

WINGS OF THE DOVE  
THE END OF THE EARTH

Texts on Sunday, October 7, 2012

*Genesis 1; Luke 6: 17-26*

IN 1968, THE JOURNAL *Science* published an essay by Garrett Hardin called ["The Tragedy of the Commons."](#) The title derives from an analogy Hardin offers, set in a green, or commons, serving farmers who have no land of their own. They graze their creatures on the commons and, at the right time, take them to market. From the point of view of each farmer, Hardin observes, it always makes sense to add another animal to his fold. The costs of feeding the animal are divided among all, but the benefits at market will be his alone. Now, as for one, so for all. All might separately see that the grass has been getting thinner or that the creatures fetch less at sale, but these facts alone cannot convince the individual farmer to withhold his creatures from the commons to help it recover. On the contrary, his losses would impel him to add more creatures, and more—and so likewise would all do—until the commons is ruined. "Ruin," concludes Hardin, "is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons. Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all." In other words, when it comes to using public goods, the "invisible hand" of Adam Smith and free-market capitalism is ignorant, greedy, and destructive.

The only way to avert the tragedy of the commons is for the commoners to make laws to restrict people from looking only to their own interests when using the common wealth, so that the costs and benefits are shared by all, including all future generations. This is a moral duty of the highest order, and I believe Americans red or blue would grasp it, if any leader ever spoke it. Imagine a presidential debate where they thought about such things! Denial may be the norm in all great power societies—ours, at any rate, is deep in denial about the ruin we are facing. The people seem unbothered that one of their candidates for president claims to have been converted from his former error in believing that global warming is caused by burning fossil fuels, while the other candidate, who probably still believes this, says so no more. They both know the drill of plutocracy. It's drill, baby, drill all the way down!

For many weeks, our sermons here at The Riverside Church have lifted up one and another of the great problems we face, yet around which we Americans can form no joined will to solve the crises. Today, we are going to think about the environment, which is, after all, *the commons*—the big green we all share and over which, according to Genesis, God has given all humans "dominion," that we might "fill the earth and subdue it!" Let it be said that this commandment of God is rather different from all the others, for this one we've

performed eagerly, to the letter of the law. The Earth: we filled it, and we subdued it. But unlike a horse or a tractor which the master takes back to the shed when its work is done, we don't know who our master is any more, or when to rest. We are going to keep filling this earth and subduing it until it is subdone!

We don't know what the Earth is for anymore, what end the Earth should serve. We don't know whether we are supposed to be master or servant. A few years ago, an article in *Tikkun* magazine argued that any professor of any subject whatsoever who does not interpret her subject in terms of global warming is committing educational malpractice. At the time, I resisted the argument. Now, with each passing season, I only hear in it the town crier on the commons, shouting Jesus' warning to all the rich and the full: *Woe to you, for you have already received all the good you're going to get. Woe to you, for you will go hungry, you will mourn and weep. Woe to us if we do not wake!*

Last August, in a *Rolling Stone* story entitled "[Global Warming's Terrible New Math](#)," Bill McKibben put out three numbers worth memorizing. The first is 2, as in 2° Celsius. According to international agreements of politicians and scientists, 2° C. is the maximum additional warming our planet can absorb before misery and destruction break out everywhere. The second number is 535, the amount of additional gigatons of CO<sub>2</sub> which, if released up into the air from the subterranean vaults of fossil-fuels, would push the globe to the 2° C. limit. The third number is the most troubling. It quantifies the CO<sub>2</sub> still locked up in the known reserves of fossil fuels, reserves which companies and countries already think they own and which they are already trying to extract from the earth. The number is 2,795 gigatons, five times greater than what humanity as a whole can afford to release without baking the planet we know. 2795 represents the fuel they are counting on for profits over the next twenty years. 2795 underwrites their *current* stock prices. But if all these vaults of energy are opened and their contents burned, they, or we, will blow through the 2° limit on global warming five times over. Eighty percent of known reserves must forever stay in the ground—if we are to have a cool future. *Woe to you rich, for you have already received all the good you're going to get.*

We're in trouble, yet in America, religion is one of the power tools of denial. Hey, when you want to get your way, you go right to the top. During a radio talk show last March, Sen. Inhofe of Oklahoma offered this: "Genesis 8:22 [says] that 'as long as the earth remains there will be springtime and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, day and night.' My point is, God's still up there. The arrogance of people to think that we human beings would be able to change what He is doing in the climate is outrageous." Wow! A god like that man's makes a million new atheists a year. Here's how wrong he is.

September 2012 was the 328<sup>th</sup> consecutive month in which the average global temperature exceeded the average figure set throughout the whole of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Someone calculated the odds of this occurring randomly at about 1 to a googol! Even the *Wall Street Journal* reported that this summer, for the first time in weather recording history, all of the ice sheet over Greenland began to melt. Not even the greenest of green scientists had predicted this could come so soon. Why, just twenty years ago, according to McKibben, environmental scientists were sure that it would take 10,000 years for ice sheets to melt like this. Now, it has just happened.

That puts a new spin on the hymn—*When we've been here ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, we've no less days to sing God's praise . . .* Oh yes, we do have less days. We are at the beginning of an utterly new world. The ten thousand year span of welcoming climates in which even our ancient scriptures were written is coming to an end—and God has nothing to do with it. We ourselves are responsible for our dominion. We ourselves brought upon all creatures great and small the change that's going to come. And *that* is where God comes in, for God doesn't put the finger on climate control. God's finger is on "we ourselves." If we don't feel that finger, woe to us. But if we will feel the divine touch, and respond, then we will change ourselves. We will become masters of ourselves, and servants of our Creator. We will soberly realize, as the late Barry Commoner always said, "Everything is connected." And we will see that the air where we are dumping the CO<sub>2</sub> from our fuels is our commons, our big green, and that freedom in that commons is bringing ruin to all. We must grow profoundly suspicious when politicians speak of "freedom," for mostly they mean the freedom of the powerful to use the commons for their own profit. We will rather learn Hegel's definition: "Freedom is the recognition of necessity."

I hope you will go from here today having made a stronger connection between science and scripture, between politics and the priesthood of all believers than religion ordinarily supports. Consider this. Although environmentalists often jump on Genesis 1 and the "dominion" clause as a prime cause of the rapacious attitude of westerners toward the earth. the accusation seems a bit silly, for it does not account for the counter-weights found throughout the scriptures, nor for why they are roundly ignored.

The gem in Genesis is not dominion, but rather that enigmatic poetry telling us that we are created in the image of God. Thousands of books have sparked from that fiery phrase. It is as if we were trying to see in a glass darkly our own image—who we are. Look, in this story, what we are told of God's nature has but two characteristics. One: God has power to fill the earth and to subdue it with laws and limits. Two: God shares God's power with creatures of no power by making them in the divine image. The lesson is as

plain as the nose on your face. The image of God is that of creative power willing and able to relinquish power to those who need it and can use it. This is the gospel, bright shining as the Son. This is what love means, as the scriptures hold it—that if they are human, and not driven animals, people who have power will give up power to those who need it at the right time. Conversely, to the degree we are attached to our own freedom to amass power and wealth, regardless of consequences to unknown others and generations to come, to that degree, we or the corporations we run, are simply not human—that is, not created in the image of God, but only dull shards of brute power and domination, denying the gift of God.

When we feel the power to pull our perspective away from the small frame of our immediate self interest to look at the whole, to see how everything is connected to everything, then we are participating in the image of God. Then we see, for example, that in a single century, we unwrapped solar energies laid down over eons in the fossil fuels. Like ignorant children, we had no idea of the consequences of our tearing open these packages, beyond what served our immediate needs. Now we are growing up. We see what we have done. We feel remorse, but we also feel empowered to act, to master ourselves. Those who deny all this are spiritually blind. They want to keep their life as it was, but they will lose it if they are unwilling to live into the image of God within.

Very difficult times are coming, no doubt. For these times, leaders must come from below. From those who are poor and hungry now; from those who have been weeping; from people not afraid when “they exclude you and revile you and defame you on account of your confidence in the image of God, the Son of humanity,” who reveals what freedom really is: the power to let go at the right time. The fact is that people of all faiths, if they are inwardly freed from material grasping and anxiety, can see what the end of the Earth is, what it is here for. It is here for a laboratory to develop and practice the powers of God; to create the new and to share power with any who need it. Real democracy— including community organizing, laws fit for seven generations to come, and love big enough to overcome the hatred and violence thrown up from those who fear they have much to lose—is a step on the path of what God is doing, drawing beings into Godself in God’s own image.

May the manner of your living and the end of your Earth become like a parable of which God shall say, *It is exceedingly good.*