

Sermon: About That Promised Land
Text: Deuteronomy 34:1-7
Date: October 21, 2018
Context: WWPC
Second Sunday of Stewardship'
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*Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah,
which is opposite Jericho, and the Lord showed him the whole land . . .*

Deuteronomy 34:1

Last week we launched our annual stewardship campaign. Naturally the campaign is in support of next year's budget but on the first Sunday in particular I felt it was important to make the case that stewardship is not about money, or at least not just about money.

My hope was to show that at its best, stewardship is about something much better and much more interesting. That ultimately stewardship is rooted and grounded in love.

But stewardship is about a lot of other things, too. Things that matter. Things we value. Things we depend upon, sometimes without even knowing it.

So, very briefly, I want to give you an overview of the themes of this year's campaign, just so you'll know where we'll be heading over the next four weeks:

On the Christian calendar, next week is Reformation Sunday. Our theme for the day will be Stewardship of our inheritance. We'll look at the gifts passed down to us by the likes of Martin Luther and John Calvin and by more recent reformers, too, and what those gifts might mean, and what they might look like in the church at this moment in history. And why they matter.

The following week, November 4th, is All Saints Sunday. Our theme will be Stewardship of our Past--the legacy our foremothers and forefathers in the faith have given us. And I think we'll find that the stewardship of our past is directly related to our present.

The final Sunday, dedication Sunday, we'll focus on the stewardship of our future. I think we'll find that this, too, is directly relevant to our present.

But today, we begin our exploration of stewardship's broader themes with the oldest theme of all, the first thing over which God charged humans to exercise stewardship: the stewardship of creation.

The text from which we get this charge comes early on in scripture, in the first creation story in Genesis.

Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'*

It's a text that cuts both ways, however. To this day, the charge to exercise dominion over creation is often read as license to exploit the earth, to dominate it.

But as the great Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggeman, has pointed out, and as we've noted here before, in Hebrew that word, dominion, is not an invitation to dominate the earth; it's an exhortation to treat it dominically, to treat it in a holy and sacred way, to treat it the way God would treat it, with love and care and tenderness.

Which sounds good. Unfortunately, that charge lasted exactly as long as it took Eden's first (and only) two residents to pluck that forbidden fruit, to be cast out of the Garden, and for the world's innocence to be lost forever.

That that post-Edenic world is the world we have inherited. It's the world we're living in. A fallen world. A wounded world. A world marked by the stain of sin, where humans spend much more time, money and effort on dominating and exploiting creation than on caring for it.

Many centuries of this practice, of this dominance and exploitation, have come at a cost.

A recent United Nations report documented the environmental challenges the global community is facing. It spelled out some very hard news. These challenges are daunting and they are urgent.

If you read the report, it's likely to leave you feeling vulnerable and perhaps even a bit frightened.

But we are not here today to hear hard news, or to be frightened. We are here to hear Good News and to be inspired.

And toward that end, the first thing to say in that this situation is not new. I think it helps to know we're not the first people to feel this way.

Vulnerability is the position in which God's people have always found themselves. Daunting is the starting point for God's action in the world. In fact, God's people were born out of just such times, just such circumstances.

Genesis provides us with the primordial story of creation itself. And according to that story, God creates the cosmos out of darkness and chaos.

But the very next book, Exodus, gives us another origin story: the primordial account of the birth of the people of Israel. In this case, creates the nation of Israel out of a band of slaves.

We know the story well. A disparate collection of overmatched nomads are taken into slavery in Egypt. And there they remain, laboring in Pharaoh's mud pits for four hundred years, until God finally hears their cry and sends them a liberator, someone who will lead them out of slavery.

A lowly shepherd, this man is completely unqualified for the job, and the challenge he is charged with solving is utterly overwhelming: lead these slaves out of bondage, over against Pharaoh and his army.

If you're wondering how this relates to our stewardship of creation, just stick with me for a minute. We'll get there in just a second.

But first, here's the opening scene of that story:

Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

For as many times as I have heard and read this story of the call of Moses, I didn't appreciate until this week that it contains a creation-centered promise.

What follows is a story of liberation, yes, but liberation with a purpose: to bring the Hebrews together as a people, and then to lead them to the promised land, a land flowing with milk and honey. A land where creation is flourishing. A land that is in balance, a land that produces all the best things.

It is a lovely promise, a hopeful promise, a beautiful promise. And it starts out well enough. Moses does in fact succeed in leading the Hebrews in the greatest escape history has ever known.

But as things did for Adam and Eve once they left the garden, things go rapidly downhill for the Hebrews once they leave behind their lives of servitude.

Scripture tells us that they are a stiff-necked people. They are stubborn. They resist God's commands. They complain. They worship idols.

And so they wander. And wander. And wander. For forty years, they traipse through the wilderness, lost and bewildered.

But then something wonderful happens. And this part of the story is told much less often.

They finally reach their goal. The story ends happily. They actually make it to the promised land.

All of them, that is, except Moses. For reasons the text does not explain, God does not let Moses cross over the Jordan and into this land, the land that Yahweh promised would be flowing with milk and honey. He sees it, and then his role in this incredible journey ends.

I set this story up at length because it reminds me of the story of an amazingly inspirational leader, one of the great environmental visionaries of our time.

But you would never have guessed that at the start of her story. Judy Bonds was a woman completely unqualified for the job she took on, and totally overmatched by forces she was about to go up against.

And like Moses, she actually passed away before she saw the results of her work. But what Judy did before she died was absolutely remarkable, and her vision of the difference it would make remained undimmed until the day she passed.

Judy was literally a coal miner's daughter. Born in the mountains of West Virginia, her father worked in the mines, as did his father, and his father before him, back six generations.

That long family legacy is obviously not the same as a four hundred year legacy laboring in the mud pits of Egypt. But it does represent a long legacy of servitude to the people who owned the mines.

The people whose lungs were not blackened by coal dust, the people who lived far away from the polluted streams. The people who lived in distant mansions, thanks to the efforts of the workers who lived in trailers and small simple houses, situated by the polluted streams.

The old fashioned, below-ground mining techniques which all of Judy's forebears practiced were harmful enough, both to the miners and the environment.

But when the coal started to get harder to extract via underground mining methods, something terrible happened.

The owners didn't abandon the mines, and they most certainly did not look for alternative forms of energy. Instead they stopped digging into the mountains to find the coal. They fired all the miners, started blowing the tops clean off the mountains -- a job that took only a fraction of the people it once took to mine the coal below ground.

In the process they turned the local economy into a desert of unemployment and turned vast tracks of southern Appalachia into an industrialized wasteland.

Mountain top removal didn't just dirty the streams, it erased them. The rock and soil that once comprised the mountain tops had to go somewhere so it was used to fill in once beautiful valleys.

The blasting itself traumatized the local residents, driving them from their homes. The slurry dams that held waste and residue eventually overflowed, creating new streams running not with milk and honey but with arsenic and mercury.

All the time this was happening, Judy kept working at her job as a waitress and manager at a local Pizza Hut. After all, what could she do? She was just a coal miner's daughter, living in a coal miners' world, keeping track of whether she had enough dough and pepperoni to keep the pizza flowing from the ovens.

Until one day she was out walking with her grandson and he stood in a stream in the Coal River Valley with his fists full of dead fish and asked, "What's wrong with these fish?"

It was Judy's burning bush moment.

She may have been just a mild-mannered Pizza Hut manager, but Judy realized she had to do something. What she did was astonishing. She envisioned a way to jump from harvesting a form of energy rooted in the 19th century, to harnessing an unlimited source of clean energy.

She would build wind farms on the site of these degraded mountains, and, discreetly, on the tops of other mountains too.

Building out this capacity and maintaining these wind farms would bring jobs back. It would bring hope back. It would bring clean air back to the mountains and clean water to the streams.

The effort to develop these wind farms throughout rural West Virginia, and the southern Appalachians in general still ongoing. Turns out Pharaoh does not give up without a fight.

But for her efforts, for her vision, Julia was posthumously awarded the Goldman Environmental prize for North America.

Judy summarized her work this way. "When powerful people pursue profits at the expense of human rights and our environment, they have failed as leaders. Responsible citizens must step forward, not just to point the way, but to lead the way to a better world."

I tell you this story not because I expect you to go out and take on big coal, or big oil. Or because I'm counting on you to invent a new form of energy that will liberate our country from our dependence on fossil fuel and so help America make the leap from 18th and 19th century energy sources to clean renewable energy, geared to the needs of the 21st century.

But I do tell you this story to inspire you. To let you know that there are people out there who are willing to take on Pharaoh, who are willing to meet the challenge of climate change head on.

The really good news is that there are thousands of other stories of other people rising to this challenge too, meeting it in simpler but no less effective ways.

People like Andy Lipkis, founder and president of Tree People, whose astonishingly simple mission is given away in the name of the organization: plant trees.

In Andy's case, his vision is focused on rehabilitating urban areas blighted by concrete, huge parking lots and other flat surfaces that reflect heat and adds to global warming.

So, parking lots around malls and retail areas, and schools, and industrial areas. The results have been immediate and incredible.

The trees absorb storm water before it becomes polluted as it runs off toward the ocean. The trees makes playgrounds and retail and industrial parking lots cooler and more beautiful, reducing the need for air conditioning, and thus also reducing the energy demands.

The trees also serve as natural air filters, aiding the exchange of carbon dioxide back into oxygen.

Sometimes even simple methods for caring for creation can have profound effects.

And because we are now, officially, an Earth Care Congregation of the PC(USA), I want to invite during this stewardship season to think about the investments we make in caring for creation.

They don't have to be financial. They can be investments in education. We might not envision new forms of clean energy.

But some of the kids in our Sunday school classes might. Our next Moses or Judy Bonds might be sitting in one of our pews this very moment.

They can be investments in our property: finding ways to repurpose the lawn that runs beside our Chapel, not just so that it does not have to be mowed with a gas mower, but so it can contribute to the environment, serving as a haven for trees and bushes that in turn provide food and shelter for birds and butterflies.

To build on what Judy said, as a community of faith I believe we have not just the opportunity to lead the way to a better world; I think we might have a duty to do so.

And certainly we have a wonderful opportunity to show our neighbors here on campus what we believe with regard to the stewardship of creation.

Amen