

**"CARING FOR THE CRITTERS"**

**July 8, 2007**

**Genesis 1:1-2:4a**

**(As told by James Weldon Johnson in the poem, "The Creation")**

**Psalm 8**

**The Rev. Ryan Lambert**

As I begin I would like to add another creation story to the mix. Although the author is unknown, it comes from the Philippines.

"Well I'll Be"

In the beginning the Great Spirit created the Universe. Now the universe was dark. So the Great Spirit said, "Let there be light." And behold, light appeared.

Then the Great Spirit said, "Let the heavens be." And behold, the heavens blossomed into galaxies filled with stars, planets, and moons.

The Great Spirit said, "Let the plants be." And behold, the Earth began to green with mosses, ferns, vines, trees, flowers, and grasses.

Then the Great Spirit said, "Let the animals be." And behold, countless creatures emerged to crawl, walk, fly, and swim over the land, sea, and sky.

All creatures needed and helped each other to stay alive. The sun gave its life to the plants; the plants gave their lives to the animals; the animals gave their lives to the worms; the worms gave their lives to the soil; and the soil gave its life to the plants.

The sun's heat formed clouds that watered the rainforest; the forest's canopy caught the lashing rain and dropped it gently into streams and rivers that continually watered the lowlands.

The rivers passed through the mangrove forests bringing water and soil for the trees. The swamp, in turn, purified the muddy rivers for the coastal reefs, which need crystal-clear water to survive.

Soon all creatures on earth began to sing:

"This earth spun of soil and sun,  
Water and air for all to share,  
Lives or dies by the work and play  
Of every creature, every day."

Then Great Spirit danced to the song of her creation. "Well I'll be!" She exclaimed, "This is wonderful."

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Over the years I have read the creation narrative in Genesis many times, but during high school one of

my church school teachers introduced our class to the creation narrative in the book of Genesis in a rather dramatic way. Somewhere in the middle of our (my) less-than-attentive behavior during that class he decided he had had enough. I think it was after we rolled our eyes through the third and fourth days of creation that we were handed copies of James Weldon Johnson's version of the creation narrative, and told to read it aloud a stanza at a time, "with feeling, since we obviously had a bit of energy to contribute." Now my behavior on that morning aside, I actually loved the creation narrative; but when I heard James Weldon Johnson's version those seven days came alive in a new way. I still remember the conversations from that day as we moved back and forth between our bibles and James Weldon Johnson's version. What was left out? What was described in detail? What was a mammy? What happened to the dominion language? What responsibility comes from being made in the image of God? Somehow, out of our disrespectful behavior a new appreciation for the text was coaxed out of us. Instead of our disrespect, we were given a new understanding of God's creative impulse and new questions about own responsibility in God's world.

My own vocabulary of my connection to God's creation was formed on the lakes, rivers, and paths of Eastern Washington and North Idaho. When I think of the wonder of God's creation I think of water lapping the shore of Lake Coeur D' Alene, walking the jagged cliffs along Lake Pend Oreille, or hiking in the hills around Spokane. But there has to be more to our connection to God's creation than our idyllic memories. Here in this place we have blue skies, chirping birds, a little bit of breeze moving through the trees. What more could we want? Take a moment if you will, close your eyes, and listen for a few seconds to the things that might elicit a "That's Good!" from God.

What did you hear? Wasn't it great just to listen for a bit? Perhaps you all have a different experience; but for me, the times are far too few when I actually stop and listen to what is happening around me in God's creation. I find myself noticing God's creation in those moments when I am supposed to: when I have picked up one of the sustainability books from the bookshelf, when I am reading about global warming, when I am frustrated by the level of my own family's power usage. These are times when I tend to stop, listen, and actually notice something of the beauty of God's creation. But most often I go merrily on my way, doing the best I can, but not really making stewardship of all of this-the trees, the grasses, your neighborhood and mine, too-a priority in my daily life. And that, I think, is the issue for most of us: not that we are ignorant about the need for stewardship of God's creation, but rather the fact that we just don't take the time to do what needs to be done.

In a wonderful coincidence, yesterday was a day when some of the world stopped and listened to musicians and activists as they rallied across the globe to commit to put an end to the global climate crisis. Perhaps some of you watched coverage of the concerts last night. I'm a huge fan of many of the acts that played in huge venues across the globe, and I deeply appreciate their passion for the cause; but I also wonder if much will come from those concerts once the buzz has worn off? Perhaps this will be the start of a sustained global effort to seek answers to climate change issues, which is what everyone hopes for.

However, I think it is more important that small groups be the focus of the conversation when we are

talking about how to address issues of ecology, sustainability, and ecological stewardship. Congregations, civic groups, classes, scout troops, and families: these are the locations where I believe there is the most hope of making long term adjustments to how we live our lives in relation to creation. I believe that congregations have a key role to play in this issue. It will take a great deal of concerted effort if we are to make much headway on this issue, and churches have always been a key location for social movements in this country and across the globe. From focus on education to the women's suffrage movement, from fighting slavery to providing much of the leadership for the civil rights movement, from speaking out against war and violence to feeding the hungry: in each of these instances the church has always been at the center of the fight against injustice, and I believe that the way humankind has used and abused God's creation is an injustice must be addressed.

I believe the church has unique standing for addressing this issue because what we are really talking about is living into the responsibilities of our most basic history: the creation story that is written in Genesis. I have always been curious about the 7th Day in the creation narrative when we are told God rests. Often it is noted that when God rests on the 7th day we are to understand the creation of the Sabbath day-a day of rest for all of creation. However, I would like us to think about the 7th day in a different way: as the day when God rests and we, in turn, take up the work. In the Genesis narrative, God rests after creating humankind-the same humans who are to have dominion over all living things; and, for too long, we have misunderstood what this meant. For too long humankind has thought of "dominion over" as an excuse to plunder and steal whatever we want from the Earth. But if we are to think about our unique place in God's created world in a different way, we might become co-creators with God and stewards of creation in a way that invites us not just to take from creation, but to nurture it and care for it as a part of our covenant with the God who created us.

Webster's dictionary defines "dominion" as "absolute ownership" and "complete authority," which, it could be argued, we (humankind) have taken to heart throughout our history. However, I would guess that when God entrusted us with "dominion over" the earth it was thought that we would use the rest of the story as our guide. In Genesis and in the other versions we have heard today, there is nothing haphazard about God's vision for creation. Everything is done with intention and with forethought, as if all the pieces need to fit together just right; and it is that sense of balance that we humans have been missing far too often, and for far too long.

I submit to you that we are perpetually living on the 7th day of creation. God's creative work has been done and continues to be done around us, and from God's creative hand the mantle of responsibility is passed to us as God rests and as God continues to create. Our task is to care for the critters-all of them. The critters of the air, sea, and land-they are our responsibility. We have been given absolute ownership of it all; but I believe that God's assumption is that our stewardship will include the same type of measured and dedicated steps that God took when creating the universe.

This takes planning and thinking, it takes balancing our need for energy with the needs of the salmon population. It takes balancing our desire for green lawns with the needs of God's people downstream. It means balancing our desire for a bigger and more powerful car with the needs of the native peoples and species of Alaska, Kuwait, and the Gulf Coast. It means thinking not just of ourselves and our children,

but also thinking about the generations that will be born 20, 40, and 100 years from now.

I would like to think that many years from now, after even the youngest person here is gone, that this grove would be available for salmon barbeques and worship services, that birds would continue to populate these trees, that new trees will have grown up after some of these have fallen. I would hope that animals will always find tranquility in this place, that the noise of traffic will still be off in the distance, and that families will find places like this to take walks together. The psalmist writes that "humans have been made a little lower than God, and been crowned with glory and honor." God's work is ongoing and never-ending; but so, too, is our work. God's Sabbath is the day of our call. As we exercise our dominion and ownership, let us seek ways to do so such that we honor this planet, its people, all its living things, and all the creative impulses of our God.

I acknowledge that there are no easy answers to the question of how we are to take care of God's creation. No matter what we do we will be using the resources of the planet and there will be difficult choices. In an effort to give all of us some practical ways to continue looking at our own stewardship, in your worship bulletin you will find a list of ways you might adjust your daily living as a way of becoming better stewards of God's creation. Many of you are already doing some or most of them, but hopefully this list is helpful.

May we all take time to enjoy the beauty of God's creation. May we all celebrate that God has given all of this to us, and may we all seek ways to honor God with our stewardship. Thanks be to God. Amen.

<sup>1</sup>According to a note in *Earth and All the Stars*, "this Filipino creation story was identified by Matthew Fox when he was leading a creation spirituality workshop in the Philippines." Copyright information: *Earth and All the Stars: reconnecting with nature through hymns, stories, poems, and prayers from the world's great religions and culture*, Edited by Anne Rowthorn, New World Library, Novato, California, 2000.