

How Forgiving is the Earth?

Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
September 16, 2018

Reading

Genesis 1:25-31.

translated by Eugene Peterson

God spoke: "Earth, generate life! Every sort and kind: cattle and reptiles and wild animals - all kinds." And there it was: wild animals of every kind, Cattle of all kinds, every sort of reptile and bug. God saw that it was good. God spoke: "Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature so they can be responsible for the fish in the sea, the birds in the air, the cattle, And, yes, Earth itself, and every animal that moves on the face of Earth." God created human beings; he created them godlike, Reflecting God's nature. He created them male and female. God blessed them: "Prosper! Reproduce! Fill Earth! Take charge! Be responsible for fish in the sea and birds in the air, for every living thing that moves on the face of Earth." Then God said, "I've given you every sort of seed-bearing plant on Earth And every kind of fruit-bearing tree, given them to you for food. To all animals and all birds, everything that moves and breathes, I give whatever grows out of the ground for food." And there it was. God looked over everything he had made; it was so good, so very good! It was evening, it was morning - Day Six.

Sermon

We live at the end of a dead-end street and at the edge of the woods. If I didn't mow the lawn and have trees and bushes occasionally pruned, it wouldn't be long before our home would be quite overgrown and over taken by high grass, brush, and eventually more trees.

So, yes, we human beings are part of the natural world – but this has never meant that we must be completely hands-off in our relation to the non-human parts of nature just letting nature be (as if we could even do that...).

For we are, depending on how you look at it, blessed or cursed with the need to make conscious decisions when it comes to how we relate to the rest of the natural world: From how often to mow your own back yard, what sort of fertilizers, if any, to use, when or if to cut down an old tree dangerously overhanging your roof... to policy decisions on national and global scales.

And it seems to me that the challenge of making such decisions was actually laid out in the first chapter of Genesis, which outlines the seven days of creation (six actually, plus the seventh day of rest) in grand, magisterial terms – from “In the beginning” to “Let there be light” to “it was very good” to “God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all the work of creating that he had done.”

(Of course God (being God after all) didn't need to rest, but was you might say setting a good example for the rest of us.)

In any case, the first chapter of Genesis portrays the creation of what we might consider, as we read it, to be a perfectly ordered world – from light to water and land and eventually the creatures of the sea and finally on the sixth day the creatures of the land, including human beings – an elegant, poetic rendering of what we now know scientifically about the origins of the universe and evolution of life on earth.

A beautifully ordered, even perfect, Creation! So it might almost seem.

But anyone with an ounce of intelligence and feeling looks around and can see plenty that *doesn't* seem particularly perfect: suffering, foolishness, evil – from a personal level to, certainly in our time, a planetary scale. So - how do we account for this? Well, in good measure that's what the second story in Genesis is about, the story of Adam and Eve in chapters two and three. Now, I'm not going to say much about that story this morning, other than to note, importantly, that however else you might understand it or argue with it, this ancient folk tale (older than the material in chapter one) is an attempt to account for why it is that there is suffering and sorrow in this otherwise beautiful creation.

But actually, even in chapter one, the fact that humans are, as we heard in the reading, enjoined to take care of the creation suggests that we don't always do a good job of it – why else would we need the reminder?

But... *take care* of creation? Don't the usual translations tell us to have "dominion" over the creation, to "subdue" it? Sounds like the source not of planetary care but of all our planetary woes.

This said, the translation we heard earlier of the day six passage strives to elucidate the real intent of those words.

To begin with, the Hebrew usually translated as "dominion" is *radah*, which in other biblical contexts has to do with the dominating rule of a king. That too doesn't sound very good. But it is clear from elsewhere in the Bible what sort of king is preferred by the prophets and the psalmist (and therefore by God in traditional understandings). In Psalm 72, for example, such a king is described like this:

He delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. He has pity on the weak and the needy and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight.

All this said, though, even without unpacking the original meanings of the words, when it comes to "dominion" over the earth and its creatures, the reality is that we *are* the dominant species on the planet and had better get used to it and get better at it.

Many scientists have now named the geological era in which we are living the "anthropocene" era, a time in the history of the planet when human impacts on ecosystems and the biosphere have become significant enough to warrant naming a new era. Some would mark the beginning of the anthropocene with the advent of agriculture (back to biblical times), which dramatically altered the landscape of the planet. Others mark the beginning of this era with the outset of the industrial revolution. Others with the outset of the nuclear age.

But whenever you believe it to have begun, it is hard at this point to deny, however much some might wish it weren't so, that we are the "dominant" species on the

planet. Wishing it were otherwise doesn't change the reality of the huge impacts we have been having on the rest of life on earth. This means that all of life will be better off if we own up to our "dominant" role and exercise that dominance with responsibility and an eye towards justice. Which is why Eugene Robinson's translation of those verses in Genesis is right on the mark. For we are called not to domination as we might usually understand that word, but to responsibility and, to use another good word, stewardship.

Something like recognizing that you are to a degree in charge of your own backyard, that decisions you make to mow or not mow, to prune or not prune, to fertilize or not fertilize, are decisions one way or another as to how to be in responsible partnership with this little part of the natural world. And we can't avoid this responsibility by throwing up our hands.

Returning to the Bible. One way of understanding the entirety of the Bible is that Genesis sets us up for everything else to come, sets us up with the challenge to be responsible stewards of the creation in the context of the clear-eyed understanding that we are flawed creatures, sometimes terribly and dangerously flawed.

So, the pleadings of the psalms, calls for justice of the prophets (including for Christians Jesus), the seeking of wisdom in Ecclesiastes and Job, are all footnotes to the essential challenge of finding ways to move from our all too obvious tendencies towards mistakes of judgment, imperfections and worse, toward ways of living more in harmony with the beautifully ordered creation of Genesis One, and life in the Garden prior to the so-called "fall."

And though the biblical writers, including the prophets, including Jesus, had no way of imagining the havoc humans were capable of wreaking on a planet-wide scale, they certainly had a profound understanding of human greed, selfishness, small-mindedness, and on and on – however we might account for the origins of these qualities and tendencies. And – very important "and" – they all also believed we were capable of doing better. Otherwise, why bother?

This brings us to the annual message of hope in the Jewish High Holy Days from Rosh Hashanah (marking the anniversary of the Creation) to Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement... hope which is also my message today:

As you know, at this time of year Jews are asked – as today I ask all of us – to look back over the year past and reckon with ways we have fallen short of our ideals, of the sort of person we would like to be, and then make amends when amends are needed, ask forgiveness and be willing to offer forgiveness... and then to resolve to do better in the year to come. This practice during the High Holy Days, like the whole of the Bible, assumes we are capable of doing this.

And though we may ordinarily think of this spiritual exercise on a personal level, it surely is something worth doing on the levels of community, nation, and planet as well.

When it comes to care of the Earth, the message is clear. We know we've not been nearly as good stewards, not as responsible in our role of dominant species as we ought to be or as we can be. Hurricane Florence and Typhoon Mangkhut are only the most immediate symptoms, but hardly the only current symptoms – record wildfires across northern hemisphere this summer, continuing rising seas, and on it goes.

Further, when the Hebrew prophets call for justice for the oppressed, it is more than worth remembering that it is those who already live marginal lives in marginal

places – from the edge of deserts to the edge of the sea – who are affected first and worst by human-induced climate change.

Yet, I'll say it again, the biblical message and the message of the High Holy Days are messages of hope. Over and over again, from Genesis through the prophets, the assumption is that we can do better. And we *can*, both personally and collectively. (Indeed, by some measures humanity is better off now than at any time in human history: higher rates of literacy, longer lifespans, cures for previously deadly diseases.)

But the dangers are real. The suffering is real. And we are called, whether by the Bible or by our Unitarian Universalist principles having to do with the worth of every individual within the web of life or called simply by our inborn compassionate hearts, called to be among those who rise to our better selves and our highest ideals.

Now: As for “how forgiving is the earth?”

Well – I'm actually not interested in our testing the limits any further than we already are. More to the point is whether we can forgive ourselves and then change our ways – in relation to each other and in relation to all life with whom we share our Earth home.

It will take some courage, and if we need inspiration we might, just to offer one example, call to mind indigenous communities in the Amazon rainforest (perhaps some of you saw their story on the PBS News Hour this week) who consider themselves “forest guardians” and who at great risk to themselves are patrolling their native forest (the forest that supports their lives and is part of the breathing lungs of the planet) to call to account those who are logging illegally, damaging those lungs upon which we all depend.

With such a remarkable example before us, we can at least make better choices within the safety of our privileged communities.

Finally, though, I want to emphasize that the heart of my message today is far closer to each one of us than the Amazon. For this message of hope is not just about the Earth, the planet-wide stage on which our lives collectively play out. The message, as I've suggested along the way, is intimately personal as well:

Yes, we may more often than we would like fall short of our inherent goodness, health, kindness, and love, fall short of our values and ideals as we sometimes hurt one another with words spoken or left unspoken, or as we do things to one another or to ourselves that we come to regret... yet, to use the biblical metaphor, we *are* created in the image of God – representing the best we can be, representing our truest and highest selves – which means that of course we can do better, of course we can learn and grow into our higher and better selves.

So I'm not asking anything of us, of myself, of each of us and our community, that we are not already doing or are capable of doing.

I'm just reminding us that in the midst of whatever hard times, whether personally or on in our nation or on the planet... reminding us to keep the faith, to strive to live our faith, and to hold one another (and ourselves) with love when we falter or fail – to hold one another (and ourselves) gently, forgivingly with love.

So may it be.