

Righteous Rule

Psalm 8

1 O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. 2 From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise because of your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger.

3 When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, 4 what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? 5 You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. 6 You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet: 7 all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, 8 the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas.

9 O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Genesis 1:1-2:4a

1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

2 Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. 3 And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. 4 God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night." And there was evening, and there was morning-- the first day.

6 And God said, "Let there be an expanse between the waters to separate water from water." 7 So God made the expanse and separated the water under the expanse from the water above it. And it was so. 8 God called the expanse "sky." And there was evening, and there was morning-- the second day.

9 And God said, "Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear." And it was so. 10 God called the dry ground "land," and the gathered waters he called "seas." And God saw that it was good.

11 Then God said, "Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds." And it was so. 12 The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. 13 And there was evening, and there was morning-- the third day.

14 And God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark seasons and days and years, 15 and let them be lights in the expanse of the sky to give light on the earth." And it was so. 16 God made two great lights-- the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars. 17 God set them in the expanse of the sky to give light on the earth, 18 to govern the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that it was good. 19 And there was evening, and there was morning-- the fourth day.

20 And God said, "Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the sky." 21 So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living and moving thing with which the water teems, according to their kinds, and every

winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. 22 God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth." 23 And there was evening, and there was morning-- the fifth day.

24 And God said, "Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: livestock, creatures that move along the ground, and wild animals, each according to its kind." And it was so. 25 God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.

26 Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." 27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

28 God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground." 29 Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. 30 And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground-- everything that has the breath of life in it-- I give every green plant for food." And it was so. 31 God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning-- the sixth day.

2:1 Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. 2 By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. 3 And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

4 This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

All this week, since last Sunday afternoon, I have been troubled. From sunrise to sunset, my mind has been distracted, my spirit disturbed, my body tense and alert.

I've felt this way all this week not because of anything I've heard from a church member, and not because of any misfortune that has befallen my family, and not even because of any lingering questions or doubts about my installation this afternoon.

No, this is much more insidious, much more elusive than any of those things.

Let me explain.

Last Sunday afternoon, the kids and I were playing together in the backyard - leaving Lisa alone in the house, the best mother's day gift I could give her right now – when suddenly we heard a strange noise. It was a loud banging, with a metallic ring to it, like someone with a heavy hammer repeatedly striking a thick piece of sheet metal. It sounded close, but neither of our neighbors were the cause. It wasn't until I followed the racket around to the front of the house, that I discovered who was responsible.

It was a woodpecker. A downy woodpecker to be precise. Perched high up on our gutter, it was banging away at the soffit and flashing.

How strange, I thought. What is that bird doing up there. Were there big tasty bugs living in our gutters? Fat, juicy insects nested in our eaves? I waited and waited to see the bird fly off with something in its beak, or to eat its fill and move on. But it did not. The woodpecker wasn't after food. It was just there to pound.

And pound the woodpecker did, with gusto, right through the afternoon, until the sun began to set. There it was and there it stayed, afternoon and evening, the first day.

Now I didn't think much about the woodpecker that night, not until the first rays of sunlight began peeking over the eastern horizon. That's when it began again. Bang, bang, bang,

pounding on our gutters, since our bedroom is on our second floor, it was now only 10 feet from my pillow.

The worst part was that this time, I wasn't the only one it disturbed. No, this time, at 25 minutes after 5 o'clock, that determined, single-minded, aluminum-fettished woodpecker got the attention of our whole family. The bird woke the kids.

Those of you who have had a child in your home know that good sleep is absolutely key to survival – both yours and theirs. In our house, it is a capital offense to wake a sleeping child.

With blurry eyes and stumbling feet I made my way outside, and just to be sure, looked up at the gutter that overhangs our bedroom windows. There it was. I looked up at the bird, and the bird looked down on me. And the pounding began again.

Off and on again, in unpredictable, undefeatable, bursts, the woodpecker continued. At times I would lean out our upstairs bathroom window, bang on the siding just feet from where he perched, but to no avail. I even went so far as to dig up my old slingshot and fling a few stones in his direction, but nothing would shake him.

There it remained, pounding and pounding, morning and evening, the second day. And then the third. And the fourth. And the fifth. Right through the week. The bird woke me up today.

This is not right. This is not what God intended for our relationship with the world He created.

Yet, the fact that I am now engaged in mortal combat with a bird the size of a coffee cup has actually aided my reflections on this first chapter of Genesis. Out of that whole long passage we read today, there's been one word, a single word that keeps grabbing my thoughts and my attention. It's in verse 28, where God speaks to man and woman and blesses them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over it..." That one word, "dominion" (RSV), also translated as "rule" (NIV) or "be masters over" (NLT) has held my focus all week long.

This is not the only place in Scripture where God directs humanity to “rule” over the natural world God created. In our first reading, Psalm 8, we hear that, “we are to rule over the works of God's hands; that we are to put everything under our feet: 7 all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, 8 the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,”

Further on in Genesis, after Noah lands the ark and begins to let the animals loose, God says, “All the wild animals, large and small, and all the birds and fish will be afraid of you. I have placed them in your power.” (9:2 NLT)

It sounds like God has taken creation, this marvelous, mysterious world, and moved control of it from his hands, and placed it into ours. It is a mighty generous act on God's part, a gracious recognition that humanity, that all men and women, children and adults, are fashioned after God's own image and likeness. As it says, we resemble God, a distinction that separates us from all other living creatures on earth. With such great privilege, comes great responsibility.

What does it mean that we are to rule the earth? What does it mean that God has given us dominion over the things that God created? What rights and mandates does it give us? How then, are we to respond, when that woodpecker starts knocking on your house?

The quick answer to that is to say, “Well, we can do as we please, we can do as we desire, and let the earth yield before us.” It sounds great, but it doesn't always work out to our favor. I don't have to dig too far back into the headlines to find examples.

Take, for instance, the earthquake in China, or the cyclone in Burma. How about the tidal wave that smashed into Indonesia? The hurricane called Katrina? What does our claim to dominion over nature mean to them? Apparently not much.

If I have authority to rule over the animal world, then why can germs make me sick? Why can bees and wasps sting me? Why can't I get a fish to bite, or a turkey to come when I call? I

can't even get my neighbor's chickens to yield to the front of my car. And that woodpecker? I'm embarrassed to say what means I'm now employing to silence his incessant pounding.

The beliefs and principles that shape our relationship to nature effects our communities in a very real and lasting way. Think about all the print in the newspaper and all the talk in our area now focused on land leases, and gas companies, and the potential for drilling and for profits, right here in our own backyards. And the questions and the arguments that arise are manifold: "Do we or don't we? Should we or shouldn't we? Can we afford to? Can we afford not to?" What kind of legacy, then, will we leave?

Maybe "dominion" and "rule" and "mastery" over this earth, over all the life that lives upon it, over all the processes that shape it and run it, is not as easy as it first appears.

In this reflection about our relationship with the world that God has made, maybe we'd do better by starting with an understanding of what sort of "rule" God has given us.

Commentator Gordon Wenham says it well, "Because man is created in God's image, he is king over nature. He rules the world on God's behalf. This is of course not license for the unbridled exploitation and subjugation of nature. Ancient kings were expected to be devoted to the welfare of their subjects, especially the poorest and weakest members of society. By upholding [God's] principles of law and justice, rulers promoted peace and prosperity for all their subjects. Similarly, [here in Genesis] mankind is commissioned to rule nature as a benevolent king, acting as God's representative over [creature and creation] and therefore treating them [both] in the same way as God who created them. Thus animals, though subject to man, are viewed as his companions in Genesis 2:18. Noah, portrayed as [the] uniquely righteous [person in the world in his time] (6:9) is also the arch-conservationist who built an ark to preserve all kinds of life from being destroyed in the flood."¹

What the Scripture means in regard to our relationship with creation is that we are to treat this world, the natural world and all who inhabit it, in the same way that God has treated us. That

1 Wenham, G. World Biblical Commentary: Genesis, vol. 1. pg. 33.

is, with grace, and love, not as dictators, but rather as caretakers and stewards. We are to rule the earth with the same kind of love that God has shown to us in our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is also good for us to remember that while we may rule over creation, we're also part of it. We were made just as all other creatures, waters, skies, planets, and stars – God spoke us into being. We are not the top of the food chain. God is. God knows that when we selfishly take from the world out of greed, or lust, out of convenience, or love of money, we're also responding in those ways to Him. Him who loved us, Him who died for us.

Now, thousands of years after these words in Genesis were first recorded and read, we can clearly see the consequences of ruling this world in a way that is short-sighted, take it now and consider the effects later. It's certainly no garden of Eden out there. Conserving energy and resources, living simply and thinking environmentally is no longer just for the hippies and the tree-huggers. We're all starting to see and feel the costs of the abuse of our unrestrained authority over creation.

Indeed, regular gas may surpass \$4.00 a gallon even before this sermon ends. And that's nothing to laugh about.

Maybe if we understand our treatment, our use, our manipulation of nature as a reflection of our faith in a God who not only cares for, but even sacrifices for his beloved children, maybe then we can start to restore some of the damage we have done.

We are to reign, rule, have dominion over, in same way Christ Jesus our Lord rules over us, way of mercy, grace, service through sacrifice. God has made us rulers, but only so that we may rule as he does. May we treat the world around us, and those with whom we share it, according to his word.

Praise be to God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.