

The Church of the Pilgrimage  
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Deuteronomy 30:15-20

See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

**Choose Life**

I was chatting on the phone yesterday with a good friend from seminary who lives in Oklahoma. When she asked what I was preaching on today, and when I mentioned it was Earth day, she told me something I hadn't known.

Earth Day, April 22<sup>nd</sup> is also the date of the 1889 Oklahoma Land Rush. "Google it" she said and after our phone call, I did.

So, we'll begin today with a little history. On March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1889 U.S. President Benjamin Harrison signed a proclamation opening the Indian territory to settlement, though only two years earlier the Dawes Act had said that very land was native land. A month later, on April 22<sup>nd</sup> to be exact, would be settlers lined up and waited for the sound of a cannon, which came at exactly noon. They rushed onto the land by horseback, wagons, and even on foot. But dusk, tens of thousands of people had staked claims, and towns like Norman, Oklahoma City, and Guthrie sprang up almost overnight. Here is how it was described in an article in Harper's Weekly that very year: "At twelve o'clock on Monday, April 22, the resident population of Guthrie was nothing; before sundown it was at least ten thousand. In that time streets had been laid out, town lots staked off and steps taken toward the formation of a municipal government. At twilight, the campfires of 10,000 people gleamed on the grassy slopes of Cimarron Valley, where, the night before, the coyote, the gray wolf and the deer had roamed undisturbed." (Harpers Weekly, May 1889)

My friend in Oklahoma? The church she is currently serving was started the day of the land run.

So, while settlers celebrated newly available land, native populations found

themselves further marginalized. Some of the native population was already on reservations, but others found their farms were plundered by settlers – settlers stole cattle and farm implements—even the wood from the native’s homes. People would come back to their properties and find half of their cabins torn down. As Daniel Swan, anthropology professor, at the University of Oklahoma says “Nothing good came out of the 1889 land rush for the native people.”

Yesterday, I asked my friend Amy if the people of Oklahoma still celebrate the land run. “Oh yes, indeed” she said. “The white folks do. There’s a massive parade – horses, wagons, authentic pioneer dress. This year is the 89<sup>th</sup> year of the 89-er Celebration so it is a very big deal” she said.

I had already been hoping to speak to this earth day with some attention to Native American experience, to how Native Americans view land and how we European settlers view land, because they are not one and the same. Learning more about the land rush gave me a place to begin this sermon.

Which brings me to a phrase that was in our confession of sin, one that might have left you saying ah...what??? “The Doctrine of Discovery.” The Doctrine of Discovery is one thing that helps explain how such land rushes” or “land grabs” could be seen as justified, or good. It is basically a philosophical and legal framework dating to the 15<sup>th</sup> century that gave Christian governments moral and legal rights to invade and seize indigenous lands and dominate indigenous peoples. The doctrine of discovery had a religious undergirding: indigenous peoples were not considered to be human if they were not Christian. It was, therefore, justified to take their land, to “invade, capture, vanquish and subdue” ... “reducing all enemies of Christ to perpetual slavery” as one Papal Bull, issued in 1452 declared.

There are at least three biblical bases to this theology of domination and entitlement. The first is Matthew 28, in which Jesus tells his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations. The second is the divine mandate to rule based on Romans 13, “let every person be subject to the governing authorities”, Paul assuming that governing authorities were just and looking out for the wellbeing of all. The third is connected to our scripture today, the narrative of a covenantal people taking possession of land as described in the Exodus Story.

Indeed, we know that the Pilgrims drew deeply in interpreting their own experience through the lens of the Exodus story. They saw themselves as called by God to find a new promised land, and that they were fleeing Egypt (England) having been delivered from Pharaoh (King James). They crossed the Red Sea (the Atlantic Ocean) and they wandered in the wilderness (New England). They entered into the Promised land, free to worship God but the Pilgrims friendship with Massasoit aside, in later years indigenous peoples were often portrayed as the New Canaanites, thereby justifying abuse, stealing and even genocide. (Source: *“Environmental Justice with Indigenous Peoples”*, a paper from Creation Justice Ministries, UCC)

It is sad, and disturbing, to think about how a narrative like the Exodus, God bringing the people of Israel out of slavery into freedom, could be used to justify enslaving other people. But there you go: the sad reality is scripture is often taken and used -- manipulated -- to justify the use (and abuse) of power over others.

Alongside, or rather undergirding these particular interpretations of these particular scriptures, the three just lifted up, is the principle of "Terra Nullius" (empty land) – a theological and legal doctrine that said "discovered" lands were effectively devoid of humans if the people who lived there, defined as "heathens, pagans, and infidels" were not ruled by a Christian prince.

It is hard for us to hold onto this, but Christendom, namely the advance of Christendom, legitimized the conquest of both people and land. It empowered European governments to use coercion and violence, including genocide and enslavement, to expand their territories. And this pattern was taken up in the treatment of native peoples here in this country.

Some weeks ago when Jenny and Kim Engle and I met to talk about Earth day, I said I felt we were in a place, or my own thinking was in a place, where it would not be enough to just praise God's beautiful creation, naming places in the natural world that are special to us, or sacred to us as we have done in the past. I suggested this year might be a time for us to go deeper. To learn more about what is at stake in creation care. I shared with them that I was a history major in college, but I had never heard of the doctrine of discovery. Having recently learned about the doctrine of discovery, I wondered out loud to several people – friends, family, my husband – if they had ever heard the phrase. They had not. So, I thought some education on this may be needful, if so many people haven't even heard of this.

Which leads us to our scripture today.

When Moses is speaking to the people, as they are about to cross over to the promised land, he wants them to remember who they are. They are a covenant people. God has brought them out of slavery, God has done all this and more for them, guiding them through desert wanderings – a pillar of cloud by day, a pillar of fire by night. Now, on the verge of leaving all that behind, on the verge of entering a new chapter, it is time to renew the covenant. To ask in a dramatic and decisive way -- who are you going to serve? Is it God who has given you life, who has led you through to this day or will it be idols, things that vie for your attention offering you life that isn't life and keeping you from worshiping and living unto the one true God? In this scripture lesson today, it is a critical time, a time for a decision, a time to set one's heart. *Choose life* the scripture says.

Surely, we are in similarly critical place when it comes to our environment. Everywhere there is evidence we have not been good earth stewards that this underlying idea that the earth is ours to control is not working out, and that we do not have all the time in the world to turn our act around. There was an article in the

Boston Globe this week that shared how the Great Barrier Reef, one of nature's great natural wonders, is irrevocably damaged – a large percentage of it bleached out, dead–due to global warming. Those tiny corals are so fragile -- waters just two degrees warmer will kill them off. There was an article too some weeks ago about the Right Whales. You know, they were the “right” whales to kill because they swam close to the surface and were therefore easier to harpoon. Now, due to ocean degradation and getting caught in fishing lines, the right whales are in serious danger. Most years, there are at least fifteen babies spotted in Stellwagen Bank. This year there has not yet been a right whale juvenile spotted.

What will it mean for us to turn from idols, for one, the idea that the earth is ours to use as we like, our possession, rather than something sacred, something we hold in trust?

It is probably important to lift up that alongside the alarming things, there is some good news – some of it quite local. Fishermen and lobsterman on the South Shore, right here where we are, have come together to develop lines that will break with enough pressure, lines that may save future whales lives. And here in Plymouth we've had for less than a year now a plastic bag ban making the ocean a little less trashed, and wildlife on our shores a little safer.

What does it mean this Earth Day for us to choose life? Can we further educate ourselves about threats to our environment? Can we further educate ourselves about how sometimes religion – or the use or misuse of the bible -- actually functions so as to work *against* an ethic of creation care? Will we think more deeply about theology, upholding one based not on conquest and domination but on something more life giving and respectful?

Maybe the Mosaic story, the Exodus story of conquest of the land needs to be countered by the prophet Ezekiel, who was speaking to the people of Israel at a later time, when they were returning from exile in Babylon. As the Israelites prepared for life in this post exilic chapter, Ezekiel instructed them:

*So you shall divide this land among you according to the tribes of Israel. You shall allot it as an inheritance for yourselves and for the aliens who reside among you and who have begotten children among you. They shall be to you as native born sons of Israel; with you they shall be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel. In whatever tribe the alien resides, you shall assign him his inheritance.” (Ezekiel 47: 21-23)*

Coming from exile and no land, therefore for them, no identity, the Israelites are to forge a new identity upon their return. In this new identity Israel will share the land with the people who live on it. Can we hear God speaking in the prophet? God had always promised the people would return to the land, but this time a note of graciousness would replace the right of conquest. (David Phillips Hansen, *Native Americans, The Mainline Church, and the Quest for Interracial Justice*, p. 122-123)

We can always learn more: More about what is damaging our environment, and more about the ethics and theology at play in our treatment of the land and indigenous people. Did you know that over time our country has made over 500 treaties with indigenous tribes, and has changed, nullified, or broken all of them? I know I personally could learn a lot more about such areas as Standing Rock and Bears Ears national monument. Did you know Bears Ears national monument, drastically reduced by our current administration, is the only national monument with a primary focus on the contributions of Indigenous people?

We could learn more about what our denomination is doing in regards to our environment, and environmental justice. For instance, did you know that the World Council of Churches, and within the U.S, The United Church of Christ, the United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and various Quaker meetings have all officially repudiated the Doctrine of Discovery? I personally hope we'll continue to make this topic, this important topic, one of interest and concern to our faith community.

Take a minute and imagine with me. What if some group of people told us they wanted to make, say, a hotel complex, or a movie complex on Burial Hill? We'd say that was wrong, not just because we think of that place as full of history. We think of it as *sacred ground*. Native American cultures think of *the land* as sacred. In the Lakota tradition, to be a human being means taking care of the sacred land that birthed them. (Hansen, p. 119) The Dawes Act I referred to earlier was the first piece of legislation that said that the land, any land, *belonged* to Native Americans – an idea that would have been decidedly odd to indigenous people, that *anyone* could say they “owned the land”. As Chief Seattle said, “The land does not belong to us. We belong to the land.”

The psalmist says “The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it. The world and all who live in it.” This is a proper basis for our relationship to the planet. It is all precious, because it is God’s creation. And we can’t count on someone else to take care of it.

So Earth Day isn’t something we should just lift up once a year and be done with it. And environmental concern cannot be just about parks to enjoy and fish and other species to protect. It’s about justice, justice for people who may actually, when it comes to our earth, have a better value system than your average American. When we chase idols, when we or our government make money and business interests our god we are doing great damage to the earth and to people. And here in church, as religious people, and for the sake of the world out there we need a theology that will not accept domination and exploitation as ways to be in the world. We need a theology of kinship, for, as the Africans say, we all live under one sky, and what happens to one part of us affects us all.

I hope we will have more time to think together about what it means for God’s people to choose life for our beautiful blue green planet and for the people, all the people who live on it.

Amen.