

A Purpose and A Place

July 7, 2019

1st Presbyterian Church, Birmingham

Genesis 2:4-8, 15

- [4] These are the breedings of the skies and the earth at their creation.
On the day the LORD God [YHWH Elohim] made earth and skies
- [5] no shrub of the field was yet in the earth
no plant of the field had yet sprouted
for the LORD God [YHWH Elohim] had not made it rain on the earth
and there was no groundling [adam] to serve the ground [adamah]
- [6] But a surge went up from the earth
and gave drink to all the face of the ground [adamah]
- [7] The LORD God [YHWH Elohim] formed the groundling [adam],
soil of the ground [adamah]
He blew into his nostrils the blast of life
and the groundling [adam] became a living soul
- [8] The LORD God [YHWH Elohim] planted a garden in Eden in the east
There he set the groundling [adam] he has formed
- [15] The LORD God [YHWH Elohim] took the groundling [adam]
and set it to rest in the garden of Eden
to serve it and keep it.¹

Colossians 1:15-20

- [15] [Christ] is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn of all creation;
- [16] for in him all things in heaven and earth were created,
things visible and invisible,
whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—
all things have been created through him and for him.
- [17] He himself is before all things,
and in him all things hold together.
- [18] He is the head of the body, the church;
he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead,
so that he might come to have first place in everything.
- [19] For in him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,
[20] and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things,
whether on earth or in heaven,
by making peace through the blood of his cross.
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In our summer series on “Caring for God’s Creation,” today we consider the place and role of humankind within God’s creation. Where are we within God’s great design, and what is our call or vocation within it, according to scripture? By way of a start, I would like to begin by returning us to last Sunday, to that time in the service after we had all received communion.

Terry offered the following prayer:

In the same manner, O Christ,
that we receive your body and blood,
let us receive and handle the gifts of your creation:
without waste or abuse,
but with reverent hands
and a grateful heart.ⁱⁱ

In many ways, this prayer captures the heart of what I have to say this morning about our role, our purpose within God’s creation. As creatures made by God, as fellow-creatures with everything else God has made, our responsibility is to care for the earth in a manner similar to the way we receive the sacrament of communion—without waste or abuse, but with reverent hands and grateful hearts.

In the book of Genesis, we have two stories about the creation of the world, including the creation of humankind—and you’ve heard readings from both accounts this morning. Both accounts give us a perspective our purpose and place within the creation—ancient perspectives, yes, but perhaps they still have something to teach us today. In the first reading from Genesis 1, we hear that God creates humankind in God’s own image and gives us a form of dominion over the earth. A misinterpretation of this passage about “dominion” has emerged which promotes a view that we humans are free to use and even abuse the earth with impunity—that we may measure the value of the earth, its life-forms and resources according solely to what is best or most useful for ourselves. But again, this is a *mis*interpretation, and one that has had a devastating impact upon the health of the earth, humankind included.

A better interpretation sees our dominion as a reflection, an image of God’s own dominion. We who are created in God’s image are to reflect God’s own care for the earth. In other words, we are to care for creation and appreciate it the way God loves and delights in creation—God who celebrates creation as “good,” indeed “very good.”

The second creation story in Genesis takes this theme even further. In that story, the LORD God takes *adam* [the groundling] and places him in the garden of creation “to serve and to keep it.” Sometimes this is *mistranslated* as “to till and keep it.” But the Hebrew word is *abad*, which elsewhere in the Bible is translated as “to serve”[—as in Joshua’s call to the people of Israel to “choose this day whom you will serve [*abad*]; as for me and my house we will serve [*abad*] the LORD”]. So then, from this perspective, our purpose within creation is not only to cherish the earth as God cherishes it, but to serve it and keep it.

How best, I wonder, to serve and keep the earth? It may be helpful to recall that the worldview and life-experience of the people who wrote the Old Testament was largely agrarian. They farmed the land, cultivated crops and orchards, raised animals, herded sheep. To use an old-fashioned word, they practiced husbandry. In a sense, their daily lives depended on how well or poorly they served and kept the land, the plants, and the animals under their care. Genesis 2 told them that this was, in fact, their God-appointed purpose—to serve and preserve

the soil, the plants, and the animals for which they were responsible and—if they were so blessed—to pass this along to the next generation.

And what about us? Our lives still depend on those who farm and raise crops and animals, and yet many of us are urban dwellers, more than a step or two removed from the fields and barns and orchards of our ancestors. How do we serve and keep creation today? One answer is: not very well. The litany of our waste and abuse is very long and includes such things as global warming, soil erosion and desertification, air and water pollution, and more. To choose one from the list, let's consider the rapid extinction of species that is due to human behavior in misusing the forests, wetlands, rivers, streams, and oceans around the world. Species have always gone extinct, and new species emerge. But what is happening today is far from normal. Richard Bauckham writes:

What scientists call the background rate of extinction—the normal rate at which species go extinct outside abnormal periods of mass extinction—is one species per million per year. The current rate is estimated to be at least a thousand species per million a year. The current rate is at least a thousand times the normal.ⁱⁱⁱ

Again this is largely due to the behavior of our species—a species that biologist E. O. Wilson calls, “homo sapiens, the serial killer of the biosphere.”^{iv}

So I think it's clear that whatever it is we're doing today, we are not serving and keeping the creation. We are not fulfilling our purpose as seen by Genesis.

According to the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew 1st, the worldwide leader of the Orthodox Church, what is needed today are not more environmental seminars or international ecological conferences (though these are helpful). What is needed is a deep *conversion* of the soul—my soul, your soul, the soul of our communities and nations. Conversion means to “turn” or “return.” We need to turn or return to practices that allow life in all its forms to flourish. We need to turn or return to our purpose as servants and keepers of creation. This is a deeply spiritual challenge, as much as it is economic and political.

In this turn or return to our purpose, it may be helpful to better understand our place within the creation—and again, we have wisdom for this from Genesis. Yes, we have a responsibility to cherish the earth and to serve and keep it, but the stories of Genesis want us to also remember that these special responsibilities do not separate us from other life-forms, but rather bind us to them more closely. For just like them, we are creatures shaped and formed by the hand of a gracious God. Our place is not apart from but alongside all other creatures. In Genesis 1, humans are created on the same day and alongside all other creatures on earth. In Genesis 2, we are depicted as groundlings formed from the ground—earthlings connected to the earth.

As contemporary scientists and environmentalists tell us, we are *interdependent* with all of life on earth. We exist alongside all other life as creatures and we are inextricably bound together in a web of life. We suffer together; we flourish together. So this is our place—the place provided for us by God's grace and creativity.

But there's more. In the New Testament, Jesus Christ is called the first-born of all creation. All things are in his hands, Colossians 1 proclaims, and in his hands all things hold together. So not only is our place here alongside all other life, but together with all other life

we are held together in the gentle hands of Christ. The Apostle Paul refers to Christ as the “new Adam”—he has come among us as bone of our bone, flesh or our flesh, DNA or our DNA not to condemn the world, but to heal it. He came to serve and save creation, humanity included, not to destroy it. And so as we remember today our purpose and place within creation, we also look to Christ with hope to reveal to us how we may best serve him by serving the creation he so loved and loves. He wasted no time, no thing, and no one. He never abused or misused, but rather healed and made whole. His hands were reverent; his heart full of gratitude.

Which brings us back to where we started, and to the prayer that Terry prayed last week. When she prayed that prayer I remembered a moment several years ago when I was serving as associate at a Lutheran church in Iowa. It was a 3,000 member church, and a communion Sunday. It was my role to distribute the bread—to place a wafer in cupped hands and say, “The body of Christ, given for you.” I estimate that over the course of three services that weekend, I did this over a thousand times. “The body of Christ, given for you.” I tried to say it each time with conviction, but sometimes I caught myself falling into rote speech.

And then I was awakened to the grace of what we were doing by a particular young man, just a little older than confirmation. When I placed the wafer in his cupped hands and said, “The body of Christ, given for you,” he looked at the bread in his hands and whispered, “Thank you, Jesus.” As I said, his words reawakened me to the enormous grace of what we were doing together in God’s name—or as we often say, “The gifts of God for the people of God.”

Perhaps that young man can serve as a model for us of what it means to receive and handle the gifts of God that is our creation and healing. Without waste or abuse, but with reverent hands and grateful hearts—“thank you, God; thank you, Jesus”. For the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat; for the bounty of creation which surrounds us; for all the other life with which we share this place: “Thank you, Christ.” To let our first and deepest response to this vast creation be an attitude of awe and thanksgiving. This, then, by the very same grace of God, may guide our actions and return us to the purpose for which we were created.

In the same manner, O Christ,
that we receive your body and blood,
let us receive and handle the gifts of your creation:
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but with reverent hands
and a grateful heart.

ⁱ This translation is adapted from that of Mary Phil Korsak, *At the Start: Genesis Made New* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 5-6.

ⁱⁱ This prayer is adapted from the writings of Charles Cummings.

ⁱⁱⁱ Richard Bauckham, *Living with Other Creatures: Green Exegesis and Theology* (Baylor University Press, 2011), 215.

^{iv} Edward O. Wilson, *The Future of Life* (Abacus, 2003), 94. Quoted by Bauckham (above), 217.