

A Biblical View of the Ecological Crises (2): Covenant

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

July 12, 2009

A sermon preached in Glebe Presbyterian Church

Toronto, Ontario

Deuteronomy 30: 11-20

Mark 10: 35-45

Over the summer I will be looking at several parts of our biblical story through the perspective of the ecological crises. Last week I looked at the story of Creation in Genesis 1, and tried to wrestle with the verse where God gave Adam “dominion” over the other species and told humanity that they were to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it”. (Gen 1: 26, 28) For many people who care about the earth and all its creatures God seems to have started off on the wrong foot with the human species. In fact, many critics of Christianity have pointed to these verses as the cause of the ecological crises. God is apparently telling humanity to take control of the earth, to have dominion over it. This week I would like to look more carefully at what God means to have dominion over something. For us, to have dominion means having power or control. It means dominating others, getting them to do what you want them to do. In today’s gospel reading James and John asked Jesus if they could be the dominant disciples when he came into his glory. The other disciples were not happy with this power play by James and John, and let them know about it. Jesus called them all together. It was an important teaching moment. Listen again to what he said: “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all” (Mark 10: 42-44). This / for Jesus / is what God means by having power or authority. For God, having dominion, or having power means having the chance to wash someone else’s feet.

So when God gives the human creature “dominion” over the animals and the earth, any power we might imagine coming from that dominion will have some pretty big strings attached. It seems that God is giving humanity the power to look after the earth, to tend and keep it. “Adam, I am giving you all of this to look after. It’s a big job. You are to be the shepherd for all of my sheep. It is your job to look after them. If one of them strays you must go into the wilderness and find it. If a wolf comes to devour the sheep you must defend them, even give your life for them if necessary.” That’s what dominion means in the Kingdom of God, Adam. Do you think you can handle that?” Unfortunately, humanity has used this power to exploit the earth, to enrich ourselves, to kill the plants and animals that get in our way.

It seems that when God gives us power, God expects us to use that power responsibly, to act within certain rules that God also gives us to govern our behaviour. In the rest of Genesis and in the next three books of the Bible God develops a covenant with God’s people and spells out what our responsibilities are as God’s chosen people. It took the lives of a whole generation of God’s people to receive this law. God rescued the people from slavery in Egypt and then had them wander in the wilderness for 40 years. Eventually, the whole generation that experienced slavery in Egypt died off, and their children knew nothing of life except hunger and thirst, living in a tent and wandering aimlessly in the desert. They had dominion over nothing at all! God feeds them manna and Moses finds water in a rock. They lost their way many times, both geographically and spiritually. They were led by Moses, and God through Moses taught the people what their obligations were as God’s people. Eventually their wandering is over. Eventually, they come to the edge of their promised land. Imagine how excited they must have been. They are eager to press on and take the land. But before they cross the Jordan

God knows they need to hear the rules of their covenant with God one more time. So Moses calls all of them together and reads out the entire law out to them, all 26 chapters of Deuteronomy. He must have started early in the morning and read all day. Finally, he comes to the end of the law and says the following words:

Deut. 30: 11-20

So this is serious business. God will shortly give God's people dominion over their promised land but as we have seen in Jesus' teaching, dominion does not mean lording it over creation; instead, it means "seeking justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God" (Micah 6:8) to quote another prophet. It means loving God and loving our neighbour to quote Jesus, and I will have more to say about Jesus' take on *our* covenant with God next week. For Moses, the covenant with God has both a promise and a threat. If we don't keep this covenant with God then we will not live long in our promised land. We will end up wandering the earth again, seeking our true home. Like our parents before us we will die in the wilderness. We are told to choose life.

Throughout the remainder of the Old Testament we learn how the Israelites and their leaders disobeyed God's commandments time and time again. The prophets spoke out against them and warned them that they would lose control of their promised land. And we know that over the centuries this is exactly what happened. The Israelites lived at the intersection of the two major trade routes for the known world at that time, the Yonke and Bloor for every ambitious ruler who was looking for land to conquer. The north-south road through Israel connected Egypt and North Africa with the rest of civilisation, and the east-west road connected Europe with the far east. Every marauding army in search of an empire had to come through Palestine sooner or later and sooner or later all of them did: the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans and even the British (that's us!) occupied Palestine, and secured the road on their way to somewhere else. God's chosen people were conquered many times and suffered greatly under foreign rulers.

We North Americans can be a little smug about that of course. Surely, this warning doesn't apply to us. We haven't had a war on our soil for almost 200 years now. How can we possibly be evicted from our promised land of Canada? So what does it mean to us when God tells rich Christians in the First World to "choose life".

I think we can begin to understand what this story is saying to us by looking at the ecological crises. Ecological scientists have been telling the developed world that we have been choosing death for a long time now – our destruction of ecosystems to exploit their resources is leading to the extinction of species at a higher rate than at any time since the dinosaurs. They are also telling us that every species in an ecosystem is connected to every other species in complicated feed-back loops that we don't understand very well at all. The point is that the human being is one of the species in the world ecosystem – in fact, we sit at the top of the pyramid, which is the most unstable place of all to be. We don't know what the long-term implications of the extinction of all these species will have on the entire ecosystem. As we continue to rip up the fabric of life, we don't really know which of species we are killing off are needed for the human species to remain viable. It is a frightening thing for example, to realize that the entire human species is utterly dependent on only four types of plants for all our grain: wheat, rice, corn and sorghum. Even now, humanity teeters on the edge of mass starvation in many parts of the world every time these crops fail. Suppose now that climate change is threatening the insect species that pollinates the plants that fertilize the soil for sorghum to survive in Africa. And we don't know anything about it. "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity". "Choose life."

These ancient words from Deuteronomy are warning us that God has created the world in such a way that when we disobey God's laws we begin processes that threatens our own downfall. In our own day ecological science

is filling in the blanks of our ignorance, teaching us what the details of some of these processes are. We are learning what we need to know to be able to live in harmony with the other species in the rest of creation in ecosystem that God blessed and declared to be “very good”. When we destroy these ecosystems we threaten our own survival as well as the survival of the rest of life.

Looking at this scripture through the reality of the ecological crises, it seems to me that the neighbour that Jesus calls us to love must go beyond the human family to include all living things as well as the earth, ocean and atmosphere on which life depends. Abundant life is impossible for any single species. Abundant life can only be achieved if all the species of an ecosystem live together in balance and harmony. Jesus answer to the question, “Who is my neighbour?” will be different through the lens of the ecological crises. But more on this next week. Also different is the idea of exile. Through Moses, God says that “if your heart turns away and you are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare too you that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you re crossing the Jordan to enter” (Deut. 30: 17-8). Through ecological science, God says that continued destruction of ecosystems on which the human species relies will lead eventually to our extinction. Our promised land is the whole earth; we have already occupied it and are exploiting it to death. Exile from our promised land means exile from the whole earth; it means the extinction of our species. “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity”. “Choose life.”

The good news in all of this is that if the human species acts responsibly towards other species, if we love our neighbours as we love ourselves, then we have the God-given power to restore the earth. God did give us dominion over the earth after all. If we can learn to be the hands and feet of Christ by acting responsibly then God has told us that the earth will respond. That is our privilege to serve given to us by God from the very beginning.

When we read scripture this way, it seems that responding to ecological issues lies at the very centre of our faith. It can no longer be set aside as an add-on, an extra obligation to be taken up if we have the time and energy for it. Also the obligation to “choose life” is applied equally to human and non-human life. It is not possible to work for the health of humanity without also working for the health of the ecosystems humans require to live. And the opposite is also true: ecological activists also work for the health and well being of humans whether they know that or not. Human and non-human life in the same ecosystem depend on one another to survive. It seems that the world has been created so that the continuance of life depends on the dominant human species reaching out in love to the rest of creation. That is what “dominion” means in the Kingdom of God. This is what the human species is called by God to do. This is our blessing as well as our vocation, granted to us by our Creator from the very beginning. And for this we give thanks to God.

Amen.