

Feast of St. Francis
Genesis 1: 20-31
October 7, 2007

Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, California

The Lesson of the Worm:
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

Today we celebrate the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi—a day the church sets aside to mark the life of one who offers us a window into the heart of God, one who by his very life turns our hearts to the beauty and oneness of God's creation. It's fitting, don't you think, that we hear today the story of how God created living creatures—the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, all the wild animals of the earth and every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth? We hear today of how the waters and the earth brought forth living beings, how God created humans in God's image, how God gave humans "dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." We hear today of our dominion over those living beings who share God's earth with us.

What does it mean for us to have dominion over those who share this planet with us?

There are those who argue that that claim to dominion has justified a multitude of environmental sins over the ages. And it probably has.

There are those who hear the word dominion as an invitation to use nature as a convenience.

There are those who use the biblical command to dominion as license to exploit the environment and every living thing that moves upon the earth.

There are those who hear, in this account of Creation, a rationale for wreaking havoc on the environment. How does Wallace Stegner put it—"to live as a weed species..."

But I wonder if something else is going on in this story of Creation and in God's giving humankind "dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth"?

Remember, before God gives humankind dominion over other living beings, God makes humans in God's own image.

Think of it—we are made in the image of the One who creates and gives life and who, at the end of the day, surveys his work and says, "It is good."

We are made in the image of the One who takes delight in all of creation.

We are made in the image of the One who seeks out the lost and binds up the injured.

We are made in the image of the One who reigns with tenderness and compassion.

God creates us in God's image and then, and only then, gives us dominion over other living beings.

Could it be, is it possible that in giving us dominion over those who share the earth with us, God is inviting us to join with God in caring tenderly for God's creation?

Could it be that at the very core of our dominion is the notion of tender, life-giving care?

But how do we—limited, creaturely beings that we are—live a life of sharing in divine dominion?

The life of Francis of Assisi points to a way of living in God's creation, a way of living out our dominion over those who share this planet with us.

It's an old story—one we know well. Francis of Assisi, born into a merchant family at the height of the age of chivalry and in the midst of the crusades, slowly turns from aspiring knight to mendicant friar and in the process discovers his oneness with all creation.

What a wonderful way of dominion—of relationship really—he offers us.

His was a way of dominion based not on power over but rather love for.

He saw himself and all of us not as a species apart from the rest of creation but as kin to all creation and kin to God as well.

Indeed, he saw all creation filled to the brim with the abundant goodness of God.

I think that's what inspired his great tenderness towards all living beings—from the birds of the air to the worms on the ground.

His friars talked about how he picked up worms from the road and moved them to safety so that they wouldn't be trampled by travelers going by.

Francis of Assisi invites us to turn to a life of compassionate dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and every living being—a dominion grounded in the twin truths that we are brothers and sisters with all creation for we are all birthed by the one living God; and that humankind is made in the image of God who tenderly cares for all creation.

Francis of Assisi, in his tender care of even worms on the road, points to a way of living in our world that takes notice of the needs of every species and that actively moves to preserve and protect even the least of God's creatures.

Francis of Assisi beckons us to live in right relationship—that is loving solidarity—with the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, every living creature, and even with one another.

