

“Where the Sixth Day and the 11th Hour Meet”

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

4-26-20 Earth Day Sunday

Based upon Genesis 1 and Psalm 104

When I was in kindergarten, I started out in a half-day program. I would take a bus called the “chicken bus” to and from school, enjoying a morning or afternoon there, but never both. Then one day something happened. I don’t remember now whether the buses had a problem that day, or if class schedules were changed for a special program or what, but for some reason both the morning and the afternoon classes of kindergarten ended up at school at the same time that day. It wasn’t long before conflict broke out all over the playground and in the classroom. “Mrs. Lewis is *our* teacher!” the morning class cried. “No, she’s *ours*!” the afternoon kids insisted. All year long each class had assumed that it was Mrs. Lewis’ only class. We thought we had exclusive rights to our desks and cubbies and her heart. But on that day, Mrs. Lewis insisted that everything in the classroom was for all of us to use, and that she loved us all the same. It was such a shocking lesson to me that all these decades later I still remember how it felt.

We can chuckle at the self-absorption of young children in situations like these. But life gets much less amusing when we realize after reading *Genesis One*, that when it comes to how we see the classroom which is Creation, human beings of all ages are still behaving as kindergartners. As you just heard, *Genesis Chapter One*, the first of the two different creation stories found in the Bible, is the one that describes God creating the world over the course of a week. It’s the one that says that God made both male and female human beings at the same time in God’s image, not the one that says God made Eve out of Adam’s rib. Over the years, people of faith have focused so much on our part of the story, which feels to us like the great climax of God’s creative efforts, that we have all but missed the fact that humanity shares Day Six with all the rest of the living creatures on the earth. “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind,” God says, “cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind. And it was so. God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.” (Gen. 1:24-25). Then God makes humanity, looks at everything that was made on that day, says it is all very good, and calls it a day.

Now both *Genesis* stories are what we would call theological poetry or story. They aren’t offering scientific or historical accounts of the evolutionary process. They are trying to describe the nature of God’s relationship with Creation and humanity from the very beginning. So, it’s important not to get so hung up on the seven-day business that we feel that God is telling us we must reject Darwin’s theory of evolution, or the scientific findings of geologists and cosmologists. But if we accept the metaphorical framework of these beautiful stories as one designed to teach us important *theological* truths, then it is pretty humbling to recognize that these texts affirm that human beings share a day, not just with cattle—beasts that chew their cud all day and are hardly known for their great intellect—but also with every other living creature including those that creep on the ground. We probably wouldn’t mind sharing a day with majestic lions, powerful elephants, or smart primates. But according to the text, we share the day with creepy snakes and spiders, with naked mole rats and skunks too. We share our day with

okapis, those sad creatures that look like God made them out of the leftover body parts of at least four different animals, and with African frogs that look like Jabba the Hutt, with plagues of locusts and too many earth worms to count. God made them all and called them very good. When was the last time you celebrated that?

The implications of our sharing a day are the same as they were for my sharing a classroom in kindergarten. First, we must recognize that we aren't the only ones God loves. *Genesis One* doesn't list God's creatures according to how they rank in God's affections. It doesn't say that human beings were the grand finale of God's work. It says that God was pleased with everything God made; it was *all* very good. The rest of the Scriptures bear out the truth that God loves the animals as much as us. For example, God's covenant with Noah was with all living things as well with him and his family. (Gen. 9:8-17). The Sabbath laws of the Mosaic covenant apply to animals and the land as well as people. (Deut. 5:12-15; Lev. 25:4). God's dreams of the future spoken through the prophets address the animals and land as well as the Israelites, describing a peaceable kingdom where venomous snakes and toddlers play side by side, and leopards lie down with baby goats. (Is. 11:1-9)

The second thing we share with our Sixth Day "classmates" is resources. According to *Genesis One*, God gave human beings plants and fruit to eat, and gave all the rest of the animals plants too. (Gen. 1:29-30). There is no talk of predator or prey in this Creation story, no permission given to human beings to eat the cattle God called good, or any of the other animals that share their day, or to destroy the plants those animals needed to eat. God gave us all the same fruit of the earth to feed us, and the same trees and sky, water and mountains to call home.

This is not the part of the story that we usually remember, however. What we remember is that on the evening of the Sixth Day after all the creating was done, God told human beings "to have dominion over every living thing and to subdue the earth." Those words, combined with the idea that we were made "in the image of God," have convinced human beings for centuries that we are more valuable to God than all the other creatures of the earth, and convinced us that we can do with the earth, and anything that dwells on it, whatever we want. The text doesn't actually say this, as I've pointed out before. The Hebrew term typically translated "dominion" is more a term to describe a job than ownership or power. It is one that a lord would give to an estate manager. Basically, God made all kinds of wonderful creatures and then realized that someone on earth was going to need to take care of them all, so God made human beings to do that. Similarly the word in Hebrew translated "subdue" speaks more to maintaining than conquering, a fact that the second Creation story makes clearer when it records Adam being told to "till" the earth, using a Hebrew verb that means "to serve." (Gen. 2:15). But English translations have never been fixed, in part I believe, because we like the classic translation better. It makes everything ours to control and use, and casts us as the next best thing to God.

Unfortunately, this understanding has made us behave in very ungodlike ways. Listen to these words from a 1976 farming handbook: "Forget the pig is an animal. Treat him just like a machine in a factory. Schedule treatments like you would lubrication, breeding season like the

first step in an assembly line, and marketing like the delivery of finished goods.”¹ This was written in 1976 C.E., not B.C.E.! Livestock management has become even worse since then as factory farms have replaced individual family farms as the primary producers of animal protein in our country. Despite increasing evidence of animals’ intelligence and feelings, agribusiness treats them like disposable widgets more often than not. We also still chop down trees for short term profits destroying countless habitats and our air in the process, pollute our waterways, poison our soil, all the while saying that we are smarter than all other creatures that share our day. Truly we have been the worst kind of estate managers imaginable. If you had a beautiful stretch of land, with running streams and blue skies, trees and all kinds of animals, and you left it in the hands of a landscaping company to maintain, only to come back and find everything either dead or dying, would you keep paying the company? No, you would be outraged. You would fire the company and maybe even sue them because they didn’t do what they were supposed to do. This is the position God is in now, only God can’t fire us because we are God’s children, and for some inexplicable reason, despite everything we have done to the Creation God loves, God still loves us too.

That is a huge blessing for us, but it doesn’t change the fact that we need to change our behavior dramatically and immediately, not just because we are letting God down, but also because we have now done so much damage that we are now threatening our own lives as well as the rest of Creation. The clock has been ticking on climate change for decades, and now has reached the 11th hour. If we don’t act now, it will soon be too late to prevent the horrible consequences our behavior has caused. We don’t have any more time to waste with partisan politics. The data is not ambiguous. We must repent and change our behavior, and the first step in doing that is to reject the “dominion” theology grounded in poor biblical hermeneutics and human selfishness, and embrace instead a new way of looking at the world sometimes called “integration theology.” Integration theology recognizes that human beings share their day with all living things. God made us to be interconnected and interdependent and loves us all.

Psalm 104's beautiful hymn of praise to God our Creator illustrates integration theology well. The psalm begins with God separating heaven and earth, making mountains and valleys, rivers and streams. Then most of the rest of it describes how God provides for all the living creatures of the earth. God provides drink for every animal, including wild donkeys. (Remember Palm Sunday? God loves donkeys!) God provides trees for the birds, grass for the cattle, and rocky mountains for wild goats. God gives the darkness to protect the night creepers, food to feed the hungry lions, and wine and bread to gladden the human heart. But even more significantly, according to verse 30, God gives all living things breath. This is the same act we talked about just last week with John’s little Pentecost. Jesus breathed on the disciples and gave them new life, just as God in the second creation story, breathed on Adam, who was made from the dust of the earth, and gave him life. This understanding is at the heart of integration theology. The Spirit of God is in all living things that fly and creep and graze, not just in human beings. We are all filled with the breath of God.

¹ As quoted in Mason, Jim, and Singer, Peter, *Animal Factories* (New York: Crown Pub., 1980), 1, citing Byrnes, J, “*Raising Pigs by the Calendar at Maplewood Farm*,” *Hog Farm Management*, September 1976, 30,

Think of what might change in our attitudes and approach to the created world if we remembered that God's Spirit is in all living things as well as in us. Instead of seeing animals as machines or objects here to serve us, trees as dollar bills, and waterways and skies as ours to travel and plumb as we please, we might see them all as filled with divine grace. I'm not saying that the animals and trees would become gods for us, but that we might finally see them as we see ourselves, as creatures that reflect the goodness and wisdom of our Creator. We might finally see Creation as worthy of awe and wonder, not abuse. This, Matthew Fox, a Dominican priest and author of several environmental books, has argued, is what has been lacking in humanity's approach to Creation. Fox argued that the origin of all of humanity's violence against Creation can be traced back to the fact that we have "desacralized the planet and the universe for hundreds of years."² In other words, ever since the Enlightenment, we have viewed the world more through the lens of ownership than awe. In order to change the way that we treat Creation, therefore, we have to rediscover the sanctity of God's world so that defacing and destroying Creation feels like desecrating God's property not our own. We need to rediscover awe for all living creatures that God made with equal love and breath. Then it won't be so easy for us to destroy them, and maybe, just maybe, our faith will make us fight to save them as much as ourselves.

So far, this pandemic has taught us two things toward this end that are helpful. First, it has taught us that we can indeed embrace radical change remarkably quickly if and when we feel our lives are at stake. We didn't think it was possible, but now are seeing that it is if we are sufficiently motivated. Since climate change promises to be far more destructive than Covid-19, that should be sufficient motivation. It should also help us to realize that we can't ignore the urgency of that pending disaster just because we are preoccupied with the current one. We need to address these crises simultaneously and can as we design what reentry will look like. Now is the time to create a new way of living which recognizes human beings' interconnectedness and interdependence with each other, and with all of God's Creation.

The second thing we have learned from the pandemic is that when we stop claiming all of their world as our own, we can see the wonder and beauty of our Sixth Day kin all around us. In the past two months, we have seen thousands of little sea turtles paddle their way joyfully to the sea through the sand mandalas their mothers created on empty Brazilian beaches because there have been no oblivious beach-goers there to crush them. We have seen mountain goats romp through closed villages in Wales, jelly fish undulate through crystal clear canals in Venice. We have seen air quality improve around the globe, dolphins and whales frolic in seas once dominated and polluted by boats, and wolves and mountain lions rediscovering territory we usually refuse to share. These changes are all small and will be easily undone as soon as we go back to our factories, cars, and bad habits. But for a few moments, in the midst of our darkest hours, we have been given a glimpse of what our world could be like if we shared more and dominated less. In the midst of our fear, these creatures have been ambassadors of grace and hope. They have inspired awe. I'm not so naive as to think human beings will give up their beaches to turtles or backyards to mountain lions. But I hope these glimpses will inspire us to

² Fox, Matthew, "Creation Spirituality," in The Soul of Nature: Visions of a Living Earth, Michael Tobias and Georgianne Cowan Eds., (New York: Continuum Pub. Co., 1994), 207.

revision our world and our future in such a way that it will be safer for both humanity and Creation going forward. I hope we will embrace a way of life that is closer to the way of the garden God placed under our care.

Martin Luther King Jr. once wrote: “We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late... Over the bleached bones and jumbled residue of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words: ‘Too late.’”³ Now is the 11th hour. If we don’t respond to climate change now, it will soon be too late to prevent the terrible consequences that naturally flow from our behavior. But there still is time. We have been given both a glimpse and a warning during this pandemic of what could be. We are more vulnerable than we thought, and more blessed than we have appreciated. May we remember both the positive and the negative awesomeness of this time, so that with the help of the resurrecting grace of God in Christ, we can make the old Creation new, save ourselves and all our classmates, and together praise the Creator who made us, saved us, and still desires for all of us, a world that is very good. Amen.

³ As quoted in Antal, Jim, Climate Church, Climate World: How People of Faith Must Work for Change (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 137, citing Martin Luther King Jr., “*A Time to Break the Silence*,” in A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr., ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 243.