Back to the beginning. Maybe we have mistaken our Maker all along. Maybe we have misunderstood power and dominion and what that all means. Read Genesis 1 again. I want you to notice three things. First, note how God keeps saying, "Let there be..." and then God lets it be. God makes the heavens and the earth and then on the seventh day, God sees that it is all very good and sets it free. So what we have here is fundamentally a God who uses power in order to create, but not to control. Let there be...

Second, what does God do after God makes the heavens and the earth and all living things upon the earth? God blesses them. This is key. Where we would be inclined to boss, God is determined to bless.

And third, after God created humankind in God's image, male and female, and after God told them to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over every living thing, God gave them every green plant for food.

Here is where our dominion differs radically from God's. God doesn't need food. God isn't dependent on anything, but we are dependent on the very living things that God has given us dominion over. That makes our dominion look a lot more like interdependence, doesn't it! And that means that we have to care for the Creation or we will literally die of starvation.

Oh, if we could only be the image of God and live into the likeness of God! If we could only learn how to use our power to create and to care rather than to control; to bless rather than to boss, to realize our interdependence rather than exercise dominion. We might just rediscover our proper place in God's good Creation.

Let the trees be our teachers. John Muir had his temple of trees in the Sierras. But there is a real tree temple in Cambodia. Have you seen it? The Ta Prohm temple was built in 1186 and abandoned in the 17th century. With the human caretakers gone, the trees began to take over. In the centuries since, a

silk cotton tree and a strangler fig completely engulfed the temple. Their roots and branches are literally holding up this huge house of worship. If the trees die, the temple falls.

And that's the message that I want to leave with you today. We are blessed that we have so many beautiful redwood trees on the church's property. They stand as a reminder to us that we can't worship God and at the same time wreak havoc on God's world. I get to look out at them from my office window. And they will never let me forget that to believe in God the maker is to accept the job of caretaker. By God's grace, we can use our considerable powers to bless every living thing. So be it. Go to it.