

25 September 2016

Good News for the Earth
Genesis 1:24-31; Romans 8:18-21

We often refer to the earth as “creation” – as in “Land sake’s child! What in creation are you doing with that paint?” But of course, it *is* creation, and so we should begin considering the earth by reading from Genesis 1, verses 24-31:

And God said, ‘Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.’ And it was so. God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

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.’ God said, ‘See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.’ And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

I read an article a week or two back about the women on President Obama’s cabinet. Evidently, they have developed a strategy to support each other. Whenever one of them proposes an idea, a minute later, another one will repeat that idea and will identify the one who originally suggested it *by name*. Why do they do this? For two reasons: first, to make sure that ideas proposed by women are actually heard, and second to prevent anyone else from later taking credit for her idea. I found this fascinating. On the one hand, of course, it is a sign of the increased gender equality that we have achieved the past few decades that there is even one woman on the presidential cabinet, let alone several. Feminists of the 1970s would be ecstatic at such progress. On the other hand, the fact that these women who have achieved such positions still feel it necessary to work together to keep from being steamrolled by men indicates that in certain ways women are still struggling to be regarded as equals. It’s as if the first step – breaking down institutional barriers to women – was the easy stuff. That just called for changing laws and entrance requirements. The second stage, being regarded as equals and judged by the same standards as men, is a slower process.

And this past week I realized it was a process I needed to apply to myself as well. Today, as you are aware, is United Methodist Women’s Sunday. This year, like last year, the UMW planned the service but asked if I would preach. Last year, I preached on the importance of

women to the church, showing that the Bible affirms women in all sorts of leadership roles, and pointing out that God has often worked through women. This is all true, and I had in mind something along the same lines this year. Then, when I was talking to Margaret Getzin in preparation for this service, a thought occurred to me. If we were to have such a thing as a United Methodist Men's Sunday, would I feel the need to preach on how important men can be to the church, to argue that in fact men *can* serve in leadership roles, that God can work even through men? Or might that come across as maybe a little patronizing?

So this year, instead of preaching about women, I asked Margaret what she wanted me to preach on, and she asked if I would preach on creation. One of the issues that the UMW has embraced nationally is our responsibility for God's creation, and that's why we started with Genesis 1. Now, as our students in the Disciple Bible Study this week can affirm, the early chapters of Genesis are fairly densely packed with theological meaning. I just want to look at one theme encapsulated in the brief passage you just heard. It's a fascinating section on the relationship of humanity to both God and creation. On the one hand, we are a part of creation. Human beings were created on the sixth day, along with all the other animals. Well, fish and birds were created on an earlier day, but reptiles, mammals, humans, and bugs were all made together on the sixth. Furthermore, as each was made, they got the same repeated command: be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. And, while the actual process by which that is done varies from reptiles to humans to bugs, in every case it is a very physical process with similar . . . yeah, let me just move on. The point is, we are all God's creatures.

On the other hand, humans are marked as being qualitatively different. We are created, male and female, in the image of God. Now again, there's more there than we have time for. We could probably do a whole sermon series on what the "image of God" might mean, but at the very least, it means that we are able to have a uniquely mutual relationship with the Creator. To put it simply, we alone of God's creatures are able, freely and intentionally, to return God's love. And because of this unique relationship with God, we are given dominion over the rest of creation, commanded to act as God's regent over the world that God deemed "very good."

That passage uses a troublesome phrase, "subdue [the earth], and have dominion over . . . every living thing." I should probably pause here for a moment, because that phrasing – subdue and have dominion over – has often been abused. It seems to speak of human mastery of the world, and so it has been used as a justification by those wishing to clearcut forests, hunt or fish animals to extinction, strip mine coal, and drain aquifers to keep golf courses green in the desert. "Hey, God said it was *ours!*" I'll come back to this theologically later, but for now I'd just like to point out that God explicitly loved creation and left it in our charge. There really isn't any way to put that together as permission to despoil it for our own convenience. Can you imagine someone saying, "This is my house, lovingly built with my own hands. Will you take care of it while I'm away for the weekend? And if it gets at all chilly at night, feel free to set bits of it on fire"? No, Genesis 1 describes us as being both a part of God's good creation and set apart from it, being given certain responsibilities over it.

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And so, as Genesis 1 makes clear, God's creation was, from the beginning, very good. But as we read on to Genesis 2 and 3 we see that at least the human element of creation went bad. That evil spread. We read from Paul's letter to the Romans, 8:18-23

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour 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.

The story of humanity's fall is familiar to those who have spent any time in church. God created the man and woman and set them in a garden, but left one test of obedience: Do not eat from this tree. Of course they did, as we would have, and by exercising their God-granted free will to reject God, they brought disaster on themselves. As we read the rest of the Bible, what we see is the story of God trying by every means to re-establish relationship with the creature that bears God's image. That effort culminates in the gospel story, in which God became a man on earth and through dying and rising again, broke down the final barrier, offering restored relationship by grace.

As I say, this should be familiar. What may be less familiar is the connection to creation that Paul makes in Romans 8. Just as humans were part of creation at the start, so too creation partook of humanity's fall. Paul writes, "creation was subjected to futility" and "we know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now." It's as if humanity's relation to God is a necessary element of the earth's destiny to be fruitful and multiply, and when that relationship went off the tracks, it derailed creation as well. Paul doesn't really explain how this happened, or what are the specific signs of the earth's groaning for restoration. All that's clear in this peculiar passage is that creation has a destiny that it's being held back from fulfilling. In Paul's words, "creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God." And it hopes that it will "be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God."

As I said, this is a peculiar passage, but it's not a lone voice. It meshes perfectly with the Book of Revelation's picture of God's final victory. The final chapters of that book paint a picture of Paradise, which is not a *different* place from earth but rather is an earth restored to its intended glory. God does not take people away from earth to a "better place" but rather heals this earth and creates it anew. Even as humanity is redeemed and given a resurrected physical self, so too is all creation.

Here is the theological reason I promised earlier for why we are not allowed to abuse creation or treat it as an expendable resource for our own purposes. Not only did God create the earth with love, but God is not done with it yet. To put it another way: in God's eyes the earth is not disposable, but renewable. Just. Like. Us.

This fall I've been preaching on the gospel. This Sunday, being UMW Sunday, I took a break from that series for a week. But not really. I have stressed the past few weeks that the gospel is good news for all races and ethnic groups and generations. Today I'm just expanding that to all creation. God's promise of restoration and renewal by grace is not just for us but also for the earth. Which leads to just one final question: How do we, as God's church and the bearer of the gospel, communicate that good news to the earth?