

**GUARDIANS OF THE PLANET**  
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May 22, 2016  
Trinity Sunday  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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**Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31**

Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice? On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out: "To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live."

**Psalm 8**

You have given humans dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet.

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My mother raised me on beef, chicken and pork and occasionally liver with fried onions. My mother thought liver put iron in the blood. Maybe so, but it tasted awful. My wife Paula spared our children that experience.

My mother was born in Alabama and raised in Georgia. Her mother, my grandmother, raised several head of cattle, a flock of chickens and a few hogs. Every summer we took the train from Youngstown, Ohio to Atlanta and then took a bus out into the countryside where my grandmother lived.

I loved those summer vacations. I loved feeding the hogs.

Every morning I took the slop bucket from the kitchen and poured it into a trough for the grunting hogs. For the rest of the day those hogs frolicked about their large pen as though they were hog heaven.

At my grandmother's house, we ate lots of fried chicken, steaks, pork and bacon, which I never once connected to the animals I'd come to know and love. I grew up in a city. I assumed food came to the table straight from the supermarket.

One morning when I was about 10 years old my grandmother told me to go out into the yard and catch a chicken for dinner. *What?*

I caught a plump one. Then my grandmother told me to kill it. *What?*

Grab its neck and twirl it over your head, she said. *What?*

I did as she said. The chicken's neck came off in my bloodied hand. I stared in shock as its headless body frantically darted about for a minute and then dropped.

My grandmother scooped it up and dropped it into a kettle of boiling water. That night after saying grace we ate that chicken.

Those were the good old days for chickens, cattle and hogs. Those days are pretty much gone.

Today as the demand for more and more meat has grown, ever more chickens, cattle, hogs and even salmon are raised in factories where they never see the light of day or saunter about pecking insects or munching grass. The inhumane treatment of animals is kept out of the public eye for good reason. If we saw it, it would turn our stomachs and raise serious ethical questions about our guardianship of the planet and its creatures.

To claim we are "guardians of the planet" is to make a rather bodacious claim. After all,

the planet did just fine before humans arose on its face. No one was “in charge.”

So who put us in charge? And isn't that a bit like asking the fox to guard the hen house?

And yet that's how our friend Nan Merrill translates the word “dominion” in the Psalm for today. Psalm 8. Here it is in its traditional language.

*O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you even care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than gods, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, sheep and oxen, the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea.*

That may read, as does much of the Bible, as a revelation to humans “from outside” as though our dominion is revealed to us by God and therefore true without question. But I find it more helpful to read these so called revelations as human discoveries. We can see that we are very much like our fellow animals and yet we possession something they don't— “god-like” powers to create and destroy like no other species. The Psalmist humbly acknowledges those powers as a gift or trust in order to mitigate human arrogance.

And now here's how Nan Merrill translates that Psalm.

*You have made us co-creators of the earth! guardians of the planet! to care for all your creatures, to tend the land, the sea, and the air we breathe; all that You have made, You have placed in our hands.*

Merrill gets “dominion” exactly right. It's not about superiority; it's about responsibility. It's not about the right to exploit; it's about compassion and wisdom.

Dominion does not mean “domination.” Dominion is a delegated power. A king appoints a governor to manage a portion of his realm, a dominion. It's an honor and a responsibility.

The governor has dominion but not ownership. The governor, or manager, is responsible and accountable as a steward to the king. It's a metaphor that encourages humility. In our “dominion” as guardians of the planet, we are accountable to the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth who, as it turns out, is not separate, above or outside of us but rather One with the whole, wondrous web of life. The revelation is from within.

I just finished reading *Food Revolution* by John Robbins. And indeed a “revolution” is coming not unlike the revolution that dramatically changed are society's attitude and behavior toward tobacco. The food revolution is moving rather quickly. It is fueled by Millennials, a cohort with huge influential powers in the marketplace.

Millennials get what older generations don't seem to. From what I've read, 30% of Millennials are vegetarians compared to 3% of the general population.

They eat that way not just for health reasons; not just because eating lower on the food chain reduces the chances of obesity, diabetes, heart disease and cancer. They also eat that way because they have heard the news: *The skyrocketing worldwide demand for meat is killing the planet.*

The American diet is not only slowly killing us but it is forcing animals to be raised in horrific, inhumane conditions. And that's not all. More and more rainforests are destroyed to raise grain not to feed people directly but to fatten cattle. And that more than the cars we drive is fueling global warming and portending worldwide food insecurity.

And what are the guardians of the planet doing? While we go about our daily lives, sentient beings, our fellow animals, our planetary friends are tortured. Future generations will look back and ask: *what were you thinking?*

But we don't have to wait for future generations, to ask that question. Millennials are already asking that of the world and of us. I am not recommending a full vegetarian or vegan diet. It may not be for everybody. I'd like to get closer but I'm not there myself.

This morning I am recommending awareness, compassion and wisdom. The first step is getting informed and in the meantime we can consider buying locally from farmers who still treat animals humanely.

This is Trinity Sunday, which is to say: wherever there is one, there is another and something else as well—namely, a community of interdependency in which all are respected and treated kindly. And that includes the whole earth and all its creatures.

The Trinity isn't some obtuse definition of God out there. The "Trinity" is not God any more than a model of an atom is the atom itself or a map is the terrain itself. The Trinity is a model, a symbol to provoke understanding and wonder. Trinity is an insight into who and what we are and, quite simply what being is. Where there is one there is the other and something more than two.

We are all interconnected. No one is greater than another. We are all one. We must practice respect for one and all.