

Our Story of Kinship
November 21, 2021 | Season of Creation
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Good morning, God's people!

There is a New Yorker cartoon I've been waiting to share with y'all. It features a spider in the center of her web. The web is intricate and glistening. A squirrel looks on in amazement. The caption is the spider saying, "I don't think of it as art, really - just something I pulled out of my butt."

I think God would like this cartoon, especially during creation season. To me, it speaks to the spectrum of creation, from the marvelous to the mundane. A spider's web *is* a work of art, beautiful and aesthetically pleasing. It is also the spider's bed. And refrigerator. Day-to-day practicality woven into artful beauty, such that the mundaneness is a part of the marvelousness and vice versa. This cartoon, like God's good creation, takes both ends of the creation spectrum and pulls them towards each other, giving us not opposites but paradox. Even more, wholeness.

Another message in this cartoon is that we choose how to understand and tell our story. Story is how we hold information, make decisions, find meaning. It is the framework through which change does or does not happen.

On this last Sunday of Creation Season, I want us, as progressive Christians, to take up the question, "What kind of story do we tell about the relationship between God and creation?"

At the recent Climate Change Conference, Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson discussed an emerging movement called feminist climate renaissance.

"The reason, Dr. Johnson said, "[that I've been enamored with the term 'renaissance' {in 'feminist climate renaissance'} is because so much of the language around how we talk about climate has been war metaphors. We're going to fight it. We're going to defeat it. We're going to battle climate change. As opposed to 'renaissance' - which has this dual implication of being artistic and creative, but also being about rebirth. That is the way I want to think about our opportunities and our responsibility in shaping the future."

Johnson highlights that we carry over these stories that limit and undermine our goal. War needs conflict. Results in destruction. It is a story that at best seeks resolution, not reconciliation. This metaphor relies on systems that perpetuate our current climate crisis.

Are we telling a story that chooses creativity over destruction?

Not only do I find this shift from war to renaissance - to rebirth - compelling, but it is also familiar. Is it not?

The official church commemoration for today is Christ the King Sunday. But that is not what we are celebrating. We are celebrating Christ and Kinship. Both emphasize the good news of Christ's resurrection. Kingship announces the good news that, even in death, Christ keeps power. Kinship announces that, even in death, Christ keeps connection. With us. With God. With love.

This shift is not new for St. Peter's. If you've been worshipping here for some time, you have likely noticed that we use a translation of the Bible that translates the kingdom of God as the kindom of God. It reminds us that when Jesus says kingdom of God, he is talking about a lot more than a system of government. He is talking about a state of relationship, the kind of relationship that makes us whole.

Are we telling a story that can imagine wholeness?

I grew up in a very small town where many people were related to each other in one way or another. More common than, "What do you do for a living?" was the question, "Are you kin to so and so?" If the answer was no, the person would continue until the answer was yes. Until they could claim connection. Then what question came next? "How are y'all related?"

In the Kindom of God, and on this Kinship in Christ Sunday, we celebrate that the answer to "Are you kin to so and so?" is "Yes." And the answer to "How are y'all related?" is "by love". That love God has made known throughout the history of the world. Love that God creates and gives for no other reason than God wants to. Love that transforms us so that we can give birth to that kinship over and over again. That radical, mercy-based, justice-driven, simultaneously exhausting and restorative, faithfully relentless love.

Are we telling a story that centers this love?

Part of loving something or someone is knowing them. Knowing and understanding each other, including how we are affected by the world around us, is crucial to that love being expressed and experienced.

As we think of what that would look like in a climate renaissance, there is a powerful image of this kinship in the story of the Great Flood, but perhaps not in the way we might expect or have been taught.

The image of godly kinship in this story does not come from God. On the contrary, God is tyrannical in this story. A God who responds to violence and corruption with more violence and corruption, on a cosmic level. Where we do see this kinship is between Noah and the other creatures on the ark.

We do not know much about Noah. He is silent throughout the story. We do not know what he said to his family when God instructed him to make the ark. We do not know what he thought as he watched God undo creation. But we do know what he did.

During God's flood, Noah and his family preserved what was left of creation. Like the spider's web, this is a marvelous thing but it also relies on the mundane. Learning what food each creature needed, along with when and how to feed them. Figuring out when and how different creatures sleep. And use the bathroom.

And reproduce. Maybe they also learned that prairie dogs kiss. That it takes a sloth two weeks to digest their food. That African grey parrots perform what scientists call “selfless acts,” like voluntarily helping each other gather food. For twelve months, humans communicated with the world that does not speak in human ways and learned how to nurture it. In this, they learned how to practice the kinship of God. As one theologian puts it, “The knowing of need is the highest measure of that curious tender concern that characterizes God.”

Through this kinship, Genesis says God remembers Noah and the other creatures, and that prompts God to send the wind to settle the chaos for a gradual return to life on the dry ground.

When the rain stops, Noah sends out birds that can see and know what Noah cannot. Just as the birds depended on Noah, Noah and his family depend on these creatures now. And like Noah, the birds are faithful. It returns to say not yet. It returns to say almost. And on the third flight, the bird does not return, a signal there is dry land. A symbol of a new creation, of rebirth.

Are we telling a story that instills this curious tender concern and recognizes an interdependence that enables change and growth?

And what about this troubling image of God? Often we try to move around this. We accept God had no other option. Or that creation deserved it. We skip over the story and jump to the rainbow. We ascribe these images to an Old Testament God, and subscribe to the belief that the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament are somehow different, separate. Another sermon for another time.

Biblical scholar Dr. Ma. Maricel S. Ibita cautions us “that excusing a deity who almost annihilated the whole human race and all other created beings endangers the dulling of our senses in face of the horrors that earthly rulers do to purge their enemies or who blame God in the face of tragedies to escape responsibilities. When disasters happen, there is a need for us to ask hard questions and wrestle with the trauma that this image of God and the interpretation of religious texts cause to individuals and communities.”

Are we telling a story that has room to struggle, humility to be wrong, and a willingness to be held accountable?

We observe the season of creation for many reasons, including the truth that, right now, creation is not whole. It is very broken. In no small part because of us. The same brokenness found within our human family. There is an urgency for us, as humans, to dramatically change our relationship to creation, if this planet is going to survive. Along with demanding science-driven systemic changes, we must also examine the stories we tell and how they frame this moment.

As a Christian, what would a renaissance of creation look like to you? And is that the story that we, as the Church, are telling? If not, then why not? And what are we going to do about it?

I spent a lot of time trying to figure out how to end this sermon. Though the answer seems pretty clear: by telling our story. Together. And so I invite you to stand in body or in spirit as we affirm our faith.