It’s All Good

Genesis 1:1-2:3

Buckingham Church

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Here’s God speaking to light, to evening, to morning: You are good!

Here’s God to water and sky, dry land, and seas: You are good!

Here’s God to plants and fruit trees and seeds: You are good!

Here’s God to sun and moon and stars: You are good!

Here’s God to everything that swims and flies: You are good! And then something new: I bless you to give birth to more good creatures just like you!

Here’s God to everything that walks and creeps on the earth: You are good!

Here’s God to human beings: You are good! I bless you to give birth to more creatures just like you! And then something new: You are different from the others in that you are more like me, so you have a job that reflects me in you: take care of all of this creation around you. Keep them from hurting you and each other and bring some kind of order and flow to it all, remembering ***that it is all good***! That is your work.

Did you catch that? God to human beings: “You have one job. Take care of all that I have created, blessed, and called good.”

How’s that going for us?

About ten years ago I sat on the ground on a little uninhabited-by-humans basalt island called Staffa off the west coast of Scotland. I sat in the middle of little holes in the ground, waiting, because I’d been told something extraordinary was about to happen.

Puffins.

If you’ve never seen a puffin, you will be amazed at these little sea birds in their quirky beauty. What happened that day, and happens most days during nesting season on Staffa, is that puffins popped out of their holes and walked around, and over, those of us sitting there, looking for all the world like they were saying hello. They did not fly away like most birds would. They obviously were not afraid of us. We were later told by a naturalist that the puffins have never been predated by humans, but they figured out generations ago that when humans were present, the larger sea birds were afraid and therefore unlikely to invade their holes to steal eggs or baby puffins. They saw us as protectors.

In that rare moment, I think I understood what might have been if we as humans had heard those words from God correctly, the establishment of a relationship of protection and care, rather than exploitation, the difference between “dominion” and “domination.”

I believe that the single most destructive word in the whole Bible is the word translated into English as “Dominion.” As in “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 on the earth.” We later expanded that dominion to stuff that isn’t alive in the conventional sense, like rocks and rivers and oceans and mountains. We understood “subdue” to mean “defeat,” rather than organize, like subduing weeds in a garden rather than torching the whole forest. We understood “dominion” to mean tyranny and exploitation, rather than shepherding.

Jesus made an attempt to remind us that we are called to be servants in the service of others, not tyrants over anyone or anything, but somehow that got lost along the line. The created world, meant to be a source of joy, food, wonder, and sustenance for many became a place where resources were willy-nilly extracted and eradicated for the wealth of a few, thus impoverishing many people as well as living and non-living, things-that-had-been-named-good-by-God.

We had one job.

And the consequences of generations of people not doing that job well are bearing down on us in fires and storms and rising oceans and human-created poisons.

In reclaiming that one job, there is much work to be done. Some things are easy, and we can all do them, like buying less, especially single-use plastics, putting solar panels on our roofs, driving less, eating less meat and more locally sourced vegetables and fruits. But much of what needs to happen for us to do our job of stewarding the good creation better is bigger than all of that, because it has to do with the systems in which we live, the money that is to be made from exploiting resources and people. We must learn more about this and figure out how we are participating in those systems with our money, or by our inattention.

And we must do this because we also were called by God to be fruitful and multiply. Children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, children of our neighborhoods and of the church: they are the ones who will pay a bigger price than those of us over 60 will. When we baptize a child here, we all promise to be godparents to them, supporting them as they seek to live out their lives and faith. How can we do that without trying harder to find ways to help all of us reconnect with all the creation God made before us, declared good, blessed, and told us to take care of?

My mother has a large attic in her house, and it is full of stuff. She is 86 years old, and I have often asked her over the past few years to let me weed out the attic. She usually refuses, saying she’d rather spend time with me and then jokes that my brothers and I can deal with it after she dies! Which is what we were afraid of. However, recently I know she has begun to do some work in that attic, realizing it is not fair to leave the mess for us to clean up after she is gone.

My mother is teaching me something about the mess to which I, and all of us, have contributed by how we have treated the creation around us. We have to start somewhere. For the sake of all of the children of the world. And the puffins, who trust us. Where will you start? Amen.