



Created for Love

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field

The Third Sunday in the Season of Creation: God's Other Beloveds ~ November 22, 2017

The whole story of God and creation, according to Barbara Brown Taylor whose thoughts influenced this sermon, would be very different if written by a non-human animal. If birds, for example, told the story it might go something like this. The 6th day of creation would be day that winged things were created. It is, after all, logical that God would start with the creatures of the deep and work upwards to the heavens, to the creatures that are closest to God's dwelling place. So after the whales, the sea slugs, starfish, and plankton, came land creatures; creeping things, things with hooves and tails and even two legged creatures. Then came the pinnacle of creation, the day of the winged things-those made in the image of God.

Birds watched other creatures God had created try to do what was effortless for them, try to fly. They watched flying fish and dolphins briefly become airborne as they rocketed through the ocean, and were mildly impressed. And they told each other stories about the flailing of the land creatures as they attempted to soar. They figured flying squirrels had it down pretty well, mountain goats did OK, but those poor humans-flapping their arms as they jumped off a rock, well they were just pitiful. Mama birds would have to warn their little ones not to make fun of them. Day 6 of creation was the day the whole bird community got excited about as that was the day when, in the image of God, the birds were made. Male and female God created them: sparrows, cranes, hummingbirds, robins, ravens, indigo buntings, God created them. All different, but all alike with 2 eyes, a beak and that most wonderful gift of all, those 2 marvelous wings-assurance that they were indeed made in the image of the One who hovered over the water in the beginning of creation and who broods over the world like a mother hen over her chicks. And the great thing was wings weren't just God's gift to them, but through them to the whole world. Wings enabled them to soar high, watching over the sea creatures and the land creatures, especially the humans who, for all their pitiful qualities, at least had an appreciation for wings in general and God's wings in particular. They knew verses like "How precious is your love, all people will take refuge under the shadow of your wings" and "oh that I had the wings of a dove, I would fly away and be at rest." And so birds did what they could for humans; singing them awake, delighting them with displays of aerial acrobatics and even pretending that the glue-like white bread people gave them down by the lake was delicious. Sometimes, at God's bidding, birds made special deliveries of bread in the wilderness. Some even offered themselves as food for a particularly miserable group of humans, lost in the desert and complaining bitterly to God about how hungry they were. The quail gave their lives for those humans, but really, what are you to do when you are made in the very image of God. You love as God loves and you love what God loves, because that is what your life is for.

We humans, of course, have a very different version of creation-one in which we are the pinnacle of creation, the greatest thing ever. And we think we have scriptural evidence to back that claim up. But you know, on close reading of the first creation story in Genesis, humans don't even have a day to ourselves. You would think the peak of all creation would have a separate day, but no. On the 6th day God created "living creatures-cattle and creeping things and beasts of the field." Yes, the only other creatures named on the day we were created are cows. I have nothing against cows, but you would think if we were all that special we wouldn't have to share a day with them. And there is more, because nowhere, nowhere in Genesis does it say that humans are the greatest thing

ever. Yes God looks at humans along with the creeping things and cattle and says “this is very good”, but God does not say “these humans are just the best”. We just got all creative and assumed that is what the story says.

One of the unfortunate results of our little egocentric burst of creativity was an approach to the natural world that has been called despotic by some Christian ethicists. And some would argue that the roots of the ecological crisis in which we find ourselves are religious, stemming from this mostly Christian view that humans are the most important thing in creation. The despotic view of the world sees it as ours to do with as we please. Ann Coulter clearly articulates it in claiming God said to us “you have dominion over the earth, do what you want to it, take it and rape it.” The despotic view holds that if I want to buy some land—at heart an odd concept—but if I want to buy land and put up a strip mall that is my right. I can chop down all the trees without asking their permission, push them into a corner of the lot and burn them up with all the other trees. Then I can go about scraping up the topsoil—soil that took a few thousand years to come into existence and that contains untold numbers of microscopic creatures, I can scrape away the moss, the lichens, the tiny wild iris, and then call the contractor to bring in a steamroller and lay down a steaming bed of asphalt. You see, God said this is all for us.

Another theology of the environment, which has in some quarters replaced the despotic view, is that of stewardship. We are to think of ourselves as stewards of creation and use its resources rightly. If I want to put in a strip mall I can buy the land, but when I chop the trees down, I feel badly about it and I plant two trees for every tree I cut down. And I cover the topsoil around the edges of the black tar field I have created with straw so it doesn't blow away as fast. It costs me more to do it this way, but I am willing to pay it because I am supposed to take care of the earth. The major problem here is that this view still sees the earth as existing for us. That pesky phrase “use its resources rightly” gives that away. The earth is nothing but one big fat resource for us to use or not. It doesn't really have intrinsic value and we care for it because we need it now and we may need it in the future, unless we blast off for Mars at some point. We do not defend and care for the earth, for water, for creatures because they exist and are fellow creatures of God but because we need them.

Carl Sagan helps us put our place in that vastness of creation in a little perspective. Sagan wrote, if we could squeeze the creation of the cosmos not into a week but into a year, then the big bang happened Jan. 1, the sun and planets entered the scene on Sept. 10 and humans made their appearance at 10 minutes to midnight on Dec. 31. We are but the blink of an eye in God's time—not nearly as impressive and important as we think we are.

It is true that as far as we know, and we need to confess that in many ways our knowledge is paltry, but as far as we know we are the only creatures who can gaze at the night sky and reflect on the wonders we see, who can contemplate the relationship of one created thing to another. It is we who discovered quantum physics and articulated the motion of the planets. And we who were, as far as we know, the first to give thanks to God for all of this.

We are indeed made in God's image, by which I mean we are rational conscious beings and we were made to be in relationship. In relationship with each other and with God. We are made in the image of Love, and we are to love those things that we perceive as having value and those things whose value we do not understand—because they exist and because God created and loves them.

So if we are to exercise dominion, it is to be a dominion in the image of Dominus, of the Lord God—a dominion of love. Which sounds intimidating and impossible—how are we supposed to do that? I don't have anything close to the whole answer, but the starting point may be to remember that, made in the image of God, we are to move over and make room for all that has life and breath under those heavenly wings, to love as God loves and to love every blessed thing that God loves, because that is what our lives are for.