Towson Presbyterian Church

May 1, 2022

Psalm 8 and Genesis 2:4b-9

“Earth Sunday Part II: We Belong to the Earth”

We have just read the second creation story from Genesis, and these two stories describe, in their own way, how the cosmos, and the earth, and humans were created. The Hebrews were one of many tribes in the Ancient Near East that had creation stories and tried to offer their own thoughts of how all of *this* began.

The first creation story comes a chapter before what we just read, and in that story, God creates the cosmos and the earth, and all that is in the earth, in 6 days, and after each day ends with this refrain…*and it was* *good*. And how courageous it was for the first compilers of the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, to include not one but *two* creation stories (that right there should already tell us something about how to read these stories),and these two stories are different. God is described in different ways and given different attributes in each story, and humans are created in different ways. In the first story God simply creates humans…just like that. But in this second story, the writer, or writers, take great care in describing the creation of the first human.

This second creation story, from Genesis 2, and verse 7 in particular, has become one of my favorite sections of the Bible because it drips with intimacy. It almost has this mystical quality to it.

*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.*

What an image…what a picture of God digging God’s hands into the earth, into the dirt, and like a potter who slowly forms and massages clay, God forms a human, and then brings it to life by gently breathing air into that human. The breath that moves in and out of this first human is in fact the breath of God….what a beautiful and intimate story.

Just recently this story came up in a conversation I was having with a young person from TPC. There was a discussion going on about the existence of God and how to know that God truly exists, and there were good, and healthy, and honest questions being asked, and I asked this young person what in particular causes them to question the existence of God?

They said, “Well, the story about God digging into the dirt to make a human. I don’t think that happened.”

I looked at them and said, “I don’t think it happened either.”

They then looked back at me with this expression that seemed to say, “Wait…aren’t you supposed to believe *everything* that’s in the Bible? Isn’t that your job?”

No.

So, I’ll put my cards on the table. I love these two creation stories, and in particular our reading today, each in their own way, but do not believe they happened *literally*. I don’t think they’re meant to be read literally. And there is a very real and understandable tendency to want to read them literally. It’s the Bible, right? Aren’t we supposed to?

Well, sometimes, yes… and sometimes, no.

It’s hard to read these two creation stories literally because we now know so much about the creation of the universe. We now know that roughly 14.5 billion years ago the universe seems to have begun, and it took billions of years, not days, but billions of years for the earth to form, and humans are very, very, very new to the scene when we look at not just the history of the universe but the history of the earth. We are a last-minute addition to the ongoing creation of the cosmos.

And it seems like each year we keep finding out more and more about the universe, and about humanity. When I was a kid, we had found fossils of humans – homo sapiens – that went back roughly 40,000 years. That’s a long time. Now we’ve found fossils that take humans back to 200,000 years! In 5 or 10 years will we find fossils that take humans back to 300,000 years?! It wouldn’t surprise me.

We live in a very different time than the authors of those who wrote the two creation stories of Genesis. We, today, have knowledge now that they couldn’t even dream about, which means there is a very real and understandable tendency (I get it) to then take this story we read today of God digging into the dirt to form the first human and say, *what do this have to say to us today? Why do we need this ancient story if it’s not true?* *Shouldn’t we just disregard it and throw it out?*

It’s like what Rob and I said in our Easter sermon about resurrection. In an age where facts are so readily available, where everything is built on facts, how do we trust in the resurrection if we can’t fully prove it? And to this creation story that we’ve read this morning, why do we need it? What’s the point if it’s not *true*? Or could it be *true* in a different way?

I think we need these stories – these ancient stories - more than ever right now, because I would argue that this story is *true* in a different way than did it just literally happen or not. This story of God forming humans from the dust of the earth is *true* in that it still has something to tell us about God and about humanity, even though it might now have literally happen.

What we have in the stories of the Bible are descriptions of what the authors believed about God in a particular time and in a particular place in the history of humanity. We all know that it’s a book about God, but what we forgot – what I often forget – is that it’s also a book about what it means to be human. It’s a book about our tendency to take instead of give, and our tendency for violence, hatred, greed, and oppression. And it’s also a book about humanity’s ability to radically offer love, mercy, forgiveness, compassion, and service.

The Bible is often true in a different way than *did it just happen exactly as it’s written*. It so often has something deeper to tell us than just facts. And it has a profound way of telling us what it means to be human on a very deep level, and here’s where this second creation story of God creating us out of the earth is true…

…that we come from the earth.

Humans were not simply dropped here from another planet…we are from the earth. In this ancient story, God forms the first human out of the ground and that is *true* in a very real way. We belong to this place, we belong to the Earth, and we are a part of the bounty that this great planet has slowly and patiently produced. We are part of it just like the blue whale, the bullfrog, the hummingbird, the beaver, the maple tree, the flowing river, and the grand majestic mountain. We come from the Earth. We belong to the Earth.

And this 5,000-year-old story from the Ancient Near East about Creation gets it right, not in a literalistic way, but still gets it right. In the grand story of this planet, that resides in our solar system, in this galaxy, in the ever-expanding universe that we live in, Genesis 2 gets it right by saying that we belong to it.

And story of the Earth is a grand story. The Earth has been here for roughly 4.5 billion years (it’s hard to try and wrap my head around those numbers) and the story of the Earth is a story of *ongoing change and evolution*. Throughout its history, change, evolution, and new life have been constant, and we now find ourselves living in another period of change. Rev. Roger Rice last Sunday shared some statistics, and I know you’re aware of this. It feels like every week or so we hear another story about how the Earth is changing, how an ecosystem has been irrevocably altered, and life on this planet will in many ways never be the same.

I have recently been learning more about the history of extinctions on our planet.[[1]](#footnote-1) I know, not very uplifting, but it is the reality of life here. And extinctions are actually very common…and throughout the history of the Earth, scientists and geologists and biologists believe that we’ve had 5 mass extinctions so far. For some of these extinctions they have pretty good idea of what happened, such as climate change or an asteroid impact. And for others, they’re not sure, but they have determined that at a certain time in the Earth’s history mass species were permanently extinguished from the Earth. Part of this is natural…it’s the fragility of life here on our planet.

But many scientists today say that the Earth is currently in the midst of a 6th mass extinction, but what makes the 6th so unique is that this extinction isn’t defined by a dramatic event like an asteroid but instead has been shaped over the last 10,000 years by *us*, by humans, and some scientists think that the current rate of species loss is probably a thousand times the normal rate. It’s happening faster than we can imagine.

And when I hear information like this, it’s so overwhelming, and because I don’t know what to do about it, it can freeze me and I take no real action at all or I just become very cynical. And both of those options are not very helpful. But what is clear, and what is needed right now, what the Earth needs now more than ever are humans that care about it. The Earth needs humans *that love it,* because when we love something, we will naturally care about it. Whatever it is – a loved one, an event, an organization, a hobby, your garden in your backyard, when we love it, we will naturally care for it, and strive to nurture it, and look after its well-being. And I wonder that if we are to love the Earth, then we first need to know that we belong to it. We need to know that we came from it, just like the writer from the second creation story tells us. When we know that we belong to it, we’ll begin to love it at a deeper level, and we’ll start caring for it at a deeper level.

 So how do we begin knowing that we belong to the Earth in a deeper way? I don’t think it’s that hard. We go spend time in the natural world.

I recently read a book[[2]](#footnote-2) by Dan Dolquist and had a conversation with him. Dan’s a Presbyterian pastor out in Colorado and he encourages some practices that can help us to slowly begin connecting to the Earth in a deeper way. Dan says one of the best ways is to simply get out into a wild space and wander, and open our eyes and hearts, and be open to all that is around us. To look, and to notice, and be as present as we can to the natural world. And Dan encourages, if it’s possible, when we get there to spend a good chunk of time in the natural world, in a wild space that humans have not touched. And he says that when we do that, we will start to become more than a *tourist* to the natural world.

I can personally relate. I love to hike but I often feel like a tourist when I do. I pop in for an hour or so and then leave and get back to the “real world.” Dan says when we get out into the natural world for an extended period, we start to feel like we belong to it, just like the trees and the birds and the crickets do.

That kind of excursion can often be hard to do, so he also recommends finding a “sit spot.”[[3]](#footnote-3) And this is your place of intimate connection with the natural world. He says it could be a park bench, it could be a garden, a place to sit off a bike path. And it shouldn’t be too far from home, so you can go back on a regular basis. And all you need to do in this spot is just be still. Open your senses to the world around you and observe. Dan says, “to open your heart to be a part of the undomesticated world.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

The more we slowly come to love the Earth…the more we will care for the Earth.

And finally, I’ll add one more practice. Go outside, your backyard is fine, take off your shoes and your socks, and *feel* the earth beneath you.

Feel the grass, feel the dirt on your toes and in between the soles of your feet.

Feel the Earth…

for it is where we came from…

and we belong to it.

1. https://www.amnh.org/shelf-life/six-extinctions [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dan Dolquist, *Finding Your Wild* (Eugene, OR: Luminare Press, 2019) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)