

from Genesis 1
Colossians 1:15-20

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Third Sunday in Lent
March 11, 2007

IN TRUST

PART 1 OF A TWO PART SERIES

So God created humankind in his image.... God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over ... every living thing that moves upon the earth." *Genesis 1:28a, c.*
For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven.... *Colossians 1:19-20a*

Perhaps your own experience can resurrect a moment when, say in the early years of marriage, you startled to the realization that life wasn't just about you anymore. That the planets no longer revolved around your needs and aspirations. That realization, especially as the children came along, that the center of your universe had shifted, perhaps led you to discover that where you had been at the epicenter, you now found yourself as satellites circling a common center, your children. That it was no longer about us—our needs and wants, but about them.

As a species we are at such a time in our all too brief human history on our little planet. A time when individual, corporate and political will must turn with all the universal determination of a "lend-lease" imperative to saving our planet from its ecological distress. Whatever epicenter we adults presently want, desire or lean self-indulgently toward must, with a jolt shift to our children's and their children's future. We are their trust. Their sustainable future *is* our mission. It is not a mission among others, it is *the* mission.

In terms of human destructiveness the past century was unparalleled in human history. And the twenty-first century does not, so far, do anything to buck the trend. Still, there is a profound difference. Whereas in all previous centuries of human habitation, warfare and natural calamities were always regional and temporary in scope (even World War 2), now we are faced with a problem that is no respecter of political or even geographic boundaries. The earth as a single organism, a biosphere—James Lovelock's delicate Gaia hypothesis—is imperiled for want of a unified will.

A few evenings ago on a night as darkly speckled as sequins on black velvet, I stood in the back yard while Mollie, our yellow lab, dutifully did

her composting of the good earth, and I stared at the full moon through a new pair of binoculars. It was a stunning site, all cratered and pock marked, and dusty gray like a confederate soldier's jacket in from a desert patrol. The moon has the most benign appearance up close and personal. Yet without its steady companionship life on earth would never have emerged. It tugs the oceans into a tidal ritual, giving life in abundance to it that is profound. Its mutual gravitational pull with the earth keeps a nuclear furnace roiling at earth's center, warming our planet's skin to a habitable temperature. It's been receding from earth for eons, not that you'd notice—at about a meter a year. And still we are its epicenter, its quiet homage. It's as though it quietly trusts us. Should the moon abandon its satellite status—goodbye civilization! If we should lose our focus and resolve toward our children's future, the same applies. We have very little time to turn it around. Some very responsible scientists even quietly whisper that we are beyond the tipping point.

Among all of life's most memorable and anticipated rights of passage—birth, baptism, confirmation, marriage—one bedrock principle is the glue: *trust*. As a child we trust our parents because they are our authority figures. When trust abandons any relationship, there goes its centripetal pull. No one can truly love who cannot trust. Trust, not love, is what makes the world go around.

Trust is God's bequest to us at creation. I'm so appreciative of Thomas W. Mann's insights (my former Old Testament professor, not the German novelist—I'm not that old!) who writes that when God blesses humankind in the virgin light of creation, the blessing does not exclude human responsibility, human work. It is not as if earth's first family are sprinkled with pixie dust and let loose on the earth with sort of spiritual immunization. This blessing rather requires work, the sort of energy, intelligence, imagination and love that we, in God's name, will invoke upon our officers at their ordination/installation in two weeks. The blessing anticipates human work; it requires it: "be fertile, increase, fill, subdue, rule." It is both blessing and command, a kind of "charge" as Mann puts it. It charges us with "a task and a responsibility" (Mann, *The Book of the Torah*, p. 16). In short, God gives us this good earth and trusts us. That is the startling impression at the end of the first Genesis creation story, which has none of the closure on the seventh day that is so familiar to the first six days: "And there was evening and morning a first day... second day... etc." God simply trusts this little orb to our care, like a parent releasing a child into adulthood. There's no lecture, no bony, wagging divine finger—just this, implicitly: 'I trust this little habitation to you, treat it well, master it, *subdue*

it.” The Hebrew word for “subdue” has the force of custodial care, not tyranny over. God lovingly trusts us, and empowers us to use the earth wisely.

The venerable Old Testament scholar Gerhard von Rad, in his commentary on Genesis, writes:

Just as powerful earthly kings, to indicate their claim to dominion, erect an image of themselves in the province of their empire where they do not personally appear, so man is placed upon earth in God’s image as God’ sovereign emblem. He is really only God’s representative, summoned to maintain and enforce God’s claim to dominion over the earth. [Thus the man] in addition to having been created by God, receives [as] man a responsibility to God.

“Good,” as Celia Marshall has observed, does not mean good in the sense of static and perfect. After all, static perfection would not allow for growth and progeny, or the passing of the seasons. But good in the sense of lovely, pleasing, beautiful, and especially bountiful, producing harvest and shelter within its own mysterious rhythms. In a word: *providential*. As Jesus puts it in his briefest parable, “The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the good grain in the head” (Mark 4:28).

Because most of us no longer make or grow the things we consume or eat, the earth’s resources have become for us as unseen, distant things. And with that distance creeps a neglect of the sacred, like eating without giving thanks. In one respect, one might say we might be forgiven for not pausing in gratitude for the things we have made or grown, but the food that distant labors bring to our table is different altogether.

What’s messed up is that along the way we switched a theology of custodial partnership with the good earth, for one of arrogance and dominance. One that dismissed God to the fringes of life, effectively discriminating between and separately siloing the divine from the other, the sacred from the secular. Like anticipating God in the sanctuary on Sunday morning, but not in the workplace, home or school. Let me explain with one illustration of how this came to be, with help from a wise and scholarly source, an active, concerned Christian layman, Professor Lynn White, Jr. He wrote an historic paper forty years ago, that has been much discussed since. It’s concerned with “man’s unnatural treatment of nature and its sad results,” and titled “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis.”

In antiquity, every tree, every spring, every hill had its own *genius loci*, its guardian spirit. These spirits were accessible to men, but were very unlike men....

Before one cut a tree, mined a mountain, or dammed a brook, it was important to placate the spirit in that particular situation, and to keep it placated.

What did Christianity tell people about their relationship to the environment? [It taught that] God planned all of this explicitly for man's benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes. And, although man's body is made of clay, he is not simply part of nature: he is made in God's image....

By destroying paganism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects.... The spirits in natural objects, which formerly had protected nature from man, evaporated. Man's effective monopoly on spirit in this world was confirmed, and the old inhibitions to the exploitation of nature crumbled.

"[Medieval] plows, drawn by two oxen, did not normally turn the sod but merely scratched it. Thus, cross plowing was needed and fields tended to be squarish.... But such a plow was inappropriate in the wet climate and often sticky soils of northern Europe. But by the latter part of the 7th century after Christ ... certain northern peasants were using an entirely new kind of plow, equipped with a vertical knife to cut the line of the furrow, a horizontal share to slice under the sod, and a molderboard to turn it over. The friction of this plow with the soil was so great that it normally required not two but eight oxen. It attacked the land with such violence that cross plowing was no longer needed, and fields tended to be shaped in long strips.

In the days of the scratch plow, fields were distributed generally in units capable of supporting a single family. Subsistence farming was the presupposition. But no peasant owned eight oxen: to use the new and more efficient plow, peasants pooled their oxen to form large plow teams, originally receiving (it would appear) plowed strips in proportion to their contribution. Thus, agricultural distribution of land was based no longer on the needs of a family but, rather, on the capacity of a machine to till the earth. Man's relation to the soil was profoundly changed. Formerly man had been a part of nature, now he was the exploiter of nature. Nowhere else in the world did farmers develop an analogous implement. Is it coincidence that modern technology, with its ruthlessness toward nature, has so largely been produced by descendants of these peasants of northern Europe?

What we do about ecology depends on our ideas of the man nature relationship. More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecological crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one.

Next Sunday, I want us to consider, not finding a new religion but precisely rethinking our old one. And while I heartily agree with Lynn White that simply devising new technologies will not save us on its own from earth's looming crisis, if we can be motivated by a new, respectful, custodial relationship to God and creation, we can turn this horror around. I'd like to show what can be achieved, and what even now is taking shape.

To God be the glory, our one true help. Amen.