



Web of Wonder

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field
The Third Sunday of Creation Season ~ October 18, 2020*

Genesis 9:8–16

God then said to Noah and his family, “I hereby establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you—birds, cattle, and the earth’s wildlife—everything that came out of the ark, everything that lives on the earth. I hereby establish my covenant with you: All flesh will never again be swept away by the waters of the flood; never again will a flood destroy all the earth.” God said, “Here is the sign of the covenant between me and you and every living creature for ageless generations: I set my bow in the clouds, and it will be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth, my bow will appear in the clouds. Then I will remember the covenant that is between me and you and every kind of living creature, and never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all flesh. Whenever my bow appears in the clouds I will see it, and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature on the earth.”

Psalms 36:5–10

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| 5 Your love, O God, reaches to the heavens, *
and your faithfulness to the clouds | 8 They feast upon the abundance of your house; *
you give them drink from the river of your delights. |
| 6 Your righteousness is like the strong mountains,
your justice like the great deep; *
you save all your creatures, O God. | 9 For with you is the well of life, *
and in your light we see light. |
| 7 How priceless is your love, O God; *
your people take refuge under the shadow of your wings. | 10 Continue your loving-kindness to those who know you, *
and your favor to those who are true of heart. |

Colossians 1:15–20

Christ is the image of the unseen God
and the firstborn of all creation,
for in Christ were created
all things in heaven and on earth:
everything visible and invisible,
Thrones, Dominations, Sovereignities, Powers—
all things were created through Christ and for Christ.
Before anything was created, Christ existed,
and all things hold together in Christ.
The church is the body;
Christ is its head.
Christ is the Beginning,
the firstborn from the dead,
and so Christ is first in every way.
God wanted all perfection to be found in Christ,
and all things to be reconciled to God through
Christ—everything in heaven and everything on earth—
when Christ made peace
by dying on the cross.

John 1:1–5

IN THE BEGINNING
there was the Word;
the Word was in God’s presence,
and the Word was God.
The Word was present to God

from the beginning.
Through the Word
all things came into being,
and apart from the Word
nothing came into being
that has come into being.
In the Word was life,
and that life was humanity's light—
a Light that shines in the darkness,
a Light that the darkness has never overtaken.

The passage we just heard from the Gospel According to John is my favorite in all of Scripture. It is breathtakingly beautiful. And it encompasses the whole of the Good News of Jesus Christ in a few sentences. That Christ was at the beginning, is in all of life, and leads us on into new life. John understood in the depths of his being that all of life is held in God. That we are all created through and connected by God. While John did not understand quantum physics or chemistry, in grounding the story of Jesus in the cosmos, using a lens that sweeps first over all of creation and then in on one tiny human being, he understood that we are made of the same stuff as the stars, we are all children of the universe. We share a common history and a common life—all of it bursting out from the big bang, and all formed of the same elements emerging from the deep womb of the sea.

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 carry 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. What they suggest is 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, who joined us as star stuff, a child of the universe and made from the dust of the earth—a God who became kin to every living thing, 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 whole world—not just humans, 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. Pay attention to the story of Job with its breathtaking parade of creatures. 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.

We Christians got off to something of a rocky start in our view of our relationship with the created world when we adopted something of a Greek dualistic worldview. This view understands that spirit is 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, that humans are to dominate nature, is deeply ingrained in western Christianity and 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, not noticing, 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 God at the center and all of us, the whole zoo, as creatures of God. With all of us breathing the same breath, that of the Creator Spirit.

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—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, 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.

A few years ago I heard an absolutely haunting audiotape of the end of WW1. It began with the loud sound of multiple guns firing and canons booming. Then at exactly 11 am on Nov. 11 the guns go silent. There are a few moments of absolutely nothing—no sound at all—then, quietly, the sound of a bird singing. A song of hope—a song that sings of a future held in God. And we are to always hang onto that 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.

Amen.