

“Mission: Earth”
Genesis 1:1-2:4a
May 25, 2008

Back when I was a kid, in a far away land called The 1970's there was something called Ecology. In the 1970's there was an energy crisis and everybody was concerned about smog and pollution. There was also an advertising campaign that featured the slogan, "*Keep America Beautiful.*" And the most famous commercial of that campaign featured a native American actor named Iron Eyes Cody who was canoeing through a river strewn with garbage. After paddling into the bank, Iron Eyes got out of his canoe and stood next to a busy highway where hundreds of cars sped by, polluting the air. Then a bag of garbage landed at his feet, where it burst open spilling its contents all over his feet. The camera zoomed in on his solemn expression. And as a single tear streamed down his face, in a deep and serious tone, the voice over says, "*People start pollution and people can stop it.*"

As the old saying goes, everything old is new again. And in many ways, the early days of the 21st century seem to be very similar to 1970's, but thankfully without the Bee Gees and leisure suits. Just like the 70's, today we are once again experiencing a gas crisis. And whereas people 30 years ago were talking about "*Keeping America Beautiful,*" no matter where you look today, it seems that everyone is "*going green.*" Everywhere you go people are talking about things like global warming, an inconvenient truth and reducing your carbon footprint. Television networks, department stores, baseball teams, public schools and Hollywood stars are all going green.

This current fascination with taking care of the earth might lead one to believe that ecology or going green, are something new. But the truth is that the call for human beings to take care of the planet on which they live is as old as that planet itself. When broken down into simplest terms Adam and Eve were the first ecologists, and the first two chapters of the book of Genesis are the first ever "*go green*" campaign.

If you take a look at the first 35 verses of the Old Testament, what you will find is a detailed description of the planet earth and its ecological system as created and executed by God. First there was water, then God said, "*Let there be light, and there was light.*" Then God put a firmament in the sky, and God said that it was good. After the water and the light God created the

dry ground and brought forth the plants and the trees. On the fourth day of creation God placed the moon, the sun and stars in the sky. Then the real fun began.

On the fifth day God said *“let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures and let birds fly above the earth across the firmament of the heavens. Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds; cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds.”* At the end of the fifth day, the earth was teeming with life.

But for God, there was still something missing. And so on that fateful 6th day, God created humankind. *“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And 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.”*

So good was this creation, so beautiful was this system, so wonderful was this plan that God had put together for the care and nurture of his creation that at the end of it all God saw everything that he had made and behold, it was very good.

Everything that God made was made with a specific place and purpose in the order of creation. The sun and the water feed the trees, and the trees feed the animals. The trees give off oxygen that is needed by the animals and the animals give off carbon dioxide that is needed by the trees. There is a place for everything and everything is in its place in God’s design.

However, as we hear God’s story, and examine God’s design, it behooves us to take note that among all the things that God created, the place that God’s human beings hold within God’s intricate design for creation is both unique and specific. Genesis tells us that we are to, *“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.”*

On first look this seems pretty clear and straightforward. But as usual, when human beings get involved, things begin to become a bit confused. And the confusion stems from these words *“subdue”* and *“Have dominion.”* For some people words like subjugation and dominion sound negative or perhaps even punitive. Like a wicked and vindictive king who uses and abuses his

subjects at will, some folks hear God's call for the people that he created to subdue his creation and have dominion over it and interpret that to mean that we have been given a license to use and abuse the creation at will, and to our own advantage. This sort of thinking and acting is precisely what has created polluted rivers, melting polar ice caps, energy crises, and Iron Eyes Cody looking into the camera with a tear streaking down his cheek.

For a better interpretation of God's call to subdue and have dominion over God's creation I turn to the words of Terrance E. Fretheim in his commentary on this passage from the book of Genesis. Fretheim wrote, "*A study of the verb "have dominion" "Rada in the original Hebrew" reveals that it must be understood in terms of care giving, even nurturing, not exploitation. As the image of God, human beings should relate to the nonhuman as God relates to them. The command to "subdue the earth" "kabas" focuses on the earth, particularly cultivation, a difficult task in those days.*"

In other words, when we are looking for some guidance in terms of what it looks like for us to fulfill God's commands to "subdue" and "have dominion" over the earth, we need to take our cue from the example set for us by God.

When the scripture tells us that we are created in God's image, it obviously has nothing to do with physical appearance. Instead, this "image of God" in which we have been created is the image of God's will and God's way. It's talking about character traits if you will. And so, as we might point to some earthly family and see a line of love and good will working its way down through the years in one particular gene pool, we, as the Children of God also carry a particular set of likes, loves, characteristics and tendencies that identify us as children of our Heavenly Father. Even as God brought the world into existence and declared it to be very good, so are we called to follow His lead and place great value on all that God has created. And even as God has continued to lavish love and care on our world and its inhabitants from the dawn of creation, so does our divine bloodline call us to love and care for all that God has made, even as God has loved and made it. We may have dominion over the earth, but God has dominion over us. We may be in charge of the earth, but God is in charge of the universe and everything in it, including us. We are the junior partners in this arrangement. And so it is up to us to do business following the model of the Sr. Partner, God.

The world is not ours to do with as we please. Everything that we can see, hear, touch and smell was made by God and it belongs to him. God made the world, and we're supposed to take care of it for him. God's mission is us, and our mission is earth. May God find us faithful in our calling.
Amen.