

“Mother Earth on Life Support”

Genesis 1: 20-31; Psalm 145

Hyattstown Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

April 28, 2019 (“Belated” Earth Day)

Our son, Danny, has a car that is his own. It gives him the freedom to come and go as he pleases, to pursue happiness, within certain limits, of course. He was bequeathed the car by a loving, generous grandmother. The car does evidence, from time to time, a need for maintenance or fixing, or even urgent repair. The car must be cared for if it is to remain useful and functional. Danny is entrusted with a certain responsibility for respecting what his grandmother has given him.

You and I have a home that is our own. It gives us the freedom to come and go as we please, to pursue happiness, within certain limits, of course. We have been bequeathed this home by a loving, generous Creator. Our home does evidence, from time to time, the need for maintenance or fixing, or even urgent repair. The earth must be cared for if it is to remain useful and functional. You and I are entrusted with a certain responsibility for respecting what God has given us.

“Then God said: ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and the birds of the air, and the cattle, and all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth’ So God created humankind...and blessed them...And God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.”

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On the other hand, some say, it may be the faith grounded in this very biblical theology that makes its believers culpable for the industrial oppression of the natural world. Canadian Professor Lynn White suggests that behind the modern day desecration of our home, stands the Judeo-Christian

defamation of the animal and vegetable worlds. It seems to be inherent in that faith tradition that humanity has both the right and the duty to rule.

HAVE DOMINION! SUBDUE! The root meanings of the words in Hebrew imply “treading on”, “trampling”, “smashing” everything in the way. The long-entrenched Christian attitude is that humanity is the rightful master over nature.

If, on the 49th anniversary of Earth Day, “Mother Earth” is on life support, who is responsible?

There is mounting scientific evidence that toxic pesticides are connected to the alarming decline of bee populations across the country.

Studies show that the world’s oceans are rising faster than in the past, verifiable due to the increased rate of melting glaciers in Arctic regions.

Recent droughts in California may be only the precursor of a “mega-drought” predicted by mid-century, according to researchers at Cornell and Columbia Universities, and at NASA. There would be water shortages and dried out vegetation that would lead to more uncontrollable wildfires.

An international panel of climate scientists reports that, even with an immediate, global effort to reduce emissions of carbon dioxide and other harmful gasses, it may be too late to reverse the trends of climate change traceable to human behavior. Michael Oppenheimer, a Princeton University geoscientist, warns: “The window of opportunity for acting in a cost-effective way is closing fast.”

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My decades-long romance with the concept of stewardship, and how it applies universally to the Christian enterprise, has been guided by the work of Douglas John Hall of McGill University in Montreal. Hall condenses to three very understandable ideas the matter of our responsibility as

stewards of God's creation: 1) Humanity "above" nature; 2) Humanity "in" nature; and 3) Humanity "with" nature. Let's briefly consider each one:

- 1) **Humanity "above" nature:** Yes, it is ingrained in our basic understanding that nature, as bounteous as it is, is there for the taking. But Hall resists the idea that Judeo-Christian tradition is at fault. If anything, our tradition teaches that the sin is not in supposed compliance with the will of God as articulated in Genesis, but rather in our disobedience of God's intentions. Nature suffers not when humans are doing what they are intended to do, but when they sin! The actual roots of the human "above" nature idea lay in the prevailing attitude of the Reformation era, symbolized by the attitude of people such as Christopher Columbus, who like others set out to dominate the known world. The "image of God" language in the Creation story does not refer to a quality that we possess, making us better than other creatures, but refers rather to a relationship we enjoy vis a vis our Creator. We are not set "above", but rather "responsible for" the others. Then there is...
- 2) **Humanity "in" nature:** When we think of the relation between us and nature, we could think of ourselves simply as one of the myriad creatures, nothing more, one species among many—mortal and dependent, having no more to offer than others, and no more right to life. But thought, speech, and feeling do render us mysteriously transcendent, different from the rest of nature. Yes, we ARE "in" nature, but we are not just another animal. No doubt we have caused more trouble in the world than any other creature, but we are also more capable of redemption, and of making a difference. Then there is...
- 3) **Humanity "with" nature:** Perhaps more of a possibility than an actual, practiced version of the relationship between humanity and nature. Not above nature; not in nature; but with nature. "With" is the right preposition, because it connotes both sameness and difference. It connotes both being together and being apart. Yes, we are different from

the beasts of the field and the birds of the air. We have thoughts, speech, and feelings. We make choices, or suffer from the lack of choosing. But the purpose of being different in our sameness with other creatures is to have the kind of dominion over them that is like the dominion of Jesus Christ—that mimics the compassionate “dominion” of Jesus: servants, caregivers, trustees responsible for the welfare of all God’s creatures, and the welfare of our mutual home, our only home.

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Glaciers melting...oceans rising...shorelines eroding...the Great Barrier Reef in jeopardy...monsters of plastic floating...mega drought looming...bee colonies dying...species at risk...

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