

The Third Sunday of the Creation Season
St. Peter's Church, Philadelphia
October 17, 2021

CREATON'S DIALOGUE

One of the things I most appreciate about Scripture is that no matter how familiar the stories may be—no matter how many times you've read or heard a passage—it is possible to hear it with a fresh perspective and notice something which may have been unnoticed before. Sometimes this is due to changing circumstances in your life, or it may be because of a different translation that renders the language with different emphasis.

The Genesis account of creation may be one of the most familiar to all of us. Yet we might carry a version in our minds which doesn't exactly correspond to what's in the Bible, or we may fill in the gaps from other sources. I remember the first day of a class on the Hebrew Scriptures when I was in Seminary. The instructor gave a "pre-test," and one of the questions was about the specific fruit that Eve and Adam ate. I confidently answered "apple" and was taken aback when I learned I was wrong. In fact, the type of fruit is not in the text, but I'm sure I was recalling countless artistic depictions which often pictured a bright, shiny apple at the center of the drama.

We are used to the litany of creation when God spends six days issuing decrees and bringing about all kinds of features of our world. I've often thought of this as a series of magic acts in which the contents of the skies, seas and land simply materialize into being. Yet as I've moved away from a less literal toward a more poetic and symbolic appreciation for the narrative, I have also come to see deeper meanings and dynamics beyond mere causal statements about how things came to be.

In today's passage, I noticed that God doesn't simply make things appear, but rather speaks a command to the earth to assume the agency to bear every kind of fruit, as well as birds, sea creatures and other animals. It's a kind of "call and response" pattern. The creation stories suggest that God creates out of nothing, but there is also the sense that as creation takes shape, it becomes God's partner in executing an abundance and variety of living things. The action between God

and creation almost becomes a dialogue: God calls forth, and creation responds, becoming increasingly complex as the conversation goes on.

This perspective helps me to get beyond the rather bipolar perspective which often fuels theological debate. The logic runs something like this: Either God is directly involved in everything that happens, controlling the weather, natural disruptions, births and deaths, and the outcome of social and historical movements...or God is completely detached; God may have gotten the ball rolling, but we're on our own. The former perspective seeks to preserve a sense of God's power and authority, while the latter, at best, accentuates human autonomy, or, at worst, leads to a cynical nihilism that suggests that the world is, in fact, godless. I find both extremes problematic, and have moved toward a perspective which stresses a rich and ongoing interdependence between God and creation. Some might argue that while we might assume that creation needs God, God certainly doesn't need Creation, but I find that binary fallacious. Perhaps we could say that we can only approach an understanding of God by looking at Creation, and likewise that we can only see the fullness of creation by understanding something about the holy mystery we call God.

This "cosmic dialogue" not only occurred at the very origins of creation, but continues day by day. The word "dialogue" suggests verbal interaction, but I would expand this to include all kinds of non-verbal mutual interactions which actually are part of any human discourse, especially one which takes place in face-to-face conversation. And in this way, we might be opened up to another way of thinking about prayer. Analogously we might appreciate prayer as dialogic—something involving reciprocal interaction. Granted, when we pray publicly or privately, we are not accustomed to hearing God's voice in our heads. Yet there are many ways in which the act of praying affects us beyond the outcome of certain petitions or aspirations. Prayer would make no sense unless it was directed toward another, and also would make no sense unless the other was responsive in some way. Mystics as well as more ordinary folks have long struggled with the challenge of praying, particularly when it does not seem that God is listening. But we might overlook the probability is that the most efficacious form of prayer is that which changes us—allows God to author something in us—to reorient, again and again, our hearts and minds.

I find my thinking about this to be inspired by a kind of evolutionary consciousness which is both somewhat new and very ancient in our tradition. It is not simply the awareness that creation continues to evolve, but it is

consciousness itself that continues to evolve, enabling us to become more aware of the implication of all things in God and our participation in the presence of the Holy mystery.

Another very familiar and apparently simple metaphor is that of the mustard seed in today's Gospel. The parable is used to describe the kingdom of heaven as something that takes root and evolves both mysteriously and miraculously. Most of us know how small seeds can eventually produce very large plants, but there is still something amazing about this aspect of nature. Is it simply that seeds contain all that is necessary to grow to maturity, or does the interaction with the right environment produce the greatest result. And might God be a part of that environment? The parable suggests that the kingdom of heaven comes about with a certain inevitability. Yet the metaphor from nature also leaves room for considering the precarity of nature, with outcomes dependent on so many variables.

All of this might render it difficult to simply relax and have faith that everything is in God's hands and will turn out according to God's will. It may also bring out a more somber awareness of how easy it is for things to go awry. Our appreciation of the extraordinary resilience of creation coexists with a growing awareness of the vulnerability of everything and everyone around us. I think this is why the gospels present us with something of a contradiction. Indeed, God is gracious in enfolding all in the power of life, abundant in mercy, and clearly intending for all to be made whole through Christ. At the same time, there is a sober realization that things can go wrong, people can make bad choices, and that actions or inactions have consequences. So let's return to the beginning: God calls on creation to produce, to scatter seeds and bear fruit, to multiply and flourish. And creation continues to reply to this divine mandate and be empowered to manifest its true nature. In essence, so much of what emerges in life is both predictable and truly astonishing! For example, those who have given birth do this to be particularly so: The natural events take their course, there may be uncertainty and fear regarding the outcomes, but the result cannot be described as anything less than miraculous. Events of our lives represent the continuation of this holy dialogue, moving us toward God through the wholeness of creation.

I believe this inspires all of us to be continually creative. To move our imaginations to look for the ways we continue to contribute to the creation of the world. Every act of solidarity and outreach to someone who is poor or otherwise in need is a creative act. Every step in the direction of greater justice is a creative

move. And, of course, every commitment to preserve and sustain our world partners with the divine intention for our world. As so to, writing a book, making music, painting, needlepoint stitching, acting, cooking, teaching, taking care of a child or loved one...all of these things, whether mundane or sublime, can link us to a dialogue with God who authors and sustains life through our participation. At the same time, having a creative consciousness may move us out of a tendency to see life in a merely linear, practical way into a register where we can appreciate mystery and the metaphorical quality of spiritual perception. These shifts can be subtle and incremental, but they bear fruit. *From the smallest of seeds comes the largest of trees, where the birds of the air come to rest in its branches.*

The Rev. Dr. Joseph Schaller