

THE EARTH SHALL BE FULL

Texts on Sunday, April 3, 2011

Genesis 1: 26-31; Luke 16: 19-31

In the wake of the Gulf oil spill last spring and summer; in the mental after-shock of not knowing the fallout from the nuclear reactors now burning in Japan, how strange to hear the Lord's command to the human, male and female: "Fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea . . . and over every living thing that moves." Reverberations from this passage passed through me the other day as morning news brought the smooth tones of Gov. Haley Barbour trying out presidential-sounding timbres for the Conservative Principles Conference in Des Moines, Iowa: "We need more oil," he said. "We need more gas. We need more coal. We need more nuclear. We need more American energy."

How fast we forget how the question lingered ominously for much of last year, whether in utter ignorance we had broken a hole in the floor of the sea which would never be stopped! Just in January, nuclear reactors received a green light from President Obama because they do not toss greenhouse gases over our heads. But no nation has solved the problem of nuclear waste storage. We wrap those wastes in blankets and promise to put guards at the door . . . for the next 10,000 years. Let the children figure it out. I have here a copy of the self-evaluation we submitted to God at our centennial performance review: *We've gone and done pretty much like you said, God. We've filled the earth and we've subdued it. In our opinion, we have done Excellent on this goal. Got any other planets you want us to have dominion over?*

Now, I am saying "we" blew—not BP blew—that hole in the ocean, for example. I know, it is satisfying to blame "them"—to have devils to despise. Have you seen *Inside Job*, the Academy Award-winning documentary of how men—yes, men—drove the world economies over a cliff? Several times, I think, I shouted *Criminals!* at the screen. Did you see *Food, Inc?* *Criminals! Waiting for Superman?* *Cowards! Capitalism: A Love Story?* You get the idea. The point is, pointing the finger is a small act. In isolation, it is useless and even a kind of collusion with evil—a ♪ type of "weak resignation to the evils we deplore." Our Lenten meditations this year commit us to see sins which we commit collectively. Cursing the men with power to do big things is not a worthy practice. We are the ones who are driving the cars that are busting our budgets and making us moan at politicians and presidents to push prices down, so drill, baby, drill. This is our game, 100%. You cannot get innocent of American power and privilege if you live here.

Sr. Joan Chittister tells how for long years after she entered the Benedictine order, she disdained her fellow sisters for their petty emotional needs and their feeble efforts to master themselves. After a time, she was sent to a South American mission. There, she ministered with people who pick ^ fruit for export—people whose whole day earns them only the price we pay for one bowl of that fruit. Chittister suddenly saw that as an American, she was involved in a system of behaviors she hated, but from which she could not extricate herself. On return home, what would she do to change the relationship of oppression? Boycott the fruits? Send guilt money south? In this respect, she saw she was not at all different from the sisters who could not control their cravings and cruelties. Her sense of superiority drained away in humility. In seeing her sin collectively, she joined the human race and began to live the life of a contemplative Christian social activist, whose daily soul service serves society.

So what has become of our dominion over every living thing? Not a few environmentalists hold this passage in contempt as an assertion of appalling *hubris* and then proceed to blame it for authorizing all the Western powers' economic and ecological domination and violence. This seems to me naïve. The Genesis poet certainly sensed the breadth of human powers over living things, but for more than two thousand years after he wrote, humankind remained balanced in the scales of nature. Men and women lived and died and none left a permanent trace on the face of the earth. Empires rose on blood and wealth as always, and faded away. In another age, Samuel Johnson could write, "How small of all that human hearts endure / That part that laws or kings can cause or cure." A balance—yet perhaps no longer so.

We must take note that human dominion, which is rooted in our ever-developing capacities of mind, has given rise to technologies and practices which have both freed *and* enslaved, have both enriched *and* impoverished, have both healed *and* destroyed. If you aim to turn back the clock to a simpler day or a smaller population more connected to the land, you also will return to chattel slavery and white male suffrage. I say this not to praise our present powers, nor us who benefit from them, but simply to stand realistically in the present situation. There is no past to return to, nor any development in the human mind that can wisely be excluded as a pure evil. The question is, What might dominion be if it were manifest as a gift of God?

Time is too short here to lengthen the litany of griefs which our culture is inflicting on the earth and on its humblest dwellers, the *anawim ha-aretz*; hold them rather in your prayer each day. Let us instead probe for something more basic. What moves us to abuse the earth however we like and to ignore the consequences? The answer is readily at hand. It is our self-concern, our interest in our own case, that moves us to place a tight frame

around our reality and to choose to see no more than fits in the frame we ourselves have selected, though we deny that. At Sing Sing prison this spring, I am teaching a course in ethics. How satisfying it is to work with minds who are eager to reframe and again reframe new possibilities for moral action, beginning with their own crimes, extending to the crimes of the prison system, and thence to the crimes of societies and nations, often re-connecting and avowing their own part in this intricate web of sorrows. Can we do the same without feeling overcome by guilt?

The main frame which tightly constricts our view of the great evils of domination is the time frame. We feel we must act now to get now. Why, we spent thirty years preparing the ground for the 2008 economic disaster, deregulating left and right as if we were back in the garden of Eden, innocent of temptations and able to eat of every good thing. Thirty years to that calamity—but the President had hardly more than thirty days before we blamed him for not fixing the whole mess. Our time frame is tiny. We want what we want now or we explode in fear and anger.

Our place frame is tiny. We call ours an information economy, but nothing has repealed our need of food and clothing, of lumber and stones to shelter beneath. In every conceivable way, our bodies, which are the center of economies, are made from the earth. Yet as we shop, especially we urban dwellers do not see the land which gives us life nor its creatures nor its caretakers. Our frames of need and desire are tiny, though our appetites are huge.

We have compassion for our grandchildren—our own, that is—but we do not as a people act like (or tax ourselves like) kindly, generous grandparents who include their littlest ones within the frame of their concern, as they work out their wills. No, we say, *We need more oil. We need more gas.* We are ourselves so reactive to our own case, and so blind to reality that, although we plainly have dominance over all things living, we must confess that we have no dominion within, no government over our own self. How else can Americans explain that degraded expression of democracy we have installed in our state houses and capitals than to admit that what we see there as confusion and fear for losing the next election (the tiny time frame again) perfectly reflects the inner confusion of a populace manifestly afraid of personal oblivion.

In the Genesis story, the human does not simply have dominion, but God gives it. Therein lies the clue to true and false dominion. If God, who has dominion, gives dominion to God's partners, then *sharing* dominion is dominion's true pattern. We cannot fully claim the gift as our own unless we in turn give dominion away wherever, whenever possible. Only power-

sharing is power from God. Domination, manipulation, violence—these have nothing to do with the Lord’s dominion. They are not like the Lord’s dominion, but like powers from lower realms, where fear and hatred rule.

I want to read to you from an autobiography called *Feed My Sheep*, by Terry Cummins. Here is a sign of the Lord’s dominion on earth:

When you see that you’re making other things feel good, it gives you a good feeling, too. The feeling inside sort of just happens, and you can’t say this did it or that did it. It’s the many little things. It doesn’t seem that taking sweat-soaked harnesses off tired, hot horses would be something that would make you notice. Opening a barn door for the sheep standing out in a cold rain, or throwing a few grains of corn to the chickens are small things, but these little things begin to add up in you, and you can begin to understand that you’re important. You may not be real important like people who do great things that you read about in the newspaper, but you begin to feel that you’re important to all the life around you. Nobody else knows or cares too much about what you do, but if you get a good feeling inside about what you do, then it doesn’t matter if nobody else knows. I do think about myself a lot when I’m alone way back on the place, bringing in the cows or sitting on a mowing machine all day. When I start thinking about how animals and crops and fields and woods and gardens sort of all fit together, then I get that good feeling inside and don’t worry much about what will happen to me. (Quoted in Wendell Berry’s *The Way of Ignorance*, p. 100)

That’s it. That is the sign of the blessing of true dominion: when you are serving well and not afraid and don’t worry much about what will happen to you. If you don’t feel it, pray for it. Or like the farmer, simply serve something. That may be prayer enough. Receive your blessing.

Friends, our Bible is full of sober warnings to that part of us which lives afraid and sees only its own case, inside a tiny frame. We have filled the earth with our fears. Yet still we come to the table of our Lord, set with no more than ordinary bread that grew in some field on the great plains and the simple fruits of the vine—only these to recall us to stand with our Lord, body and blood entire, ready to give what is called for, that we may receive the kingdom, that government-within which is the truest our heart can conceive. There all things are one and seen as one within one eternal frame. There the prophet’s word rings out over all time and place, “The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.” (Isaiah 11:9)

Rev. Stephen H. Phelps

*The Riverside Church
in the City of New York*

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