October 20, 2019

**God as Creator Origins and Implications**

Genesis 2: 4-9, 15-23

Romans 8: 18-25

I would like to begin by offering words of thanksgiving, taken from the book “Peace, Power, Righteousness” by indigenous author Taiaiake Alfred:

We address and offer thanks to the earth where human beings dwell, to the streams, the pools, and the lakes, the corn and the fruits, the medicines and the trees, to the forests for their usefulness, and to the animals that are food and give their shelter for clothing, to the great winds, and the lesser ones, to the thunder; to the Sun, the mighty warrior, to the moon; to the messengers of the Creator who reveal his wishes and to the Creator who dwells in the heavens above who gives all the things useful to humans, and who is the source and the ruler of health and life.

In the early part of summer we had a series of sermons at NPMC on names for God. I participated in that series and spoke on God as Healer, but when I was preparing I also had thoughts of speaking on God as Creator. Kind of seemed like low hanging fruit: say a few things about the beauty of nature, God’s love for us, and done. However, the more I contemplated the depth of the subject and the complexities associated with it I realized that fruit might be dangerous. I chose a different topic at that time but some of the thoughts I had about God as Creator stayed with me, partly because that big question of where did we come from always looms over us and partly because of the current state of our relationship with creation. So when I was asked to speak again today and given a blank slate I decided to go back there and try to delve into these two themes related to God as Creator – the origins of creation and our interaction with that creation today. To me, these two are inexorably linked. So let’s begin, well, in the beginning.

The most basic level on which we relate to God is the relationship between Creator and created. We see this physical world around us and wonder where did it, and we, come from. This is a fundamental question that connects people across all places and time.

The Judeo-Christian answer to this question is that all things and forces, seen and unseen, on this earth and beyond, are the intentional act of a Creator God. This framework is set out in the first couple chapters of the book of Genesis. The author’s creation accounts tell a story of the heavens and earth being established by a singular and all-powerful God, of a diverse and inter-connected group of created things on that earth, and of the role of humans within that group of created things. You may have noticed I said “creation accounts” – plural. There are in fact two – the account of the seven days of creation in chapter 1 and the account of the Garden of Eden in chapter 2. If you read them carefully you will notice there are actually discrepancies between them regarding the order and manner in which things were created. For a considerable time these accounts were accepted unquestioningly by those in the Judeo-Christian traditions, but as scientific inquiry has led to more and more discovery about our world and universe an unfortunate debate has resulted between those who reject the notion of the involvement of a divine entity in creation and those who seek to justify the Genesis accounts and other passages related to the age of creation as the literal inerrant word of God.

The latter often involves some significant logical gymnastics in attempting to explain the words of the Bible in the face of what evidence shows us to be true. I understand the desire to defend one’s belief structure, but to me it is not necessary to buy into a false choice between science and faith. We cannot explain away the facts that science has revealed to us, but neither has science proved capable of answering all questions. In my view, there is nothing about important discoveries such as the expanding universe, the evolution of species, or laws of physics that are incompatible with belief in a designing God. Rather, those can be seen as processes used by the Creator in His work. When I consider the big question of where did everything come from, I am unable to accept that the beauty, complexity, and singular uniqueness of our world could emerge randomly out of nothing. What I see and experience, particularly when out in nature, tells me that all of this came from the loving and intentional act of a Creator. That is not proof of anything, it is by definition an act of faith to address that which cannot be fully explained with certainty.

Instead of science undermining God, I submit that when you consider creation in this context it only emphasizes the awesomeness and preciousness of creation. This idea is expressed rather beautifully by Walter Klaassen – who happens to be my uncle – in the book he wrote the first 100years of of Eigenheim Mennonite Church. In the opening he put that physical place in the context of creation in the following words I will ask Aleta to read:

There were mountains once, two and a half billion years ago, where the church now stands, a mile high, and then also a second time a billion years later. Both times they were worn to nothing by wind and water and vanished. All that time there were no living things.

Then the salt ocean covered our place, retreated, came again and yet again. … There was a time when the northern shore of a great sea was where Saskatoon now lies, and broad rivers without names flowed into it from north and east. Sixty million years ago the last ocean retreated into what is now Montana, and only after that did the mountains appear again with a lot of stone crunching earthquakes and volcanic fire. …

And then the earth cooled off about three million years ago by only a few degrees. Where before our place had been covered by tropical rain forests of enormous redwoods stretching almost to the North Pole, the cold came and covered the land three times with ice sheets as deep as those first mountains had been high.

In those ancient oceans, half a billion years ago, living creatures were created, and plants grew on the land. And there were dinosaurs large and small, refined and grotesque, and when flowers appeared with protein in their seeds, mammals came into being. Then, also, human beings were created in the image of God.

The first traces of the families that later lived where we now have our farms, are to be found in the northern Yukon at Old Crow, where at least 25,000 years ago, they made tools of mammoth bones to clean animal hides.

So the earth we have farmed these hundred years for our livelihood was made and shaped over immense spans of time by water and wind and ice and sun. We did not create it; it is a gift. We are the beneficiaries, the inheritors of conditions and processes not done by human effort but by the strong, patient hands of the Creator.[[1]](#footnote-1)

That that the writer of Genesis in attempting to explain the origins of creation some 3500 years ago could not do so in a way that aligns strictly with the knowledge we have gained since does not mean his words were not inspired by God or have nothing to say to us. They paint an important picture for us about the relationship between God and creation that is carried on elsewhere in scripture. Job 12:7-10 reads “But ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds in the sky, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish in the sea inform you. Which of all these does not know that the hand of the LORD has done this? In his hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind,” Psalm 19:1 says, “The heavens proclaim the glory of God, the skies display his craftsmanship.” Nehemiah 9: 6 proclaims: "You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you."

What we find in these passages and others is a picture of God’s deep and abiding love and connection with every corner of creation. When we read these words and accept the notion of God as Creator, there are many implications that flow from this. The question I intend to focus on today is what does this mean for our relationship as humans with the rest of creation?

That question leads us inevitably to a consideration of the references in Genesis 1 and Psalm 8 to humans having dominion over creation. Sadly, they are often cited in support of the idea that earth and all its resources are there for us to take advantage of in any and all ways regardless of the consequences. Related to this is the belief that the promise of a new heaven and a new earth means that this is just a temporary home and at the appropriate time God will step in and rescue us from all the destruction we have wrought.

If dominion is to be seen as equivalent to “having power over”, there is no question humans have power over many facets of creation and have exercised that, often in very destructive ways. But the context of Genesis suggests we must look at this differently. Genesis 2 talks about other creatures being created as companions to man, of man being a participant in creation by naming the animals, and that man was put in the Garden of Eden to cultivate it and take care of it. Furthermore, Genesis 1 tells us we are made in the image of God, this suggests that we ought to love and care for all of God’s creation as He does. The idea that God intended unrestrained exploitation of His work is offensive to the praise for creation found in the Bible.

The examples of our abuse of creation are numerous, but I am compelled to focus today on the issue of climate change. I think this topic is why I avoided speaking on God as Creator the last time, as I knew no proper discussion regarding creation at this time could ignore this issue. I am often guilty of flipping past the dire headlines and skipping to the sports scores, as the topic of climate change feels overwhelming. In preparation for speaking today I read the book “Climate Church, Climate World” by Jim Antal. It was a difficult but necessary read, and much of the rest of what I will say this morning is influenced by this book.

This is not a science lecture and I am not a scientist so I will not attempt to go into the details, but the accepted consensus is that we are experiencing a long-term rise in average global temperatures and changes to precipitation patterns that if unchecked threatens the viability of human life on earth. The primary culprit is our use of fossil fuels – quite properly referred to as an addiction by no less than George W. Bush who is not exactly a tree-hugger. All those dinosaurs and other organisms from millions of years ago have decomposed into highly concentrated deposits of carbon which we are now burning and releasing into the atmosphere. The effects of climate change are rather terrifying: intense disasters of increasing frequency, the melting of glaciers and polar ice caps leading to rising sea levels and flooding of coastal areas, an unimaginable rate of species extinction, and large areas becoming unsustainable resulting in untold numbers of climate refugees.

We can see these effects happening already, and they almost invariably have the harshest impact on those who are the most vulnerable and have done the least to contribute to climate change. This picture from a 2016 Reuters news article[[2]](#footnote-2) is a stark example. This man is a grave digger in Karachi, Pakistan, he had the trench dug in an effort to be prepared for the burial of 300 bodies in the event of a serious heat wave. The previous summer temperatures had reached 44 degrees Celsius in Karachi and 1,300 people had died as hospitals were overwhelmed, particularly with those from the margins of society. Practically every social justice issue we face is amplified by climate change: hunger; homelessness; racism; immigration; war; economic inequality, etc. are made worse by climate change. Long-term, the viability of our planet for human life is in serious jeopardy. It is not hyperbole to say climate change is the greatest moral challenge humanity has faced.

The passage my Uncle Walter wrote which Aleta read, beautifully describes the patient work of the Creator that has made it possible for us to be in this place. We are undoing that work at hyperspeed. The incredible beauty and gift of creation is being destroyed.

The gravity of the problem demands that there be some fundamental changes to our way of doing things. Unrestrained extraction in the pursuit of limitless economic growth and convenience is no longer tenable. We must turn to a more sustainable way of life that is in harmony with the rest of creation. At the end of September we saw millions of youth from around the world march in climate strikes to call for this kind of change, inspired by Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg. Are we willing to hear the call and take the steps that are necessary to protect their future? Will we do our part to ensure that whoever is elected tomorrow to form our government, they will implement the necessary measures for Canada to meet our commitments under the Paris Climate Agreement?

There are solutions if we have the will to make some big changes, but be wary of those who suggest we can address the crisis without any cost to us. If what is needed is a moral revolution, it is essential that the church be part of this change. The text from Romans emphasizes the link between us and the rest of creation. Just as we are waiting for redemption from our sufferings, creation is groaning and also waiting to be set free. As one commentary I read put it, ”Our expectation of a new creation in God’s good time does not negate the importance of the creation we have. We do not seek to escape from the creation; we affirm a common destiny with it.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Throughout history, dedicated Christians have been leaders of social reform movements including the abolition of slavery, nuclear disarmament, and ending apartheid in South Africa, to name just three. We are being called again. The moral standard of the Good Samaritan’s compassion, mercy and sacrifice is required of us. We must see the grave digger in Pakistan, the teenager in Sweden, and generations to come as our neighbors. We must act to preserve the creation God put us in charge of taking care of.

By now I may have you suitably depressed feeling guilty. That is not my point. Rather I wish to highlight the importance of the issue in the belief the church should and can be a force for positive change. I am pretty much preaching to the choir here, as I know the people of this congregation feel the same type of connection to nature and the importance of environmental issues. I’m not in a position to call for any particular concrete actions and I have my own plank to pull out of my eye, but I do have a possible suggestion for our worship. Every Sunday we light the peace candle as a way to orient our hearts and minds to the issue of peace and specific examples of where peace is needed. What if we added a similar ritual to our worship services that would highlight stories of how climate change is impacting people and communities, or things being done by churches, groups, or governments to work for change. It feels inadequate, and it is, but perhaps it would be a way of highlighting this as an issue of our faith and lead to further conversation and action in our personal lives and church.

In a recent blog post, Rev. Susan Hendershot was asked about how to maintain hope in the face of the climate crisis. She begins by quoting the following two line poem:

That God had a plan, I do not doubt.  
But what if His plan was, that we would do better?

She follows that with these words:

This poem reminds me that hope is active. It is about people of faith showing up and doing the work, day after day, even when it is hard, and we feel that there isn’t much to show for it. Hope is about believing that the future isn’t already decided, and that what we do matters. It is about joining our hearts and our voices with one another because it is our sacred vocation to do so.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In the passage from Romans Paul talks about waiting in patience with hope for that which is unseen. That does not mean that hope is passive. The Creator is calling us to act.

I would like to close with a prayer taken from the Book of Common Prayer:

Almighty God, in giving us dominion over things on earth, you made us fellow workers in your creation: Give us wisdom and reverence so to use the resources of nature, that no one may suffer from our abuse of them, and that generations yet to come may continue to praise you for your bounty; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

1. The Days of Our Years A History of the Eigenheim Mennonite Church Community: 1892-1992. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-heatwave/pakistan-city-readies-graves-hospitals-in-case-heat-wave-hits-again-idUSKCN0YB0TU [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2366> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://sojo.net/articles/how-hope-when-world-burning> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)