

Trusting the Goodness

Genesis 1:1-25

John 1:1-4

This Sunday and the next three Sundays we will be taking a little detour from the scripture lessons assigned by the Common Lectionary that we regularly follow. One of the resources I use in worship planning and we occasionally use for Sunday School is a resource called Seasons, an ecumenical publication geared toward progressive congregations. This past spring several of us from Cherokee Park United Church were asked to write some of the resources for the fall of 2016, which we have been doing this summer. A few years ago, Seasons editors decided that it was time faith communities began giving much greater attention to the relationship between our faith and care for the earth. They, therefore, proposed this detour from the Common lectionary so that we might for at least one month, give focused attention on themes that call us to deepen our care for creation. This Sunday's focus is Planet Earth. Next Sunday's focus is "Humanity", which seems like a spirit led choice for a Sunday we celebrate our shared ministry in what we also call Covenanting Sunday. The third Sunday's theme is Sky and the fourth Sunday's theme is Mountains.

A focus on Planet earth is far from the only thematic choice we had available to us this Sunday. This is, after all, Labor Day weekend.

It would be appropriate if we focused on the struggles faced by the labor movement and economic justice. We have in the past invited speakers from labor unions to be present with us. We are keenly aware that economic disparity, the gap between the 1%, the middle class and the poor is a very burning issue and quite an appropriate one for this Sunday.

We might also have heeded the call of the African Methodist Episcopal denomination who following the assassination of brothers and sisters in Charleston's Emmanuel AME Church called for all congregations in the U.S. to make September 6th a "Day of Confession, Repentance, Prayer and Commitment to end Racism". No one would deny the vital importance of a focus on ending racism today.

Why then a focus on Planet Earth? What possible value can our giving attention to creation have for those concerned about economic justice or the future of labor? What possible value can a focus on planet earth have for racial justice? Or any one of us might add, what possible value does a focus on Planet Earth have when it comes to the very real challenges, questions, and uncertainties I face in my own life? We all have our personal struggles, some more than others. Yes, planet earth is important, but we are not a congregation of climate change deniers. What good does reflecting on planet earth do when the problems in my life, worries and concerns are so immediate?

Quite likely this was a question for the Hebrew people exiled in Babylon to whom the story of Genesis was first read. “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth....” One of the great advantages of not being Biblical fundamentalists is that Biblical scholarship enables us to engage the richness of the text for those who first heard it. Faith among the people of Israel was for most of their shared life nurtured by an oral tradition. There were at best fragments of written stories and sayings. With no written Bible, people told stories about Adam and Eve, Moses, Abraham and Sarah and the many other narratives found throughout the Hebrew Scripture.

The exile was a time of spiritual crises. Their homeland, including Jerusalem and the beautiful temple had been destroyed. Families had been torn apart. They had been forced marched into the foreign land of Babylon. These exiles felt disconnected from the land in which they lived. They felt disconnected from God. They felt disconnected from one another. They saw no future. It is during this time of great spiritual crisis that Biblical scholars tell us that prophets and priests began pulling together the various strands of oral tradition and snippets of writings, giving to the people for strength and encouragement the start of what we now refer to as the Hebrew Scripture or the Old Testament.

These exiles in Babylon are in a time of spiritual crisis brought on by the disappointments, hardships and heartaches of life. They are looking for answers. They are looking for guidance. The first word they

encounter in this newly formed Scripture is this passage from Genesis, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...” It would come as no surprise if they too are asking, “Why begin with planet earth? Yes, creation is important, but we have problems in our lives, problems in our world that need attention now. Creation can wait”. How can a focus on planet earth speak to a people in exile, a people feeling disconnected from all that matters most?

I am guessing you noticed or were reminded as we read this ancient story of creation together, the repeated refrain, “and God saw that it was good.” Over and over again we hear those words, “and God saw that it was good. And God saw that it was good. And God saw that it was good.” Like a mantra intended to go beyond the level of thinking to something that resides deep within our hearts and spirits, the story of Genesis continues repeating “And God saw that it was good.”

Genesis tells us anticipation of goodness is woven into the very essence of creation, because creation and the planet earth have been formed out of goodness. For those who have been present for the past several times I have preached, you may start to think I am developing a sermon series on the Boundary Water Canoe Area, because I keep returning to the richness of the BWCA. This August as my family and I paddled down the Isabella River, we found ourselves canoeing through an area that a few years ago suffered a major forest fire. All around us were tall stumps of blackened and charred trees. Acres and acres had

been burned. As far as the eye could see, we were greeted by landscape devastated by the fire. But, also present among the burned out trees was new green growth, some two or three feet high. Amidst this developing green floor were wild flowers in abundance. They blanketed the entire area with their rich color. It was one of the most beautiful sites I have ever seen on the BWCA.

“And God saw that it was good.” Whether it be economic injustice, the evils of racism, or the heartaches, disappointments we encounter in our own personal lives, it is tempting and even understandable that we get lost in the burned out landscape of our lives. The world can look devastating as it certainly must for the people fleeing Syria and so many other refugees in our world. It can feel like there will be no end to the problems, the challenges and injustice standing guard like charred trees. Certainly this is how the exiles in Babylon must have felt. Is there any reason for hope? Is there any reason to believe life will ever be any different?

The story of planet earth, the story of creation, repeats the refrain “And God saw that it was good.” Rather than look on the chaos in our lives and the chaos in our world as something to be resisted, Genesis simply affirms the very essence of planet earth is comprised of the goodness of God.

Beyond the devastation and the losses, the goodness of God is at work, preparing the soil, preparing our lives, preparing our world for the new life, the new possibility, the creative, life giving goodness of God.

An inescapable measure of the goodness about which Genesis speaks and of which we are reminded in the Gospel of John is that all of life is connected. “In the beginning was the Word, *in the beginning was the goodness...all things came into being through that goodness and without that goodness not one thing came into being.*”

In his book *New Harmony*, author Philip Newell says, “there is today a growing awareness of earth’s essential interrelatedness. This new-ancient way of seeing is radically challenging us to see ourselves as connected with everything else that exists....Wellness is found not in isolation, but in relationship....We carry the essence of all things within us. And all things carry the essence of our being within them”.

This coming weekend our congregation will share in the Wacipi (Pow Wow) of our Mendota Mdewakanton Dakota brothers and sisters. As many of you know the Dakota, like many of the world’s Indigenous people, have their own creation story. For the Dakota that creation story is centered around the area where the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers meet, a place they refer to as the Bdote. It is for them their Garden of Eden, a sacred place of birth and a sacred place of much suffering because it is also in this location that relatives were held captive below

Fort Snelling, many dying, in what can only be described as a concentration camp.

One of the great spiritual truths we share with our Dakota brothers and sisters, a truth many of us too often forget is that we are connected to this planet; we are connected to one another. We have been created from goodness, for goodness, through the goodness of God.

When we see burned out landscapes, face injustice, personal loss or hardship, it is understandable that we might begin to feel that is all there is. Today, the invitation we are given is to remember that at the very beginning, in the very essence of existence for our planet, are these words and this promise, “And God saw that it was good.”

Genesis 1:1-25

The Hebrew people who found themselves in Exile in Babylon often wondered if they had been abandoned by God. The story of Genesis is a response to people who feel alienated and separated from life and all that exists.

Liturgist: In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said,

People: ‘Let there be light’; and there was light.

Liturgist: And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. And God said,

People: ‘Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.’

Liturgist: So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day. And God said,

People: ‘Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.’

Liturgist: And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. Then God said,

People: ‘Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.’

Liturgist: And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day. And God said,

People: ‘Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.’

Liturgist: And it was so. God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day. And God said,

People: ‘Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.’

Liturgist: So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying,

People: ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.’

Liturgist: And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day. And God said,

People: ‘Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.’

Liturgist: 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.

People: And God saw that it was good.

Reader: Hear what the Spirit is saying to God’s people.

People: Thanks be to God.

John 1:1-4

Our second lesson reminds us that the goodness and love we encounter in Jesus is the same goodness and love that was at the heart of all creation.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

Reader: Hear what the Spirit is saying to God’s people.

People: Thanks be to God.