

Creation Matters
Genesis 1:26-28, Psalm 8
First Presbyterian Church
October 20, 2019

Genesis 1:26-28

Sermon

A woman was in line at the grocery store
 when a little fellow riding in the cart in front of her
 began to sing an enthusiastic rendition
 of what she thought was “Happy Birthday to you.”
Sensing that he might enjoy the attention, she asked him,
 “Are you having a birthday?”
His mother laughed and explained
 that he was actually singing, “Happy Earth Day to you”
 as his preschool class had just put on a program
 to celebrate the environment.
 “Happy Earth Day to you,” he sang.
We don’t celebrate Earth Day here at church...
 and yet this morning as part of our series of sermons
 in which we try to reclaim the fullness of biblical stewardship, we will include this,
 our earthly home,
 and all its creatures in our job description.
The truth is that only in the last four or five decades
 has the Church had much of anything to say
 about OUR responsibility as people of faith
 to care for this earth...
 we have clearly been guilty of sins of omission.
Yet, it’s not only what we have NOT DONE,
 it’s also what we have done.
There are folks who see the Church as part of the problem...
 folks who accuse Christians of being so focused on heaven
 that they have neglected and yes, severely damaged this earth.
They point to prosperity gospel churches
 that preach how God intends for his children
 to have all kinds of material possessions
 that are awfully hard on the environment.
They point to other Christians who condemn many sins,
 but say almost nothing about the lifestyle of this nation,
 or our own lifestyles, which consume so much...
 waste so much... throw so much away... and pollute so much.
At best Christians are guilty of benign neglect, these critics say...
 so obsessed are we with our own institutional survival...
 our own spiritual experiences... our private comforts...
 that we really don’t seem to care

about the creation God has made.
And as a result, many environmentalists
have just thrown the Bible out with the bath water.
But the Bible's not the problem!
In fact, it is Scripture that provides a vision –
grounded in God the Maker of all –
which gives to the human creature
a sacred calling to care for the earth.
Far from being silent...
the Bible has much to say
about enjoying and being responsible for this gift...
about respecting and caring for this earth...
which is what motivates
Sojourners' community's Jim Wallis to write:
"It may well be that ONLY theology – GOOD theology –
can save the earth now."¹
My intent this morning
is not to judge you
(because you would rightly judge me, too).
And I'm not going to weigh in on the climate change debate –
I'm pretty sure most of us
have already decided what we think about that.
What I want to do is offer you some GOOD THEOLOGY
regarding our place as God's stewards...
our sacred calling to care for the earth and all its creatures...
And to do that we must go quickly to Psalm 8.²

The poet of Psalm 8 lay down one night,
stared up into the inky black Middle Eastern sky...
and he was utterly blown away by what he saw.
And to think he was only using his naked eye!
What if he could have spent even ten minutes
looking through a telescope,
what might he have written then?
Ancient astronomers were quite skilled
at mapping the night sky...
and even at predicting the movements of the stars.
What puzzled these early scientists, however...
was a handful of stars that refused to behave.
There were about a half-dozen stars
that refused to march in line with the others.
The Greeks called these mystery stars "wanderers,"
believing them to have
somehow lost their way in the universe.

¹ Jim Wallis in *Sojourners*, March 2004 issue, p. 5.

² The following borrows from a sermon by Rev. Scott Hoezee, "How Majestic!", preached at Calvin University.

In fact, the Greek word for “wandering” is *planeo*,
from which we derive the English word “planet.”

Of course, we now know that these “wanderers”
were not stars at all, but other worlds all their own.

We’ve now seen amazing pictures of them:
of Venus and Jupiter... of Saturn and Mars...
and their beauty is absolutely stunning.

But the poet of Psalm 8 didn’t know any of that.
All he saw was little pin-pricks of light
twinkling in the night sky and was overjoyed.

How much more cause for joy do we have -
what with at least 10 billion galaxies in the universe...
each containing perhaps 100 billion stars.

As the poet confessed, so do we –
it makes you feel really, really small.

Some years back *Time* magazine
published some of the Hubble telescope’s
most impressive photos –
huge luminous pillars of clouds and gas.

A few weeks later someone wrote a letter to the editor
suggesting that these photos
should *finally* put an end to the religious idea
that humanity amounts to anything.

Not only are we clearly NOT the center of the universe,
this person wrote, we don’t even register.

Well, though the poet of Psalm 8 won’t go that far,
he readily admits the wonders of the universe are humbling...
and you don’t have to go all the way to outer space
to know that.

Just scoop up a handful of topsoil from the forest floor
and, with the help of a microscope,
you can find hundreds of beetles and springtails,
not to mention about two billion
fungi, algae, and protozoa.

Or look at the birds of the air –
Did you know that Arctic Terns
fly a 10,000 mile round trip each year
from their winter home in the Antarctic
to their summer home in Asia.

Meanwhile the Northern Fulmar
equipped with a water desalinization factory in its beak –
spends its entire life out on the ocean... drinking fresh water.

The universe is filled with wonder –

on both the macro and micro levels...
in both human and non-human creatures...
and IT IS every bit as humbling as the poet claims.

But Psalm 8... is not written... to make us feel like nothing.
Instead, using a remarkably brief 70 Hebrew words,
this psalm directs us in how we might think theologically
about human life in the cosmos.

Psalm 8 is the first psalm of praise in the Book of Psalms.
And it's significant, I think,
that the first psalm of praise is about creation.

As recently as fifty years ago,
Bible scholars were convinced
the ancient Israelites didn't much care about creation.

They thought that Israel was far more interested in redemption—
the covenant with Abraham, the exodus from Egypt, and the like.

But Psalm 8 is one of a number of texts that proves this wrong.
Creation mattered to the Israelites.

The cosmos is the handiwork of God...
it is the target of redemption...
so much so that the Israelites could not even conceive of salvation
apart from the promise of a good *land*
flowing with milk and honey...
land on which God could provide for the needs of his people...
and his people could worship God.

Throughout the Old Testament,
God's purposes and promises are again and again tied
to things like soil and water,
fruit and flocks, wine and wheat.

Creation matters, Psalm 8 says,
because God himself delights in it...
because God himself loves it.

God made it all,
God stays active in its preservation,
and God remains vitally interested in its flourishing.

And making sure we understand this...
(making absolutely certain we get this)
is one-half of Psalm 8's larger purpose.
But only half.

The other half addresses
what is sometimes called "the humanity question."
Who are we? How do we fit? What is our role?

The poet looked into the night sky
and felt like nothing by comparison.
You and I have EVEN MORE cause to feel that way.

And because of that,
many thinkers do now proclaim
that humanity is nothing—or at least nothing special.
Let me just say that the Bible disagrees rather passionately.
If there is anything MORE marvelous
than the sheer scale and splendor of the universe,
it is that in all of that vastness,
you and I really do matter.

We have been made in the image of God...
or as the psalm puts it - with “a crown of glory and honor.”

And it is because of this gift
so graciously doled out by God,
that we are given the job of “steward” –
that we are put in charge of this cosmos
to tend and keep and rule it on God’s behalf.

Stewardship began when God gave human beings “dominion” -
Cliff read: “Let us make human beings in our image,
after 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 earth.”

The critical question is what is the nature of that dominion?
Is it the conquest of nature?
Is it to exterminate whatever stands in our way...
to use up whatever resources we uncover...
to pollute whatever life source we find?

Some, in the name of the Judeo-Christian tradition,
have said just that.

But Jesus makes it quite clear what dominion means to him.
In his teaching about the faithful steward he asks:
Who then is the faithful and wise steward,
whom his master will set over his household...

and then he answers with these words:
“to give them their portion of food at the proper time.”

The dominion of God’s faithful steward
is expressed in feeding. Feeding.³

Another image we might use is that of a “trustee.”
I think we’re all familiar with trusts.

Mr. A. is the original owner
who gives up the use of some property
and establishes a trust.

In the trust, he appoints Mr. B. to manage the property...
NOT for Mr. A’s benefit and not for his own benefit,
but for the benefit of Mrs. C., who is the beneficiary.

So, the earth and everything in it is the Lord’s,” says Psalm 24...

³ This and other insights are thanks to Albert C. Winn, “Holding the Earth in Trust,” published in Teaching and Preaching Stewardship (National Council of Churches, 1985), p. 210-216

it belongs to God.
Yet, God has made it over to us...
 we do not own it, but we do hold title to it
 so we can manage it according to our discretion.
We hold it in trust...
 to accomplish with it the owner's purpose...
 which is the well-being of his beneficiaries.
And who are the beneficiaries of God's trust?
 Not just me and my family...
 not just the good members of this congregation...
 not just those who have the resources to acquire them.
No, God's has remembered all the children in this trust –
 every man, woman, and child... living and yet to be born...
 and as good trustees,
 we are to do our very best to feed them all.
And not only human children...
 that great big old ark would have never been built
 if God was only interested in Noah and his family –
 a much smaller vessel would have done the job.
but God made US a part of a much larger family...
 (along WITH all the other creatures)...
 and we must manage the trust aware
 that the beneficiaries extend far beyond the human race.
We are given power to rule and tame,
 to order and reshape the world.
We are to produce and consume,
 but always as God's trustees...
 always with the purpose of feeding
 all people and all creatures in mind.
So, far from being small and insignificant,
 God has given over to us the power
 to care for one another and all created things.
It is an awesome thought –
 that we hold the earth in trust.
This stewardship is our glory, our honor, our crown.
It makes us little less than God.
 In God's image, after God's likeness.

But it is also our ultimate judgment.
You know, it's a good thing that in the end
 I do not have to judge you and you do not have to judge me. Because if you did finally
have to judge me,
 we would, of course, listen with respect
 to whatever I might say about my faith and piety...
 the strength of my belief and my devotional life
 and my involvement in the church – that sort of thing.

Yet, if you did finally have to judge me,
 you would also need to look at who I am as an economic being – how I earn my money
and what I spend it on...
 how I invest my resources and how much I give away...
how my lifestyle either respects or disrespects
 my trusteeship of God’s beloved world.
As hard as it would be,
 we would need to judge each other that way...
 because that is precisely the way God judges us.
When Jesus pictures the last judgment in Matthew 25
 he never mentions faith at all... only actions.
He never mentions having devotions
 or an active prayer life or good church attendance
 (though they are all important to him, I’m sure).
What he mentions are economic actions... stewardship actions...
 feeding the hungry, clothing the naked,
 welcoming strangers, visiting the sick and imprisoned.
He mentions these economic actions... trustee actions...
 as being the real test of the reality of our faith and piety.
Frankly, I tremble to be judged by my stewardship.

And yet, I keep trying...
 mostly in small ways that one guy who is a part of one family
 that lives in one neighborhood
and is at least partly responsible for one church
 in one small city in North Carolina.
I keep trying to remember
 that this massive universe belongs not to me, but to God...
 and that God has given this small corner into my hands...
he has signed it over to me
 and made me responsible as trustee
 to carry out his purposes –
not for me or my family only –
 but for all people and animals and plants
 and every other kind of being.
And I keep trying to remember that in the end
 I am accountable for everything I have received...
 every penny, every minute, every thing.
God loves us enough not only to give us good things...
 but also to hold us accountable for the gifts.
So there is... with this gracious God...
 always that time when we are asked simply,
 “What have you done with what you have been given?”⁴
In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁴ William Willimon in his Foreward to David N. Mosser’s *The Stewardship Companion* (WJK,2007) p. ix