

***WHOSE PLANET IS IT, ANYWAY?***

Carl Wilton

Lamington Presbyterian Church

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Ezekiel 29:1-10; Matthew 8:23-27

***“Because you said, ‘The Nile is mine, and I made it,’  
therefore, I am against you...”***

Ezekiel 29:9b

**“Elders:  
we have been here so short a time  
and we pretend that we have invented memory.”**

Judith sang those lines to us a short while ago. They come from W.S.

Merwin’s poem, “To the Insects.”

It’s an odd little poem: but very moving, when you realize what it’s all about. As with many poems, the title provides the key: that, and the knowledge that the various insect species on this earth have been here far longer than have we, members of the species *homo sapiens*. “We have been here so short a time and we pretend that we have invented memory.”

You’ve probably heard what the scientists say about one particular species of insect: that, of all the creatures on this earth, the one species most likely to survive a nuclear holocaust is the cockroach.

Were there ever — God forbid — to be a nuclear holocaust, and were the cockroach to be the only creature to survive, that would not speak very well of us — members of the human race — now would it?

We are the ones, after all, who have received God’s directive to us in the book of Genesis:

**“Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”** [Genesis 1:26]

*Dominion.* It’s a word that’s been badly misinterpreted down through the centuries. There was a time when this verse from Genesis was used to justify all manner of exploitation of the earth: everything from slash-and-burn agriculture to strip mining. If God’s given us dominion over the earth — or so the logic goes — then we can pretty much take what we want and destroy whatever’s left over. It’s our God-given privilege. Right?

Not exactly: because there are plenty of places in the scriptures that speak of the responsibility of those in authority to use their resources wisely. One of the best examples is Psalm 72, sometimes called “a prayer for the king”: one we rarely pay attention to, because we live in a democracy. But it’s got a lot to say about this whole subject of dominion — and the responsibilities that go along with it.

**Give the king your justice, O God,  
and your righteousness to a king’s son.  
May he judge your people with righteousness,  
and your poor with justice.  
May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,**

**and the hills, in righteousness.**

(This isn't just about power and wealth. It's about justice, righteousness.)

**May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,  
give deliverance to the needy...**

(God expects those who exercise dominion to have a special place in their heart for the poor.)

**May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass,  
like showers that water the earth.**

(Somehow I think the poet is picturing something other than acid rain. It's all about making the earth produce a rich harvest, whose benefits go far beyond the produce in the basket...)

**May there be abundance of grain in the land;  
may it wave on the tops of the mountains;  
may its fruit be like Lebanon;  
and may people blossom in the cities like the grass of the field.**

Now, lest you think these instructions to the king have nothing to do with you, consider this: you may not be a near Eastern potentate, but there are plenty of things in this world that are in your control, and mine. There are decisions you and I make every day about using energy efficiently; about recycling; about putting some limits on our carbon footprint. There are certain things in this life that even the humblest among us do have some dominion over. And the Lord has given us

that dominion not so we can strip away and destroy, but so we can sustain and nurture. This is not some idea that seeps in from the secular culture. It's deeply imbedded in the scriptures. Dominion includes stewardship: care for the earth.

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Now, let's take a look at our principal text for today: the passage from Ezekiel 29 that was our first reading. To fully grasp the power of these words, you have to take a little trip. You have to go to ancient Egypt.

There's a picture on the bulletin cover that may help you do that.

You may think it's a photo at first, but it's actually a painting: that's how fine the detail is. The artist, an Austrian by the name of Hubert Sattler, painted it in 1846. It's called "The Colossi of Memnon During the Annual Flooding." What you see there are two immense statues of the Egyptian Pharaoh Amenhotep III. They were commissioned by the Pharaoh as monuments to himself.

In the painting, you'll see they're surrounded by water. These are the floodwaters of the Nile River.

From generation to generation, it was the same — for as far back as anyone could remember. Once a year, the waters of the great river would rise up, overflowing its banks. For several weeks, the broad flood-plain was covered by several feet of muddy, brown water. As soon as the waters receded, the farmers

could be seen, plowing the soft earth and sowing their seed. This was precisely the moment they'd been waiting for.

The annual flood made agriculture easy. It washed away impurities from the soil, leaving behind a thin layer of rich, brown silt: natural fertilizer. Into the still-moist soil the seeds would go, and their growth was extraordinary — miraculous, even. Wheat, barley, millet and a whole succession of garden vegetables: this rich soil, it seemed, would produce anything.

How could these farmers take credit for their abundant crops, season after season, when the truth was plain to see? It was not the sowers, nor the cultivators, nor even the reapers who delivered the harvest. It was the river itself. It was the Nile.

Behind the power of the Nile — or, so the people believed — there was the Pharaoh. Some said it was Pharaoh himself who caused the river to flood; others, some god with whom he was in intimate communion.

So it had always been. The civilization of Egypt stretched back for centuries at the time Ezekiel was writing — even millennia. — It was older than history.

Always, close to the heart of the Egyptian people, there was the Nile, and its life-giving, annual floods. And always, behind the power of the river, and the fertility of its flood-plain, there was the Pharaoh.

But somewhere along the line, something went wrong. As generation succeeded generation, and dynasty succeeded dynasty, the Pharaohs forgot who they really were. They grew proud and vain. They came to believe that they, themselves, were like unto gods.

And so it happens that, in the book of Ezekiel, the prophet issues a stern warning to the Pharaoh of Egypt. Speaking for the Lord, Ezekiel thunders:

**“I am against you,  
Pharaoh king of Egypt,  
the great dragon sprawling  
in the midst of its channels,  
saying, ‘My Nile is my own;  
I made it for myself.’”**

[Ezekiel 29:3b]

See how Ezekiel pictures the Pharaoh: as a fearsome dragon, indolently sunning himself in the river shallows. The text says “dragon,” but very likely the prophet’s thinking of a crocodile — the closest thing to a dragon in his experience (and crocodiles do dwell in the Nile).

What enemy does this dragon have? None. He reigns supreme, and no one dares challenge his rule.

No one, that is, but Yahweh, God of Israel. Israel’s God will hook that toothy lizard like some flopping fish, and cast him up on the riverbank, to rot:

**“I will put hooks in your jaws,**

**and make the fish of your channels stick to your scales.  
I will draw you up from your channels,  
with all the fish of your channels  
sticking to your scales.  
I will fling you into the wilderness,  
you and all the fish of your channels;  
you shall fall in the open field,  
and not be gathered and buried.  
To the animals of the earth and to the birds of the air  
I have given you as food.”**

[29:4-5]

So much for the mighty Pharaoh, Lord of the Nile! There is but one Lord of the Nile, the prophet’s saying: the God who fashioned that river long ago, on the great day of creation, when the Lord “separated the waters from the waters” [Genesis 1:6].

The prophet finishes with this summary indictment:

**“Because you said, ‘The Nile is mine, and I made it’, therefore, I am against you, and against your channels, and I will make the land of Egypt an utter waste and desolation...”** [29:9b-10a]

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So what, you may be wondering, does all this colorful invective have to do with us, today? How can an ancient prophet’s curse against an oriental potentate mean anything at all to a roomful of Americans, in the year 2019?

If you listen carefully, you just may hear in the words of that curse an indictment of our society today. **“The Nile is mine, and I made it.”**

None of us are laying any claims to Egyptian real estate — at least I don't think so (though this congregation always surprises me) — but is it not true that we do lay claim to the natural world around us: sometimes just as much misplaced pride of ownership? Is it not true that, in so many unthinking moments, we consider the earth as existing to serve our needs?

There are mining companies who literally blow the tops off mountains, to get to seams of coal beneath. When they're finished, there's nothing left but vast fields of rubble, slag where no plant will ever grow. **“The mountain is mine, and I made it.”**

There are chemical companies that have dumped noxious waste into rivers for years. Then, when government regulators finally catch up with them, they simply moved their factories — lock, stock and poisonous barrel — to Mexico, just south of the border. **“The stream is mine, and I made it.”**

There are international agreements about air quality, but our nation has still not signed on to them. Virtually every other industrial nation has signed onto this treaty, except ours. **“The air is mine, and I made it.”**

No, we do not stand aloof from creation: we are a part of it. And if you have any reason to doubt that, just consider what happened yesterday in Manhattan. A good part of the island had no electricity for over three hours: no elevators, no

subways, no traffic lights. It was a reminder of how fragile our vaunted technology can be.

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Back in the time of Ezekiel, there are but two superpowers in the world: Babylon and Egypt. Caught between them is the tiny, vulnerable nation of Judah. The prophet — along with all his neighbors — is much concerned with the posturing of these two superpowers, as they flex their muscles and warily circle one another. As the Babylonians are preparing to invade, Ezekiel warns Judah's king not to expect any help from the Pharaoh of Egypt. That overfed crocodile will never budge from his comfortable spot in the river mud.

And what of our world today? Who is Babylon, and who is Egypt? I don't think you need my help to figure it out.

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Let me tell you the story of another king, from a very different part of the world. King Canute was of Danish origin, but he ruled the ancient kingdom of Wessex, in present-day England. He is famed for his wisdom.

One day, he invited his courtiers to join him on a little trip to the seashore. There he had caused his throne to be set up, facing the ocean. Taking his place upon the throne, King Canute commanded the tide to stop coming in.

There are two versions of the story of King Canute commanding the waves to stand still. In one version, the king is a fool, overimpressed with his own authority. In another, he's doing this as a teaching moment for members of the nobility, vividly illustrating the limits to royal power.

Whatever the king's motivation, the result was the same. The rising tide was completely oblivious to his command. The water continued to rise, until it was lapping at the king's beautifully embroidered slippers.

I think of King Canute when I look at that painting of those two colossal statues of Pharaoh surrounded by the floodwaters. It's an image that speaks to me of the arrogance of so much of our culture. Are there not ways we continue to proclaim not "**The Nile is mine, and I made it,**" but "This world is ours, and we made it?"

But here's the thing: *No, we didn't.* We have mined it and refined it. We have tilled it and filled it. We have slaved over it and sometimes paved over it: but we did *not* create it.

We are not the Creator, but rather creatures. It's so easy to forget that fundamental truth of our existence. As the poet dishes out our well-earned comeuppance — "we have been here so short a time, and we pretend we have invented memory."

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But here's something to remember: the experience of those disciples in the boat, in our Gospel lesson. They watch Jesus arise from his nap and command the wind and waves to be still. Unlike the legend of King Canute on the beach, in this story the disciples turn to one another and ask in wonder, "What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?"

What sort of man, indeed? A man, yes: but a man who is also son of God. Not creature as we are, but creator. Him the waves do obey. Before him, we can only stand in awe.

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The text of our next hymn, "God of the Sparrow," was written by an American Lutheran of Slovak origin by the name of Jaroslav Vajda. A Lutheran church in Kirkwood, Missouri commissioned him "to compose a hymn text that would provide answers from the users of the hymn as to why and how God's creatures (and children) are to serve him."

Vajda's composer friend and frequent collaborator Carl Schalk composed an original tune to go with Vajda's poem. "God of the Sparrow" is the result: reminding us of the words of Jesus in Luke 12, verses 6 and 7:

**"Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them**

**is forgotten in God's sight. But even the hairs of your head are all counted. Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows."**

How does the creature say Awe? How does the creature say Praise?

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