

Genesis 1; Romans 8:19-23
Fourth Sunday of Easter: Earth Day; Sunday, April 22, 2018
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Spring is my favorite season of the year. For me, there's nothing more hopeful and energizing than watching the daffodils and crocuses push themselves up out of the cold, hard ground and the trees as they flush with new color. After the cold, dark barren days of winter, the signs of new life in spring always seem like a miracle, more so this year than most.

The coming of spring reminds me of the creation story from Genesis, where we hear how God brings creation into being, speaking light and life into a dark, wet world. Fundamentally, the story is a poem, divided into six parts in which God speaks, creation responds, there is evening and morning, and another day, each building on the last.

The poem describes a vision of cosmic beauty, from the creation of the vast skies and seas to the birds and fish and every kind and size of plant and animal that inhabits the earth. Over the course of six days, God speaks into being this magnificent wonder we call creation and on the seventh day, God rests.

But more than beautiful poetry, the creation story is also a theological statement that locates us and our role within the larger web of creation. Articulating God's intention for creation, the story acts as a corrective to an exclusively human and often destructive understanding of creation.

In his book, *"For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care,"* Steven Bouma-Prediger summarizes this alternative understanding.

First, we learn that it is God who brings all things into existence. In contrast to other near Eastern creation myths, like the *Enuma Elish*, nothing in creation is endowed with divine powers. Only God has the power to create out of nothing.

Second, we learn that God shares creative power with the created order. The sea brings forth creatures, the land brings forth vegetation, and humans are called to rule the earth. In his words, "Both human and nonhuman creatures are called to participate in the creative activity initiated by God."¹

Third, we learn that the universe is ordered and structured by God, lovingly and purposely designed by God. In God's creation, everything has its place.

¹ Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), p. 88.

Fourth, we learn that creation is good. It is borne not out of conflict between multiple gods, as in other creation stories, but called forth joyfully and effortlessly by God. It is designed by God to be a place of peace and harmony.

Fifth, we learn that the earth provides a home for all creatures, not just humanity. Our species was created on the same day as all the other so-called "land" creatures, and offered the same food for sustenance. "The emphasis in this day is not so much on anthropology, that is, on the supremacy of humanity, as it is on ecology, that is, the earthly habitation that human beings share with other forms of 'living beings'".²

Sixth and finally, we learn that the climax of creation is the Sabbath. Rather than the world being made for humanity, the world is made for Sabbath. "[Sabbath] reminds us, among other things, that the world is in God's loving hands and, therefore, will not fall to pieces if we cease our work."³

When we forget that the earth is home to all of God's creatures and live as if everything were made exclusively for our benefit, we ignore God's intention for the earth. Just as we fail to understand God's vision for our lives together, we also fail to recognize God's vision for our place in the larger web of creation. When we do, we destroy the very means by which our lives are sustained and supported.

So it's no wonder, as Paul writes, that "all creation is groaning."

Creation is groaning under the sheer weight of human demand for endless resources.⁴

With a growing population and a food production rate that cannot keep up, approximately one in eight people on the earth do not get their required daily energy needs met. In 2008, the number of hungry people in the world could circle the earth at the equator 13 times.

The loss of three species every day (one every eight hours) contributes to the destruction of ecosystems, resulting in increased flooding, rising sea levels and disruption of the food chain. The loss of 25 million acres each year of tropical forests means that our trees are no longer absorbing more carbon than they are producing. Instead of mitigating climate change, trees are now actually contributing to it.

More than one billion people lack safe drinking water and 2.6 billion people lack water for proper sanitation; that's 56 percent of the global population. 6,000 children under the age of five die every day from water-borne diseases.

² Ibid, p. 89.

³ Ibid.

⁴ The following statistics come from Bouma-Prediger's book, pp. 23-54.

In the U.S. alone, we lose three billion tons of topsoil due to wind and water erosion. "During the last 40 years about 30% of the world's arable land has become unproductive and much of that has been abandoned for agricultural use."⁵

In addition, the amount of waste we produce in one year in the US alone could fill a convoy of trucks that would stretch around the world 3.8 times.

One of the bleakest stories of the year so far was the report of a six-ton sperm whale washing up on the shores of southern Spain with 64 pounds of plastic in its stomach, a grotesque sign of the alarming rate at which we're dumping plastics into the ocean.⁶

And even though we represent only five percent of the world's population, we use 25 % of world's energy, some 21 million barrels of oil a day.

Creation is indeed groaning; groaning with exploding population growth, increasing hunger, loss of biodiversity, deforestation, water scarcity and impurity, land degradation, accumulating waste, expanding energy consumption, and global climate change.

What does that have to do with the Christian faith?

The appearance of the resurrected Jesus in last week's story highlighted the significance of human bodies in Christian theology. In contrast to the claim of dualism that our souls are waiting to escape our bodies for a better place, God affirms the goodness of bodies throughout the Christian witness, from the very beginning.

But, in today's creation story, God also affirms the goodness of all creation: the dry land and the gathered waters, the sun and the moon, the shrimp and warblers, cattle and kangaroo, too. Just as God links the goodness of our bodies to goodness of all creation, Paul, in his letter to the Romans, links our redemption to the redemption of all creation. God is not going to redeem us by spiriting us away from the earth but by transforming the earth.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.⁷

In the meantime, we are called to participate in this work of redemption.

⁵ Bouma-Prediger, p 38.

⁶ <https://www.vox.com/2018/4/21/17247994/earth-day-2018-plastic-climate-change>.

⁷ Romans 8:22-23, NRSV.

As recently as 2015, the session re-affirmed our commitment to this work, claiming that our proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ includes promoting care of the earth. Earth Day gives us the opportunity to re-commit to this sacred calling.

Why do we do this? We do this because God calls us to be caretakers of the earth, because we are called to respond in gratitude for the gifts of creation, because our redemption is tied to the redemption of all of creation and because our lives may just depend on it.

Amen.