HAVING DOMINION
(Fourth in a series on Creation)

Pilgrim Church — August 29, 1982 — Royal F. Shepard

Genesis 1: 28

One reason the Bible remains alive and exciting is that some part of it forever is embroiled in controversy. The controversial parts vary with the times. In Luther's day certain sections of Paul's letters became storm centers in the Church. In our day those passages do not seem to engender much ferment. On the other hand, the creation stories are very much in the news.

One controversy, a rather silly one, I think, has to do with Creationism versus Evolutionism. Another controversy more worthy of respect, centers in this particular verse:

> "And God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Befruitful 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.'"

That may sound harmless. For most of the centuries since those words were written very few people saw anything there to worry about or to debate about. But in our day that little passage from Genesis suddenly looms up in the center of the environmental crisis. I don't need to tell you that in an age beset by the spectre of over-population some people are experiencing second thoughts about the exhortation, "be fruitful and multiply."

The second part of this verse troubles people too, the part about "having dominion." I don't think I was aware that this phrase had become controversial until one day in the late sixties when I was listening to Arthur Godfrey. Now for the benefit of the very young, let me say that Arthur Godfrey is a man who dominated the airwaves to a degree that may never have been equalled. At one time he had four separate shows going on radio and television. The longest running of these was a late morning talk show on the radio. It was on that show that Mr. Godfrey leaped resoundingly on the environmentalist bandwagon. It was there that I heard him assert that the biblical injunction to have dominion gave us license to abuse our fellow creatures.

I became aware then that this particular verse in the Bible was under attack. Since then from time to time I have heard other references to it containing the same conplaint. Stated very simply the complaint is that in giving humanity dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air and every other creature, God appears to have handed us a blank check for exploiting the rest of creation for our own selfish purposes.

This is a serious charge. I suspected that it had its roots in sources more scholarly than Arthur Godfrey. I am indebted to Professor Kent Shifferd for an article that points to some of them. One of these sources is the historian Lynn White, Jr. Dr. White believes that if we want to do something to stop the wholesale abuse of our natural environment through modern technology we need to go behind the technology to something more basic. It is not our machines that are responsible, but our values. These are values that allow us to use machines in destructive ways. Dr. White argues that some of the sources of that destructiveness lie in our Judeo-Christian value system, more particularly in the Bible.

Writing of the creation story in Genesis, Dr. White tells us:
"Finally God created Adam and, as an afterthought, Eve to keep man from being lonely. Man named all the animals, thus establishing his dominance over them. God planned all of this explicitly for man's benefit and role: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's pur-

poses. And, although man's body is made of clay, he is not simply part of nature: he is made in God's image.

"Especially in its western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen....Christianity insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper end. (Maxhina Ex Deo: Essays in the Dynamism of Western Culture, p. 86)

Along with this summons to domination Dr. White sees Christianity contributing to our modern abuse of nature in two other ways. One way is by the "disenchantment" of nature. Primitive peoples dwell in an enchanted forest where trees, rocks and streams are inhabited by spirits. Sometimes they believe themselves bound to these natural objects by ties of kinship. Theirs is a magical world. In more sophisticated eastern religions various animals may become sacred because of the doctrine of reincarnation.

Now along comes Christianity and banishes all these spirits. In the Bible there is but one God who stands above the world. The enchanted forest is now a matter-of-fact place of trees and rocks and nothing more. Converted to Christianity the former pagan picks up his axe and cuts down the sacred grove.

Many historians and sociologists have argued that without this disenchantment of nature, science and scientific technology could not have developed. Some Christian theologians have seen in this development a great liberation. Humanity is set free to explore the world and to develop human capacities to the fullest. This line was taken by Harvey Cox in his popular book, The Secular City. But interpreters such as Dr. White perceive a negative result. Because other creatures lose their sacredness we feel free to abuse them. He writes:

"We are superior to nature, contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim. A governor of California, like myself a churchman but less troubled than I, spoke for the Christian tradition when he said (as is alleged), 'When you've seen one redwood tree, you've seen them all.' To a Christian a tree can be no more than a physical fact."(ibid. p. 90.)
(I guess we all know who that governor was.)

Combined with giving human beings dominion and disenchanting the sacred groves is the Bible's view of history. In most religions that center in the cycle of the seasons, time goes in a circle. But in the Bible, time moves in a straight line toward a goal. In the modern era this linear picture of time gave birth to the idea of progress. And the idea of progress encourages us to believe that we can solve all our problems with a little new technology.

So then the Bible's teaching about having dominion combines with other ideas rooted in the Biblical-Christian outlook to foster the ecological mess we've got ourselves into today. It is noteworthy that although he makes these charges, Lynn White believes that the Christian tradition itself may contain a corrective. In the UMD visual aid library there is a very interesting tape of a discussion held at Big Sur in California between Lynn White and Alan Watts. In contrast to Dr. Watts, who looks for the answer in eastern religions, Dr. White identifies himself as a Presbyterian who works out of his own spiritual heritage. He says that he believes Christianity always has contained certain "recessive genes" which make possible a more positive relationship to nature. He points to Francis of Assisi. In him he finds a Christian revolutionary who advocated the democracy of all God's creatures.

It seems then that despite his sharp criticism of the way Christians have used certain biblical themes to justify their abuse of nature, Dr. White comes close in the end to taking the position of Professor Shifferd who holds that "anti-ecological conclusions do not necessarily follow from Christian and humanistic premises." ("A Viable Land Ethic," in Rituals of the Earth, Fall/Winter, 1979-380).

Well, what do we make of all this as we try to understand what this verse in Genesis has to say to us? Let me attempt a beginning by confessing a few things.

First, I would say that I think there probably is some truth in the theory that this and other Biblical ideas helped make possible the birth of modern science and so the various environmental problems that have come in the wake of science.

Second, I would say that there is a strain in modern Christian thought that sets up too wide a gulf between nature and humanity. Along with that tendency goes a tendency toward an excessively human-centered outlook on the world. I have always been uneasy with these trends. Some of you will recall that from time to time I have protested against them in my sermons.

Third, the idea of human dominion probably has contributed to human tyranny over nature. I don't think that people who ride motorcycles through the woods or who pour toxic substances into streams go around saying to themselves, "I have a right to do this because God gave me dominion." But unconsciously and indirectly I suspect that Genesis 1:28 has contributed to the kind of contemptuous disregard of other creatures about which Lynn White complains.

So much for confession. Next for a few words of caution.

My first caution has to do with getting too sentimental about nature. As I observed a few weeks ago, we do not reside in Eden. We dwell in that land east of Eden where Cain and Abel lived, the land of Nod. This is a hard land which brings forth thorns and thistles and where we eat our bread in the sweat of our faces. Here the truth is that we human beings must live in competition with other creatures and to some degree in combat against them. We cannot exist without consuming other living things. We cannot survive unless we do battle with creatures that prey upon us. Unlike our distant ancestors we do not live in perpetual fear of large predators. But we still fall sick and die because of microscopic ones, and, I may add, only through science and technology are we able to resist some of those predators effectively.

Another caution has to do with our romanticizing other religious traditions while we misunderstand our own. Our modern appreciation of the beauties of nature is a luxury few people were able to afford before the advent of the romantic poets in the last century. I have an idea that sometimes we read those romantic attitudes into animistic religions. Perhaps we would do well to rever that sense of kinship with other creatures that is sometimes found in such religion. But we overlook the fact that those spirits that inhabit the rocks and trees are not always friendly. People often live in constant fear of them. From the time of Peter and Paul until now, multitudes have thanked Christian missionaries for setting them free from a demon-ridden universe.

Confession, caution. Now for affirmation.

I believe that the biblical teaching about having dominion may contribute in constructive ways to our sense of environmental responsibility. To understand how we need to see the passage in the larger context of biblical teaching.

That means first of all that we need to see it in the context of God's declaration that all that God has made is "very good." It is true that in the Bible trees and rocks are not inhabited by spooks. It is true that they are not the reincarnation of our Aunt Nellie and our Uncle Otto. It is true that they are not so many pieces of God. It is true that, as Lynn White observes, a tree for a Christian is a physical fact.

But, you see, for the Bible a tree is good, it is sacred, if you will, just because it is a physical fact. A tree doesn't have to be part of God or inhabited by a spirit or a surface appearance of some underlying reality to be sacred. A tree is sacred just in being a tree. God gives trees and rocks, snails and human beings the freedom to be themselves, separate from God and yet "very good."

So if we are going to have dominion over God's creation we had better respect that very-goodness. Any dominion that does not show such respect is not the dominion God gave to Adam and Eve.

Next, we need to see the teaching about dominion in the context of the Bible's teaching about God.

What sort of God do we find here? Well, surely the answer to that question is complex. But I think if we look at the whole Bible, including the great prophets and the New Testament, we shall find that this God is very far from a tyrant that exploits us for God's own gratification. This is the God who leads us out of bondage into the Promised Land. This is the God whose love overcomes all obstacles to reclaim us and to give us a new start. This is Hosea's agonized parent who cannot give up on the child who has gone astray. This is Jesus' happy housekeeper who delights in finding the lost coin. This is the God whose tender concern for every sparrow that falls and whose delight in each lily that blooms is infinitely magnified in the concern and delight God takes in you and me.

Finally, we need to see that the dominion God gives us is not our own, but a dominion in God's service. As the great Old Testament scholar, Gerhard Von Rad, points out, what God does is to appoint Adam and Eve as representatives on earth. They are God's stewards, God's agents.

Now what kind of representation can this be except one that respects the very-goodness of all God's creatures? And what sort of stewardship can this be except one that reflects in all our relationships with our world the care and compassion that God shows to us?

In the light of the whole Bible, I believe that having dominion means not to tyrannize over the world, but rather to care for the world.

No doubt we have turned certain biblical ideas to our own selfish advantage. The Bible itself rebukes that tendency in us. No doubt other religious traditions have something to contribute to our developing greater reverence for the creation round about us. But I think we might deal with our world rather differently if we began to learn from the Bible what having dominion really means, that it is the dominion by which Christ rules, the dominion of sacrificial love.

* * * * * *