

The Land of the Great Turtles

An Earth Day Sermon

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*Title slide-Earth Day

April 22nd has been designated Earth Day. The first Earth Day was in 1970. Think back to the early 70's if you were around then. If not, think about what you know of that time period. With regard to the environment, how was life different in our country?

- “Keep America Beautiful.” (Native American with tear, from Ad council)
- Leaded gas
- V8 engines
- No limits on industrial air pollution

Most Americans were not tuned in to environmental concerns. Change was in the air though, for in 1962, the New York Times bestseller *Silent Spring*, by Rachel Carlson, had been published and it started a national conversation. The book represented a watershed moment, raising public awareness and concern for how pollution affects human beings, animals, and the environment. Earth Day 1970 gave voice to that emerging consciousness, channeling the energy of the anti-war protest movement and putting environmental concerns on the front page.

*The idea for Earth Day came from Senator Gaylord Nelson, from Wisconsin who was stunned in 1969, by an enormous oil spill in Santa Barbara, CA. Nelson and his people organized rallies all over the country and more than 20 million people, among them, many college students on spring break, raised their voices and their protest signs to demand healthy, sustainable environmental policies.

*They protested oil spills, polluting factories and power plants, raw sewage, toxic dumps, pesticides, freeways, the loss of wilderness, and the extinction of wildlife. According to Earthday.org, “Earth Day 1970 achieved a rare political alignment, enlisting support from Republicans

and Democrats, rich and poor, city slickers and farmers, tycoons and labor leaders. By the end of that year, the first Earth Day led to the formation of the United States Environmental Protection Agency and the passage of the Clean Air, Clean Water, and Endangered Species Acts.

Today, 48 years later, we continue to struggle with what our responsibility is with regard to the environment and the creatures with which we share this Earth. Long before the EPA, long before Democrats and Republicans, long before smokestacks, electricity, and oil rigs, human beings were talking about the connection human beings have with the rest of creation. The story I read to the children today is an example of one way those conversations have taken place. Through their oral story-telling tradition, the Cherokee people taught their children the importance of caring for the Earth and all creatures.

In the story, the Creator gave the people a beautiful island with all they needed to live happy, healthy lives. It all only came with one rule---take care of the land and the animals.

*I think how we say that today is, "You had one job."

The children in the story made the choice, instead of caring for the turtles, to use the turtles. Yes, instead of *caring* for the turtles, they *used* the turtles. I don't know about you, but I can think of some ways we behave exactly like those children.

*The one that came immediately to my mind was trophy hunting. Human beings kill animals for their own entertainment. Not to eat them, but to take pictures with them, or display their heads on their "man cave" walls.

What are the ways you see us *using* what God has created, rather than *caring* for it?

Like the Cherokee story, there are stories in the Bible that are meant to teach us about the interconnectedness of all of creation. The story of

the great turtles, in some ways, parallels the creation stories in the Hebrew Bible. God created human beings in God's image. This means that in some ways, human beings are like God. Hopefully, one way we are like God has to do with how we interact with other human beings and with all of creation. In the creation story in Genesis 1, God puts human beings in charge of all God created, just as the people in the Cherokee story were entrusted with the turtles.

*This is what it says in Genesis 1:28, "God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." This is the verse we cite when talking about our responsibilities toward creation.

Let's look at the two underlined words in this verse, "subdue" and "dominion," because these words carry with them a dangerous bias. So, here's a quick Hebrew lesson.

The word "subdue" in Hebrew is *kabash*. We can't dance around it; it does mean "subdue" or "enslave." But here's the catch: it only means this when the one being subdued is already hostile. It's used with regard to military enemies in scripture. In biblical terms, not to subdue an attacking army would lead to death. So, how does this apply to creation?

There are times, when for the good of the whole, nature needs to be subdued. There are practices that temporarily subdue nature which bring about increased abundance. One example of this is the practice of pruning. We trim bushes and trees to stimulate growth and increase productivity. Controlled burning is another example of subduing nature to bring about abundance. Controlled burning stimulates the germination of desirable plants and trees, renewing the land and forests. We have benefited from the wisdom of our Native American brothers and sisters who used fire across Oklahoma to provide better access to water sources and land, improve hunting, and to rid the land of undesirable species so they could farm. We should not confuse these practices with activities which destroy creation permanently. It's the

difference between hunting an overpopulated species and hunting an endangered species.

Let's move on to the Hebrew word for "dominion." That word is *radah*. It is a word often used to describe the way in which a king would behave toward the people with whom he is entrusted. Consider what qualities God desires in a king.

*In a tirade against Israel's kings, God said through Ezekiel, "You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them." The dominion God desires protects the defenseless and gives justice to the oppressed.

If we think of this in terms of our role to exercise dominion over creation, we see that while we rule over creation, we're called to protect it. As a king should take care of the the ones who are vulnerable in his kingdom, we are called to protect the environment, preserve God's creatures, and even to restore the places which we have too often ruled "with force and harshness." This week, I read a blog by Presbyterian minister Christopher Brown. In that post, he wrote his own paraphrase of Genesis 1:28, "Be fruitful and have children, filling the earth with your life so that you can have power to fight against everything in it that leads to death. Rule with care and fairness over the natural world, over the myriads of My beautiful creatures – from tropical fish to soaring eagles to dogs and cats – every creature that is a part of this living world."

*Both the Cherokee story and the creation stories in Genesis, as well as stories from other traditions, highlight the thing it seems human beings have always known yet have often forgotten...we are connected to all of creation by the One who does the creating. And because we are connected, our taking care of the environment and the other creatures we share the Earth with, ought to be a priority. A friend asked me this week, when we were talking about our struggle to eat the right things,

how I think about eating meat with regard to our call to care for the environment and other creatures. I understand the question. I don't think we can both care for a chicken and eat it. I also know that raising animals for food isn't the best thing for the environment. I was honest with my friend and told her I have the same thoughts and questions and I daily question my own commitment to our call as God's caretakers in the world.

I know that I have work to do better in my own life and there are many changes I can make to be a better steward of creation. I thought I would share some cool ideas I came across this week.

*If you are someone who prefers to drink from a straw, use stainless steel straws. We use millions of plastic straws in our country every day. Often these straws end up in water sources, doing damage to animals and fish who live there.

*If you use dryer sheets in your dryer to soften clothes, consider using wool balls. They soften clothes and cut drying time in half, saving energy.

*Most of us are aware that it's good to take reusable bags to the grocery store in order to bag our groceries. One thing we may not be aware of is there are reusable produce bags that we can use for fruits and vegetables. Anytime we can avoid using disposable products that is a good thing. I learned this week that 91% of the plastic produced since the 50's has not been recycled.

*And did you there is reusable wrapping paper? And no, I don't mean the paper crumpled, faded wrapping paper that Aunt Ida has reused every Christmas for the last 10 years. This wrapping is pretty and it's made of beeswax! And look at those cute little cloth ribbons!

I'm not suggesting these ideas are all we can do or even that these are the most effective changes we can make. What I am saying is that there are things we can all do. If recycling has been challenging for you, get some help from someone who has been doing it for a while. It's all

about having a system you can live with. The truth is, anything we do is better than doing nothing.

*I watched a video this week of a conversation between scientist Bill Nye and Ken Ham, the creator of the Creation Museum and the Ark Encounter. You may have seen and heard these men debate each other. This particular conversation took place while Ham was giving Nye a tour of the Ark Encounter. As you can imagine, it was an awkward conversation. One of the exchanges was especially troubling to me. You probably know, the two men have very different ideas, including about what happens to human beings when we die. My guess is there are different ideas about that even in this room.

In response to Nye's view that when we die, we just die and that's the end of us, Ham asked him why science matters, why taking care of the Earth matters, if we are all just going to die anyway. In other words, since Nye doesn't believe in an eternal afterlife, why bother to learn, why care how things work or bother to find the answers to big questions? Bill Nye asked Ham, "Don't you want to leave the world better than you found it?"

As a Christian, who believes God is the Creator, I found myself embarrassed. I think I felt embarrassed because the idea that what we do with our lives, and the choices we make, doesn't matter is not biblical at all. Mr. Ham claims his tourist attractions and way of being in the world is based on "God's word." I am not critiquing his faith...he has a right to believe what he wants to believe...we all do. However, I believe our faith is nothing if it doesn't affect how we live today. God did not create this world for us to use, for us to take what we want since we aren't here for very long anyway. The reality is, just as there were consequences for the Cherokee people *in The Land of the Great Turtles*, there are consequences to our carelessness as well. Earth Day is an opportunity for us to pause to appreciate the beauty in the world around us and also to remind ourselves that we can do better. We have one job...to care for what and who God has created.

I will end this morning with a wisdom from our Native American brothers and sisters. Thanks to Pat Brown for sharing it with me. "We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors. We borrow it from our children." Amen.