

“Creation as Inheritance”  
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury  
Genesis 1:1-2:4 (lectionary for 6/11/17)

Richard E. Otty  
April 23, 2017

[Genesis 1:1-23 – The first five days of creation have been read prior to this introduction and reading of sixth day. The seventh day is the closing blessing at the end of the service.]

The account of Creation in Genesis 1 is the lectionary text for Trinity Sunday, which this year falls on June 11, so you may hear another sermon on it, along with its companion text, Psalm 8. Perhaps because I have preached so many sermons on doubting Thomas, I decided to use this beautiful account in conjunction with Earth Day weekend, with a particular focus on our role as stewards of the creation with which God has entrusted us – the “dominion” clause, if you will, of the sixth day.

Somewhere along the line, in my genetics, education or upbringing, I developed a passion about waste. I use blank sides of sermon drafts for grocery lists, so if you find a portion of a sermon in a shopping cart, you know one of us left it. We fill a bucket with water until the hot water actually reaches the shower. I keep the smallest pieces of wood when constructing because I hate to think of filling the land fill. I cringe when I hear a car’s engine running when it is sitting in a parking lot so people can stay cool or warm when it is not that hot or cold outside. I am particularly concerned about the waste of water. It is said that beavers will do everything they can to dam up running water – I do the same when I see or hear clean water running down a drain without thought, concurring with those who, for a number of years now, have predicted water is the new oil in terms of future scarcity and security. With that preview, let us hear the sixth day of creation (Genesis 1:24-31) and our responsibility in terms of having dominion:

*And God said, ‘Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: 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.*

*Then God said, ‘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.’ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’*

*God said, ‘See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.’ And it was so.*

*God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.*

Lynn is in Las Vegas this weekend. [pause] I always like to let that sit for a moment before I add she is visiting our son and his family, and that we will have absolutely no gambling winnings or losses to report on our taxes. I don't particularly like the city, and find the summer heat oppressive. Yet, there is a time of year when I like to go. It is what we consider late winter, and often the Lenten season interferes. Yet, if I can travel then, there is something I want to see.

Whether I will see what I want to see is predictable from the weather of previous seasons – if there were rains in the late fall and early winter, gentle winds rather than tumultuous storms, and a gradual warming in spring. Those signs predict whether there will be a marvelous display of spring wildflowers in the desert, color bursting forth from what is usually barren earth and scorching heat.

I marvel at all the facts and factors that allow predictions to be made as to whether it will be a bountiful desert wildflower season. Even though scientists can explain why it happens some years and not others, there is still an air of mystery and wonder when one is ambushed by the color and variety of flowers and plants in the midst of what seems to be a lifeless desert.

I expect I am not alone in finding one of our most intimate relationships with God within creation itself. I admit I often isolate the term creation or nature to the world of seas and mountains, deserts and forests, flowers and meadows, birds and wildlife; away from urban landscapes, with their asphalt and brick, and defined green spaces. Or perhaps it is more that I think of creation as being isolated from people. Photographers often awake early to take pictures so they can avoid having a human creature in them, but will delight if a deer or moose enters the view. As such, I need to be reminded the human is the creature with whom God chose to be intimate and to whom God granted dominion over Creation – intimacy and responsibility, combined within wonder.

George Will, with whom I almost always agree ... when he writes about baseball, but seldom about other matters, once gave a graduation address about the danger of certitude, of being so absolutely certain you are right. One phrase in particular has stayed with me over the years – “unfathomable strangeness.” He said, “One way to immunize ourselves against misplaced certitude is to contemplate – even to savor – the unfathomable strangeness of everything, including ourselves.” [Will, George, “The Oddness of Everything,” *Newsweek*, (May 23, 2005), p. 84.]

This morning, I hope we can enter into that “unfathomable strangeness” and wonder of God's creation. In so doing, may we sense the relational desires of a sovereign Creator God, and reacquaint ourselves with our human responsibility in exercising God-directed dominion over Creation.

As we have heard the account of the seven days of creation, the last being the Sabbath day of rest with which we will close the service, we may miss a symmetry of the six active days if we simply try to put the days together in a six-step, blitz-build, construction plan by God and company.

Day one is linked with day four, day two with day five, and day three with day six. On the first day, God created day and night. Three days later, God created the celestial bodies to rule the day and night.

On the second day, God formed a dome – and I love the picture – pushing up some of the waters to create a firmament from which rains would be released, leaving between the waters above and below, an expanse that is called Sky. Three days later, God created beings to fill the waters, and others to fly in the skies.

On the third day, God separated the waters under the sky into oceans and seas and rivers, allowing dry land to appear; land that could bring forth vegetation that would seed itself generation after generation. Three days later, God places creatures on the land which will live off that vegetation, and humans are set on the land to have care for it all.

Create and fill, form and fill, separate and fill. I do not become hung up on debates as to whether the world was created in this way, though they are important. I actually fine wonder in the science, but to focus on the debate, for me, takes away the wonder, the symmetry, the mystery, the “unfathomable strangeness.”

From the beginning of time, as science itself was in its infancy, people have pondered the question, “How did all this come to be, including us?” We know from other ancient Near Eastern texts that our creation account has parallels in other traditions. Yet, the distinction of Yahweh, the God of Israel, as Creator is marked by a desire to be in relationship with the created.

From the beginning, in the beginning, God’s Spirit was present, as wind moving over water. The Message version captures the Hebrew sense better: “God’s Spirit brooded like a bird above the watery abyss.” There is anticipation. Hover is another verb suggested: God’s spirit, hovering watchfully, with a mothering spirit of care.

[Brueggemann, Walter, *Texts for Preaching – Year A*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), p. 339.]

From the beginning, in the beginning, this Creator is one with all that is being created; there will be a relationship; thus, the granting of dominion is connected to the creator’s desires to care. Psalm 8 echoes the themes of God’s sovereignty and the role of human dominion.

*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; ... O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

The psalmist understands human dominion is derivative, given to us, not claimed by us. The dominion is “over the works of your hands,” God’s hands, God’s handiwork. Thus care for the relational nature of God with all parts of creation is placed with humanity, with us, for the benefit of all creatures, not just us.

In the world of those who wrote the biblical account of creation, there was an understanding of light and dark, day and night, but within the concept of a flat world, there was no comprehension that on the other side of the earth, the sun would be appearing as one’s own day ended.

I have to wonder if we still live with a mindset of the sun only rising on our own lives or country, even if we believe in a round earth. When we argue that drilling for oil or gas in a pristine wilderness will assure our energy independence, it would seem wise to consider that we may be asserting that God has now centered Creation around our country, our desires and chosen lifestyles, whether we drive a gas guzzler or a gas sipper. Are we so uncreative in exercising dominion that our only solution is to feed our need?

For me, a stewardship of Creation focuses less on our wallets and more on our picture albums, less about how much it costs and more about what will be left for future generations. Creation is an inheritance, not just received to be spent, but preserved to pass on.

Now, I am not naïve in knowing environmental concerns have become political, with the word “regulation” being bandied about as the go to word to separate sheep and goats, us and them. I understand the concern, but wonder what kind of air we would be breathing or water we would be drinking without regulation. In fact, I think it can be shown how fair and equal regulations have actually fostered creative ingenuity by and profits for businesses.

A common refrain to which I suspect many of us hold is “let’s err on the side of caution.” I recall it voiced when cell phones first appeared. To justify them, they were regarded as a safety device, before morphing into a cultural necessity. The safety issue is still there in deciding when a child will carry his or her own. Ask a parent why a seven year old needs a cell phone and one might hear, “I’d rather err on the side of caution.” Even in safe neighborhoods, we lock our doors, because we “err on the side of caution.”

Yet, I see resistance to erring on the side of caution in terms of care of creation. If we do “err on the side of caution” in terms of the environment, it is usually only until that caution impedes on our convenience or comfort, pleasure or profit – then we say, the science is not definitive and we demand proof for the caution, rather ask for a defense of the convenience.

In our Christian faith, we believe the God who began an intimate relationship with humanity at creation – in the beginning –made that relationship more personal in Jesus Christ. In part, God did so because humanity never really got it, preferring a textbook certainty of law to a narrative mystery of grace and care.

To have dominion means to be in relationship with God, as the still-hovering Spirit continues to move us to be sensitive to all of creation. To exercise care-filled dominion means:

- avoiding certitude that mutes wonder, and quests for proof that discount mystery;
- it means looking at our convenience-laden culture to find ways to reduce consumption rather than feed our appetites;
- it means recognizing when we have enough and not robotically following a lifestyle that drains and pollutes in ways we may not see and thus are easy to ignore, often because the pollution is in the back yards of the poor and powerless.

Creation is a gift, an inheritance, not for convenient consumption, but precious preservation, so the inheritance we pass along will be better than that we received, and three generations from now, there will still be delight at the wonder and mystery of wildflowers in the middle of a desert.

May we commit to living within and caring for such unfathomable mysteries with which God has entrusted to us.