

“Created to Care”

Valley Presbyterian Church – July 14, 2024

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Psalm 8:1a, 3-9

Genesis 1:26-31

Introduction

It is wonderful to be able to worship outdoors, surrounded by the beauty of creation. Having recently returned from ten days spent in Salt Lake City and Denver – two cities where you can stand in the middle of the city on a hot summer day and see, in the distance, mountains with snow-capped peaks – I certainly am cognizant of the majesty and awe of the natural world revealed in grand and small ways.

Today marks the first of six Sundays that we will spend looking at different aspects of the relationship between humanity and God’s creation: the wonders of earth, water, and sky; the plants and animals in all their awesome variety. And just as God created and ordered the rest of the universe, God also made us – human beings – in God’s own image and likeness.

As we will hear in today’s reading, our relationship with creation is not static. Rather, as human beings, we have been given specific instructions for how to interact with the environment around us; God calls us to tend, enjoy, and steward the created world.

We will not read this entire creation story – which spans from Genesis, chapter one, verse one to chapter two, verse three – but only from the “sixth day” of creation, chapter one, verses 26-31. Listen for the word of God:

Read Genesis 1:25-31

It is sometimes easy to forget that this story of creation is a liturgical poem: composed to be used in corporate worship. It also serves as the *Genesis* – the very beginning – of the Hebrew Scriptures and Christian bible. The six days – the way that each phase of creation is poetically described – share a common outline: 1) an introduction: “And God said” 2) a command: “Let there be” 3) its result: “And it was so” 4) an evaluation: “It was good” and 5) a time frame: “Evening and

morning, day X.” The first five days follow this outline closely. In the last half of day six, though, these elements are modified in some way.

It is on this sixth day that cattle, and creeping creatures, and wild beasts are brought forth from the earth, from the dry land that had been separated from the deep waters. And much like a painter viewing the progress of a portrait, God steps back and sees that this was good.¹

The sixth day continues as God says, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.” Many scholars believe *our* here refers to some divine council – possibly God and the angels – who consult over the topic of creation. Christians might see a glimpse of the Trinity in this declaration of God, three-in-one, ever in relationship, creating as community.

Humankind is then given dominion or rule over the other creatures of the earth. In the ancient world, kings were often referred to as God’s agents on earth; God’s presence mediated to the rest of creation. Scholars remind us that just as monarchs would erect images of themselves in portions of their kingdoms where they did not actually appear or place their faces on coins to be spread far and wide, so humanity is placed upon the earth in God’s image as an emblem of God, serving as God’s representative: instructed to “maintain and enforce God’s claim to dominion over the earth.”²

Our text also reminds us that God created humanity male and female; for just as there is variety in its flora, fauna, and creatures, so are human beings made fully in God’s image; thus, all parts of all people are valued by God. God instructs humanity to be fruitful and to multiply, to fill the earth and to subdue it. This is God’s way of sharing power with humanity, calling us to be about the propagation, protection, and renewal of all things.

It is in ongoing relationship with God that we carry out this calling to creation care. The final verses of today’s reading describe a world where God has provided ample plants and trees for food; for us and for all creatures. In this Edenic world, there is no presence of violence, no predatory behaviors. All parts of the environment exist in peaceful coexistence. God then looks upon this created order and declares it to be supremely good.

¹ Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bible Worm Podcast*

² Gerhard Von Rad, as quoted by Walter Bouzard in *WorkingPreacher.com*

Of course, the world that we know is not so peaceful or pristine. Instead, we witness and participate in predatory systems and violent societies. We behave in ways that extract from the earth rather than replenishing. We have grown further removed from the production of the food that we eat. We perpetuate ongoing warming of the planet and destabilizing of the climate.

Over the coming weeks, we will look at other Old Testament texts that will help us think about the relationship between humanity and God's creation; about our role as co-creators with God in caring for and renewing the earth and all that inhabits it. Made, as we are, in God's own image, we will look at our relationship with the earth and sky and sea, with other creatures and with one another. This will mean that, at times, we will need to confess negligence of our call to creation care and complicity with our destructive ways. It will also allow us the opportunity to explore ways that we can reclaim, refocus, and reform the ways we interact with the environment in which we live.

This first chapter of Genesis describes creation as the limiting, but not the elimination, of the many elements of chaos that surround us. It describes waters being separated to form the land upon which we live and the air that we breathe. Still, we are vulnerable – and in some ways now more than ever – to the chaotic forces of wildfires and floods, to the violent winds of hurricane and tornado, to the seismic changes wrought by famine and migration. God saw the world and declared it to be very good, but creation is far from perfect. We have been challenged with the ongoing task of seeking to better understand and ultimately subdue these many chaotic forces; to apply creativity and wisdom to make the planet a more hospitable and compassionate place for all of God's creatures and creation.

I noted at the onset of today's sermon that this text is a liturgical poem, designed to be a tool for worship and praise. Standing here in this outdoor space, warmed by the sun, shaded by the leaves, and cooled (at times) by the wind's gentle breeze, it is difficult not to experience awe and wonder. In this posture of worship, we are called to remember God's amazing goodness and grace, recalling that as we have been created in God's own likeness, we know God most fully through the One who is described in Colossians as "the image of the invisible God." (1:15) When we need guidance about how to function as God's representatives in the world, called to be fruitful in all things, we look to the example of Jesus who lived and taught a life of humility, inclusion, compassion, and peace.

When the ancient Rabbis ruminated on why humanity was not created until the sixth day, they concluded that maybe it was so that the very first activity that humans were called to do, on the seventh day of rest, was *nothing*. Instead of constantly seeking to mold the environment to our personal whims, the Sabbath calls us instead to simply be in creation; to take notice of its beauty, wonder, and majesty. Maybe this explains why Jews are prohibited even from picking flowers on the day of rest; instead, they are only to look and appreciate them where they will naturally grow.³

In our moments of worship, we are also called to praise God as the Creator who calls us to live in and appreciate the natural world before trying to subdue or control it; remembering that the rest of creation also has a right to be. Thus, we are inspired to sing and pray, to confess our shortcomings and accept God's grace, to dwell in the good news of God's Word, and to practice good and faithful stewardship of the resources we have been provided.

And in this world that is filled with so much chaos, it is appropriate – even necessary – for us to remember that we have been made in God's own image and likeness, created in order to bring hope, healing, and order to this broken and distorted world. In pursuing these tasks, human beings cannot simply sit back and assume that God will take care of everything or that the future of creation rests solely in God's hands. Humanity is being called not to passivity but to genuine engagement, the nature of which will surely have significant implications for the future of the environment and the earth's future.⁴

Today, though, is the Sabbath; it is the day for the enjoyment of God and all that God has made. It is the day for rest, for renewal, and for worship and praise. Thanks be to God for this space and opportunity to appreciate that which surrounds us in all its wonder and glory. Amen.

³ Robertson and Williamson

⁴ Terence E. Fretheim from *WorkingPreacher.com*