



Beloved Dust

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field

The Fourth Sunday of Creation Season:

Biodiversity ~ November 18, 2018

Genesis 1:12-28

The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day. And God said, "Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth." And it was so. God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day. And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky." So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth." And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day. 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."

Psalm 148

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| 1 Alleluia! Praise God from the heavens; *
sing praise in the heights. | 9 Mountains and all hills, *
fruit trees and all cedars; |
| 2 Sing praise, all you angels; *
sing praise, all the heavenly host. | 10 Wild beasts and all cattle, *
creeping things and winged birds; |
| 3 Sing praise, sun and moon; *
sing praise, all you shining stars. | 11 Rulers of the earth and all peoples, *
judges and all leaders of the world; |
| 4 Sing praise, heaven of heavens *
and you waters above the heavens. | 12 Young men and maidens, *
old and young together. |
| 5 Let them praise the Name of God, *
by whose command they were created. | 13 Let them praise your Name, O God, *
for your Name only is exalted;
your splendor is over earth and heaven. |
| 6 God made them stand fast for ever and ever, *
and gave them a law which shall not pass away. | 14 You have raised up strength for your people
and praise for all your loyal servants, *
the children of Israel, a people who are near you.
Alleluia! |
| 7 Sing praise from the earth, *
you sea-monsters and all deeps; | |
| 8 Fire and hail, snow and fog, *
tempestuous wind, doing God's will; | |

Revelation 5:11-14

Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, "To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!" And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" And the elders fell down and worshiped.

Mark 16:9-15

Now after he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. She went out and told those who had been with him, while they were mourning and weeping. But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it. After this he appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country. And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them. Later he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were sitting at the table; and he upbraided them for their lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen. And he said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.

If you took organic chemistry, you may or may not remember, that our bodies are made up of 65% oxygen, 18% carbon, 10% hydrogen, and 3.3 % nitrogen—plus a smattering of a few other things. All of which came from the creation of the cosmos—bursting forth into the heavens during the Big Bang. And all of which are the elements that make up stars and that are bequeathed to the galaxy when a star dies and explodes, sending its matter out as a gift to the universe. Which means that everything, all the matter in the universe, is made from the ashes of stars. Chemically speaking, the only difference between us and trees or rocks or chickens is the way in which our elements are arranged. We are all made out of the same stuff. We are all children of the universe. We share a common history and a common life—all life formed of the same elements and emerging from the depths of the sea. And all related by that shared history—so much so that during WW1, when blood was in short supply, wounded soldiers were sometimes given transfusions of sea water—and it worked!

And in the same way that the elements inside us link us to the stars, so our metabolisms link us to every other living creature. Every cell on earth, whether it belongs to a patch of blue green algae or a human brain, consists of the same 50 organic molecules and functions in the same basic way. Humans get their fuel from sugar while algae gets its fuel from the sun, but the basic reactions are the same. All cells, all of life, carries our blueprint inside us in the form of RNA and DNA. The cells in our bodies are in a sense living fossils over 3.5 billion years old. What they suggest is that, not just in some romantic, ethereal fashion, but in physical matter, we are all kin: algae, tadpoles, skunks, bears, and blue jays, not to mention elephants and cats. Not a clockwork universe in which individuals function as discrete springs and gears, but one that looks more like a luminous web, everything related one to another and in which the whole is far more than the parts.

You would think that Christians, we who believe in a God who in Jesus became human, a child of the universe and made from the dust of the earth—a God who became kin not just to humans, but to algae, tadpoles, skunks, bears, and blue jays—you would think we would have long been rooted in a theology of Creation. A theology that stressed and celebrated that God created all that exists and that God loves the world, the whole world—not just the human bits, a theology of a web of relationship. You would think we would pay attention to the story in Genesis with its wonder and delight at all that is created, to the story in Job with its clear message that Creation is not all about us, to Jesus' command in Mark to preach the Gospel to the whole creation. And at times you would be right—at times we and our theology have done just that. But at other times we and our theology have become quite caught up in our own importance—driven by hubris or fear of irrelevance we have placed ourselves at the pinnacle of creation, far more important than any other of God's beloved creatures, despite that the fact that even a cursory read of the Genesis story tells us we were created on the same day as every other creeping thing, not to mention cows.

We got off to something of a rocky start in our view of our relationship with the world when, despite the Biblical emphasis that creation is good and that God loves every blessed creature and thing, we Christians adopted something of a Greek dualistic worldview. This view understands that spirit is really, really good, and matter-flesh is really, really bad. Holiness was viewed as turning away from the world solely to the spirit. And then things went further downhill in about the 16th century when the predominant Christian worldview became one based on mastery over the world. The source of this ongoing aberration was a misread of Genesis—specifically the verse in which God gives Adam dominion over all creatures. In this misread Dominion was not understood in line with the Hebrew understanding of it—as those made in the image of God we are to exercise the sort of dominion that God does—a dominion of love and care. Rather what was read and then exercised was domination. And so this beautiful Genesis story of God creating and delighting in all of creation was twisted to justify Europeans conquering other lands and exploiting the earth. It was twisted to justify enslaving indigenous peoples, to justify enslaving and moving African people in chains on packed ships to the New World. A world in which white Europeans were biblically ordained to be lords of the earth.

This view is deeply ingrained in western Christianity—that humans are to dominate nature. It has erased creation from the faith experience and absolved us of any ethical concern for it. It has opened the door to massive exploitation of land, animals, and people with the church either complicit, clueless, or occasionally finding the energy to whisper about it.

The good news, the really good news, is that that is changing. Many Christian theologians are returning to our Hebrew roots and seeing creation as an expression of God's own life. Many are forcefully rejecting the idea that being created in God's image means using and destroying the world—and instead reading Genesis as was intended to be read, a love song for all creation. Recognizing that the word “dominion” in Hebrew means the pursuit of right relations NOT lording it over the world, and that the word “subdue” in Hebrew does not mean

trampling down the earth but rather is connected to tilling and caring for the soil. Reading that God's covenant after the flood in the Noah story is with all of creation, not just with humans, but a covenant between God and the earth. Remembering that in this universe, all things are made of the same stuff, there is no such thing as an individual apart from her or his relationships. Remembering that the Genesis story takes a "circular, community view" that places humans in the world with all other creatures and with God at the center.

Theologians like Elizabeth Johnson are writing about evolution as the spectacularly creative, joyful expression of a creative, joyful God. A God who delights in the diversity of life. Who marvels with us at the many forms it takes. The most recent estimate is that there are 8.7 million species on earth, in forms so numerous that humans have not identified all of them and likely never will. A God who has given all of creation a voice—not just the obvious ones like birds and whales—but all of creation. Each creature taking its part in the whole song of life. It is true we humans are currently singing a lot of wrong notes, are something of a parasite on the face of the earth—we are wreaking havoc on the planet, and causing extinction of non-human species at a catastrophic rate. And it is true that this means life on earth in 50 years, in 100 years will look very different than life on earth does now. But all is not lost because God, you see, is creative and God is the God of life, and has built into the earth itself with its biodiversity—its creatures who live everywhere from the skies, to sulfurous steam vents on the floor of the ocean, to the middle of vast deserts—built into life the capacity to go on. Biodiversity is the insurance policy for life—ensuring that life continues even in the face of dramatic change. Even if the earth is reduced to dust and we humans are a distant memory, life will go on because dust is basically all God has ever needed to make life. The quantum dust from which the stars arose, the earth dust from which the rocks were made, and the rock dust on which the first creatures grew.

So where does this leave us, now at this pivotal point in the history of the earth? I believe that a really good place to start is with God. With remembering that we are in a web of creation with God at the center. I think it starts with remembering that Jesus was flesh—that flesh, all flesh not just human, is good and holy and beloved of God. It starts with remembering that the God we believe in is madly in love with bears, and trees, and dandelions, and river currents, worms, and sparrows and that we are to talk about this aspect of our faith to the world, and that we are to live as if we believe it. And we are to always hang onto hope—to the knowledge that God is wily and creative and that with God what looks like sure and certain disaster often turns instead into joy and celebration. Because the one we call Savior of the world is just that—not just the savior of humans, but of every creature and of all creation—is the Savior of the world.

Amen.