

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ  
The Reverend Dr Scott Everett Couper  
Sunday, June 6, 2021  
Second Sunday after Pentecost

**“What ‘Dominion’ Meant for the American Bison”<sup>1</sup>**

**June 6, 2021**

**First of three sermons in a series entitled:**

**"Come Holy Spirit, Renew the Whole Creation"<sup>2</sup>**



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<sup>1</sup> This message was inspired by the following publication:

Prof. Larry Rasmussen, "Adam, Where Are You" in *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1996), 227-244.

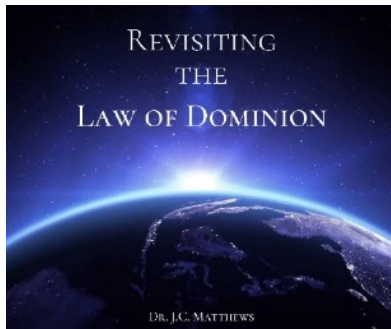
<sup>2</sup> "Come, Holy Spirit, Renew the Whole Creation!" was the theme of the World Council of Churches Seventh Assembly in Canberra, Australia, 1991.

In the wake of Pentecost, the early church grew and strengthened. A whole new theological paradigm shift took place and it fueled the growth and strength of the church. The paradigm shift decentralized a faith that focused itself on a Temple in Jerusalem to one that rippled out to the ends of the then known world. The shift turned a faith based on sacrifice to one on service. The shift morphed a faith based on law and penalty to one based on love and grace. The Holy Spirit, gifted to the church at Pentecost, has since caused the plate tectonics of our faith tradition to shake us out of our old molds of thinking in a myriad of ways. I believe our generation is experiencing a new tectonic shift of the theological plates and is thus causing us to have a richer, deeper, and fulfilling relationship with our God. This is something to be embraced, not avoided. I thank God for the freshness and new life the Pentecostal winds of the Holy Spirit bring to us.

In this series, we will feel the shock waves caused by recent changing theological paradigms and we will learn of new revelations that blow winds of excitement within us that can spread like wildfire.



This first week, we examine the theological concept of 'dominion' and how it shaped our destructive relationship with the Earth. Next week, we will follow the evolution of theological thought to the concept of 'stewardship'. Though 'stewardship' is more progressive and one might say 'enlightened', it is nonetheless woefully inadequate. In our third and last week, Matt Deen will speak to about 'discipleship' and thus present a new theological paradigm that will change the way we think about our Earth and thus change again *for the better* our relationship with God.



The theological concept of 'dominion' understands that within the created order, humans are the pinnacle and thus are 'exceptional'. Following on this understanding, 'dominion' understands that humans are to rule or to master the Earth. The concept of 'dominion' for Christians has been orthodoxy, the authorized or officially sanctioned belief about our relationship with the Earth, because it is so clearly and unambiguously stated in the scripture from Genesis that Sue read for us. Humans were the last to be created, on the sixth day, and thus were seen to be superior to that which was previously created. In fact,

humans were seen to be created just under God, in God's own image, above all other created beings. Humans' elevated status predictably has given us an extraordinary superiority complex and thus made us exceptionally arrogant. Not once but twice, in verses 26 and 28, the term 'dominion' is used and the word 'subdue' is thrown in for good measure as it regards humans' relationship to the Earth.

How has humans' arrogance been articulated theologically? Well, I hesitate to criticize our Catholic brothers and sisters. First, I hesitate because Catholic theology perhaps best *articulates* dominion but the Protestant faith tradition with its so-called work ethic and birthing of the Industrial Revolution arguably best *practices* dominion.



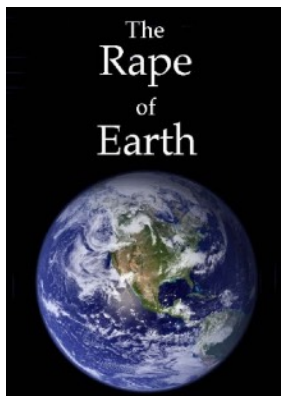
Remember, it was the Anglican philosopher Francis Bacon who once said that nature ought to be the "anvil" on which humans "hammer out" a world.<sup>3</sup> Second,

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<sup>3</sup> Francis Bacon, *Works*, ed. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, Douglas Devon Heath, 14 vols. (London: Longman Green, 1879), 3:156.

I hesitate because Catholics produce some of the best theology that counters the theological concept of dominion, using both Saint Francis and contemporary theologians like Richard Rohr. Nonetheless, we see the destructive understanding of dominion in Cardinal John O’Conner when he stated in 1990, “The Earth was made for man, not man for the Earth”. We hear dominion theology in Pope John Paul II’s commentary on Genesis when he proclaimed that Genesis “places man at the summit of God’s creative activity, as its crown, at the culmination of a process which leads from indistinct chaos to the most perfect of creation. Everything in creation is ordered to man and everything is made subject to him”.<sup>4</sup>

It difficult in this one message to quantify the destructiveness that this theology has wrought on the created world. When one contemplates the hideous destruction of our Earth because of human beings’ insatiable greed, it brings one to tears.



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<sup>4</sup> Pope John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life* (New York: Random House, 1995), 60-61, 149.

One word comes close to describing what humans have done to the Earth using dominion theology: 'rape'. Just as many men historically have taken the scripture's mandate for wives to be subject to their husbands (Colossians 3:18 and Ephesians 5:22) and understood such a commandment to give them a moral and legal right to rape them, so human beings have understood the concept of dominion to give them the moral and legal right to rape the Earth. And we have. I give you one example.



In the sixteenth century, there were approximately thirty to fifty million buffalo roaming the western north American continent. By the 1880s, less than one hundred remained in the wild. What happened?

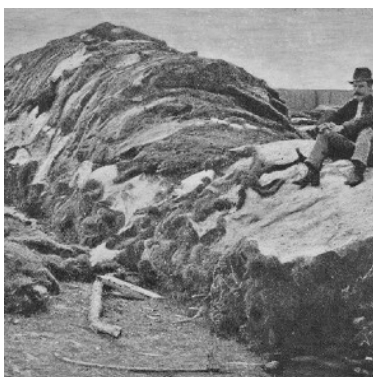


Well, mostly white Christian males commercially hunted or slaughtered them to near extinction. Sometimes they were shot by the hundreds and thousands from trains for recreational purposes. "The railroads began to advertise what they

called 'hunting by rail'. Parties of hunters using .50 caliber rifles headed west by rail to shoot bison from the roofs or windows of trains, in these cases not even bothering to take the hides".<sup>5</sup>



Sometimes, they were killed only for their skin or tongue, the rest of the animal being left to rot. William "Buffalo Bill" Cody was called such because he boasted in one eighteen-month period that he killed 4,280 buffalo. Bison were easy to kill, because when one in the herd lay dying, the others came to rally around it making it easy to slay the rest.



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<sup>5</sup> Joseph Cummins, "How Many Buffalos Were Killed During the Settlement of the Western United States?" *The Classroom*, June 27, 2018. Found at: <https://www.theclassroom.com/many-buffalos-were-killed-during-settlement-western-united-states-14633.html>, accessed June 5, 2021.

If sport or money were not bad enough reasons to kill millions of animals to the point of extinction, how about if those animals were eradicated to intentionally commit genocide against an entire race of people, the Native Americans.



President Ulysses S. Grant saw the destruction of the buffalo as the solution to the ‘Indian Problem’.<sup>6</sup> General Grenville Dodge once said, “Kill Every Buffalo You Can! Every Buffalo Dead Is an Indian Gone”.<sup>7</sup> General Phillip Sheridan advocated that the government supply hunters with military weapons and ammunition saying, “These men have done more in the last two years, and will do more in the next year, to settle the vexed Indian question, than the entire regular army has done in the last forty years. They are destroying the Indians’ commissary”.<sup>8</sup> As we approach the Fourth of July next month, I boldly declare that if we were taught

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<sup>6</sup> J. Weston Phippen, *The Atlantic*, “Kill Every Buffalo You Can! Every Buffalo Dead Is an Indian Gone”, May 13, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Native American in Philanthropy, “1865-1903: Annihilation of Buffalo by Military and Hunters”, 2021. Found in: <https://nativephilanthropy.candid.org/events/annihilation-of-buffalo-by-military-and-hunters/>, accessed June 5, 2021.

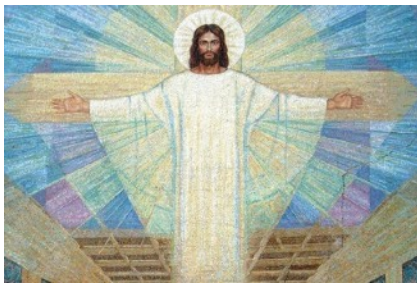
<sup>8</sup> Gilbert King, “Where the Buffalo No Longer Roam: The Transcontinental Railroad Connect East and West – and Accelerated the Destruction of What Had Been the Center of North America”, *Smithsonian Magazine*, July 17, 2012. Found at: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/where-the-buffalo-no-longer-roamed-3067904/>, accessed June 5, 2021.



the actual history of our country rather than its mythology, its theology would be much improved!



As we move to the Holy Communion table this morning, I would like to offer you a possible redemptive aspect of dominion theology.



We often refer to Jesus as 'Lord', which in Latin is *dominus*. Douglas John Hall proposed that if we as followers of Jesus Christ wish to emulate our lives after Jesus, then the manner in which we "exercise power should be patterned on his kind of Lordship – a servant stance in which the last are made first, the weak are made strong, and even the sparrow is cherished, so that all might be gathered into covenantal intimacy on equal terms".<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Douglas John Hall, *The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990) and *Lighten Our Darkness: Toward Indigenous Theology of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976) and *Processing Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993).



This morning, we will come to the table, and learn from the Lord.

This was the Word of God. And it was delivered to the People of God. And the people of God responded, "Amen!"