

Earthly Works
Preached by
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United Church of Fayetteville
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For Reflection: *"While I know myself as a creation of God, I am also obligated to realize and remember that everyone else and everything else are also God's creation."* Maya Angelou

Introduction to Scripture:

Today's sermon is based on texts used in the Bible Study I led in the "Unending Search," our new adult ed format, last Sunday. Their topic for this first offering is "environmental stewardship."

As is so often the case, words and phrases from our contemporary language and concerns do not appear in Scripture. The word "environment" or any of its forms do not appear in Scripture. The word "steward" appears 16 times and refers literally to persons in charge of wine cellars, pigs or produce. "Stewardship" is a valuable Biblical concept even if the word itself does not appear there. This is not to suggest that our Scriptures offer no wisdom or insight for contemporary life, but rather that we must be careful in teasing out that guidance.

All that being said, we approached this conversation from the perspective of the relationship among the Creator, the creation and the humans who are a part of the creation. We began by using the two stories from Genesis.

There are indeed two stories, written by two different groups of people, not in competition with one another, and even if they were, it was a tie, because both stories were retained by those who treasured, saved and passed on the texts we now find in Scripture.

Although it is a tricky business, I am going to read the portions of both of these stories that address the creation of humans. It's not optimal, because we have a tendency to "conflate" these and other Biblical stories—that is our minds harmonize them into one story with the details of both woven in. It is a way our minds save a lot of information, but can get us into interpretive difficulty.

I will tease out the differences and their implications in the sermon, but I encourage everyone to listen for them as I read.

Our first reading is from the first chapter of Genesis—the chapter that begins "in the beginning." This is the longer, more poetic and rhythmic perspective, likely used in worship that details creation, day by numbered day. In art, we'd likely experience this pressed back in our chairs staring at the dome of a darkened planetarium. Today's reading is from the sixth day of God's work. Let us listen:

Hebrew Scripture: Genesis 1:26-28

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."

Our next reading comes from the second chapter of Genesis. This text is much more narrative in style. It provides us with much of the dramatic impetus of being human – this is the story that tells of

humans need to not be alone, the creation of women as partners for men, the Garden of Eden and "the fall." Most often we have encountered this story in an epic drama. In this story, humans are not the ultimate of God's created works – seeds, trees, fruits and gardens will all come after the creation of humans. Let us listen again.

Genesis 2: 7, 15

then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

Gospel Reading: Mark 16:14-20

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. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover." So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it.

Sermon: Earthly Works

We cannot turn on TV, check the news on-line or attend a school without being aware that our planet is experiencing a crisis of epic proportions. While we often presume to know a lot we cannot possibly know about weather patterns from millions and billions of years ago, we have seen evidence, and read reports about climate change, are witnessing epic storms, droughts, fires and other changes around the world that are affecting and will continue to affect all species on the planet. While we may differ with regard to political stance, perceptions of levels of alarmism and other related debates, we, as a people of faith, are not climate-change deniers. Ours are religious traditions which use the world's knowledge to enhance our understanding of the holy, of human nature and of the obligations of discipleship. We are no different than any other group of believers or those who embrace other understandings of the cosmos. We accept and adapt to change at our own and differing paces, often too slowly or too quickly for others' taste. We also tend to ignore or reinterpret our scriptures to our own taste. Let's see if we need to, in regard to the environmental issues confronting us today.

There are schools of thought that suggests that if the Bible apparently contradicts itself, it should either be discounted in its entirety, or we should toss one or the other side of the contradiction, (usually the one we don't like in the moment); or that we assume the earlier writers and readers weren't as smart as we are and didn't notice the contradictions.

There is another school of thought that suggests that when Scripture has preserved more than one version, story, perspective, or interpretation, that what it has, in fact, preserved for us the richness and complexity of what it is to be human and faithful in relationship with a holy God. Care to guess which school we are in? ☺ Experience has shown it is a more helpful school to attend when looking at complex contemporary issues.

The Chapter One rendition about creation is perhaps the most used, and I daresay abused text with regard to our relationship with the rest of creation. "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." In this story, humans are unique in creation. On previous days, God has called water and earth to bring forth living things. God creates

humans alone in God's own image, apparently from nothing but imagination. From the beginning, humans are both creatures and different from all other creation.

That sense of self is then combined with the following command: "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." Have "dominion" over the other creatures. That word gets a lot of air time in contemporary discussion, as it should.

Some well-being folk have tried to re-interpret it to mean have responsibility for the earth and its inhabitants, but, in fact, that word is about power. It does disservice and is an inauthentic translation to suggest they mean something else. Again and again in regard to the earth, to creatures, to enemies and armies, those words refer to having power over something or someone else.

The word "dominion" also is used to refer to God's power over us. That fact invites us to remember that power itself is value neutral. How that power is used –benevolently or malevolently – is critical. We might want to debate whether power is used benevolently, except I would ask us to remember that at differing stages of our lives we have power over children, power over employees, and power over aging parents among others. Denying that we have power is the first step in abusing it.

We have been too arrogant about the power we have and our difference from the rest of creation. We have not focused on using it as the One in whose image we are created does --and therein lies the rub of our living out this text – if we claim the power, we are obligated to use it according to the model of the one in whose image we are created. In this text, we cannot have one without the other. We might do well in these days to de-emphasize our use of this text, given our uneasy relationship with power, and in particular with this text's misuse or misunderstanding over the ages, but we forget about it entirely at our peril.

Letting that rest for a moment, let's look at our second text: First, the creation of humans: "Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being." This is very different from the previous version. Here, we are made not from "nothing but imagination" but from the topsoil, the fertile soil of the earth. We do not live on our own, but only when God has breathed life into us. There is no mention of being made in the image of God. We are one with the rest of creation.

The nature of our relationship with the rest of creation is also differently expressed in God's charge: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it." The word "till" is the same word used in other places to mean "serve" as in slave to a master, and "keep" is the same word as famously used by a fratricidal brother who said, "Am I my brother's keeper?" We who are of the creation, made from the earth itself have a much more integrated and dependent relationship with that creation than in the first story. It may well be that we have spent too little time with this understanding of our human nature as creatures --not spiders spinning the web, but balancing on creation's fragile, yet strong silken threads of all life and being.

Over the past 30 years, the Christian tradition has become gradually more articulate about creation spirituality and our interdependence with all that God has made. It's clear that in thought, prayer and action we need to pick up the pace.

The first text makes clear that we have the power and the power to change and work for healing. The second urges a new humility about human nature in creation, about our role as God's stewards, and our understanding that we have both dominion over and dependence on the health of all God's creation.

Mark's text is the only one that gives us Jesus' charge to preach the good news to all creation. His examples are all anthropocentric, but the word is clearly creation. Let us consider how we might preach the good news to all creation with fresh energy and commitment, as Christians, as a community, and as individuals. We are earthly works who have earthly works to do.

Prayer for Others and Ourselves

Merciful God: As we gather in prayer, we seek Your Spirit to open our hearts and minds and eyes to an expanded vision of your world and purposes.

We pray for all your people in every place: If we have never considered the power that creation has, open our eyes and spirits, that we may understand as ancient people did, their relationship with the earth and the potential of its power over them. We especially remember those whose lives are being torn apart and livelihoods are being washed away as terrific storms Florence and Mangkhut, ravage the Carolinas, the Philippines, Hong Kong and China. We think too of the anxiety and the long days of waiting before the storm hits. Grant us your grace that we might respond with prayers, with caring, with our money and with our service, as we have no doubt others would respond to us in such situations.

We remember people around the world and in our own cities who are hungry, sometimes even in sight of more than enough food for us all. As we remember and pray for all these things, for people still recovering from wildfires in their communities, and those we know who are sick or mourning, and for all the people hurt and bewildered by a rapidly changing economic environment, we no longer understand or control. Help us not to be overwhelmed by size and numbers, but rather to identify our personal passions and abilities for change and response.

We pray for our nation. Even in these days of intense political campaigns, passionate about mercy and justice, we pray that you move through us (yes even through our own hearts) with a spirit of reconciliation and hope that we might move forward in constructive ways that benefit all citizens.

Continue to strengthen us as a congregation, helping us to expand our witness to your love; developing outlets for the expression of the gifts you have bestowed on us; affirming the gifts of those around us, and challenging ourselves toward new faith and ministry. Touch us to, in our personal lives, making us partners with you in healing the broken places in our lives -- where we hurt in relationships or bodies; where our minds are twisted by fear or doubt or hopelessness; restore in us a sense of your presence and purpose, and light the way you would have us go. All this we pray in the name of your Son, who taught us to pray together, saying...