

April 30, 2006
Genesis 1:1-2:4; John 1:
First Parish Church
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This Amazing Day

At council meeting the other night, one member in the group, thankfully, stopped us in what we were doing to point out the sunset, which was striking. It was a moment to remind us of the amazing work of creation going on around us all the time.

Once upon a time, humans knew far less about the inner workings of the natural world from a scientific perspective. There were times when people thought the sun revolved around the earth, for instance. They didn't know that if we were doing a 'to scale' model of our relationship to the sun, and this eight-inch ball represented the sun, then the earth would be only the size of this peppercorn.

In one of our EarthCare team meetings, Norman Hamlin, helped us to appreciate this kind of perspective regarding our place in the creation. Norman, if you would come take this peppercorn maybe we can continue this imagining. First of all, Norman reminded us that it is crucial that the earth be tilted on its axis for us to experience the seasons, as we know them. It may be hard to show us that tilt with a peppercorn. Know that it is there. And the earth has to be just the right distance from the sun – not too close and not too far. Norman, will you please walk down the center aisle to show us, at this scale, how far the earth is away from the sun. Should he go back about five pews? Half way back? No, he needs to go all the way down the center aisle to

the doors that come into the sanctuary. (78 feet) Thank you, Norman.

Those who told the creation stories we find in Genesis may not have had this scientific knowledge, but they understood, in ways that we often lose sight of, the amazing intricacies of creation, and how to live and work in sync with its rhythms. Before electric lights, or even gas lights, people noticed each and every day the rising of the sun and the setting of the sun. They knew instinctively and existentially that there was no life without light.

So, in the opening verses of the story of the genesis of creation we hear *and God said, "Let there be light."* The writer of the gospel of John begins his gospel, echoing back to this image, proclaiming that the Word, Jesus, is the *light of all people*.

I love the creation stories in Genesis. I often argue with them, but the more I engage them, the more they fascinate me. In today's story, the rhythmic cadences and the broad sweep of images, encompassing all that is, feed my soul. Yet, we live in a time where we church folk are sometimes hesitant about these stories. I have had numerous youth tell me in recent years that these stories are irrelevant to them because they believe in evolution. So who says the two are mutually exclusive?

Well, some Christians do. Those folk assert that the Bible is a historically and

scientifically accurate accounting of creation. Some of them, therefore, are arguing for Intelligent Design to be taught in schools.

This is not how I understand the Bible. I think the stories of creation are the witness of ancient peoples to their best understandings and insights of both the physical and spiritual realities that they experienced. It is astonishing to me how the progression of creation in Genesis 1 so closely reflects the progression understood in evolutionary science. First there is light, then water, then vegetation, then water creatures, then land creatures, and then humans.

When future scientific inquiry brings new understandings, which of course it will, that will not negate the power of the biblical stories. For at their root, they speak to the mystery of creation, and the need of humans to give thanks to God for life itself. In the face of each amazing new day, these stories proclaim that the Ground of all Being, the Source, the Great Spirit, the Holy was and is the creating and creative force behind and embedded within creation. As Martin Luther said, "God is in, with, and under the whole created world."

Our kindergarten class in church school has made a wonderful bulletin board in Fellowship Hall with images of creation and these words, "The world is a sacred place and a sacred process and we're part of it."

In spite of these affirmations we often find ourselves today living with a tension between science and theology. The seeds of this come from the 18th and 19th century with the rise of Newtonian mechanistic science (the clockwork

universe) and the development of Darwinian evolutionary science. In the face of this developing "scientific" worldview, theologians began to root religious faith more in the intangible human spirit, and to leave the objective world of nature to the scientists. This has been greatly to our detriment, both scientifically and spiritually. It has given us illusions - the illusion that we can know the whole truth through science and, the illusion that the spirit is disengaged from the created order.

Yet, I have heard the opposite from people time and time again. Over the years, I have probably asked hundreds of people, "Where do you sense the presence of God?" Think for a moment "Where do you sense the presence of God?" The most common answer I hear is "in the midst of creation" - by the ocean, in the woods, at camp, hiking, on my back porch.....

I'll never forget the first time, at age thirteen, when I walked into Muir woods just north of San Francisco. It was awesome to see those magnificent redwoods. It was a profoundly spiritual experience.

The tendency in recent centuries to objectify nature as simply a scientific reality has led us down a dangerous path. With this worldview, we have been comfortable exerting "power over" other parts of creation. We have taken the commandment found in today's scripture to "have dominion over" as a license to greedily do what we like for our own personal comfort and aggrandizement.

Is that really what dominion means? When talking with folk on the EarthCare team about this the other day, I

commented that dominion was better understood as stewardship than raw power. Lisa Blake, an intern from the Maine Council of Churches, who has been working with us this year, suggested that the word dominion probably traces back to the same roots as dominus, meaning the Lord, or God. It was an ‘aha’ moment for me. Maybe the way to say it is that to have dominion over means to exert “God-care” over. That changes everything, because “God-care” would mean to make decisions with God’s point of view in mind – with Christ’s point of view in mind - to look at things from God’s perspective with the well being of all creation in mind. It would mean to love creation as God loves creation. Maybe that’s what it means to be in the image of God.

Back in the twelfth century, Hildegard of Bingen wrote, “If we fall in love with creation deeper and deeper we will respond to its endangerment with passion.”

We live in a time of endangerment. We have an increasing awareness of the ways we have already and are presently endangering creation itself. Never in the earth’s five-billion-year history has one species had such an impact on the life of the planet itself.

Have you bought gasoline this week? Think about how far that gas had to be transported just to get to the pump. In other words, how much gas was used to get the gas here? And what is the extraction of that oil, the production of that oil, the politics around that oil, and the use of that oil doing to our life together and to our planet?

The “Good Apple” challenge that the EarthCare team brought to us this morning reminds us that we utilize way more gas each week than just what we put in our cars and in our furnaces. We also use gas to transport food, as well as most products we purchase. I used to think that the most important environmental question I had to confront at the grocery store was whether to use plastic or paper bags. (I try now to remember to bring cloth ones. Sometimes I remember, sometimes I don’t.) However as I become more sensitized to creation spirituality, now I realize another important decision at the grocery store is to pay more attention to where food comes from. I’ve read that the average food travels 1,200 miles to get to our tables. Buying local is good for our economy and good for our environment.

It is easy to be overwhelmed in the face of all the environmental challenges before us. They are serious and they are deeply entrenched in our way of life. But, we are called – called to exert “God-care” in relationship to all creation, including ourselves.

Where to begin? At the beginning as did those who first told the creation story in Genesis and who wrote the gospel of John, and that is to give thanks for this amazing day and this amazing world.

The fourteenth century mystic Meister Eckhart said, “If the only prayer you could say in your whole life is ‘Thank You’ that would suffice.” In a few moments, the choir will share with us a thank you from the poet e.e. cummings, who, with his quirky linguistic style wrote, “i thank you God for most this amazing day.”

