

# **“Connected to Creation, Connected to Each Other, Connected to God”**

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

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I have long lamented the typical modern discourse on this passage. Our advancements in science have revealed more than humanity has ever known before about the origins of our world and the universe and in the wake of these exciting and fascinating discoveries this scripture has either been used for purposes for which it was never intended or thrown out completely. As this creation story does not fit the scientific discoveries on our origins, some have clung to it in fear insisting that it is a description of the exact nature of how our world came to be. Others have embraced modern science and thus rejected this scripture and others as no longer relevant for understanding the human experience. Still others have taken a middle route acknowledging that the passage does not follow exactly what we've learned about the origins of the universe, but working to find parallels between this text and what science teaches us. In truth I think that last one just misses the point and eclipses the inherent wisdom of these words. The whole conversation surrounding this passage in modern culture is like an ongoing argument about what a Beethoven symphony does or does not teach us about thermodynamics. Symphonies are not meant to tell us about thermodynamics any more than this ancient writing was intended to explain astrophysics.

But while the cosmology it describes does not reflect what we've learned through scientific study. It is a work of art, it is a work of liturgy, and it is valuable in its own right for its spiritual wisdom and as an invitation for us to explore the relationship of creation to God and consider where human beings fit in the midst of that relationship.

In fact, if you read this passage truly literally, you'll notice that God does not create out of nothing. The primordial waters are already there, and God simply separates the waters to reveal dry land. The work is described more like God is just moving things around, organizing to make something new, creating space for life to emerge. Each day builds upon the last, further creating that space, but each aspect of creation is also pronounced good in and of itself. You have affirmed that throughout worship today with that repeated refrain “And God saw that it was good.”

So, although each day of creation God creates something that is necessary for human and animal life to exist, the light and the darkness, the dome of sky, the waters above and below that dome, the sun and the moon and the stars, the dry land and all the vegetation are good, and valued by God for their own sake, even without human beings to appreciate them, and write poems and songs about them. This tells us that God has a loving, caring relationship with the natural world before humanity ever existed. God invites us into that relationship when human beings are created.

In fact, human value is exalted in this creation story. We are made in the image of God and the text is specific that that image is inclusive. Though the original writers did not have the expansive view of gender and gender

expression that we do now, their intent to show that the image of God is not singular is clear. And so no matter what your gender identity or expression- by virtue of the fact that you are who you are you can be sure that you too are made in the vast and diverse image of God.

As human beings made in the image of God, we bear particular responsibility in our relationship to God's creation. The words used to describe that responsibility have always rubbed me the wrong way. I spent significant time this week researching the Hebrew words behind the words dominion and *subdue* which appear in nearly every English translation of this passage.

To be honest, despite a large amount of reading I do not have clarity about the nuance in those Hebrew words, but I can tell you that there is a multifaceted scholarly discussion and like most Hebrew words there are still questions about the cultural understanding of those words when they were written.

Even in the English there is nuance in our understanding of those words. The reason they have rubbed me the wrong way in the past is because when I think of dominion, I'm reminded of the word dominate. It makes me think of empires, tyrants, and oppression. And when hear subdue, I imagine a powerful ruler using force to put down civil unrest and subdue the population. I am clearly not the only one to understand these words in that way, and I fear that our cultural tendency to think in those terms has horribly distorted our relationship with the natural world and our relationship with God.

But the word, dominion is also related to the word domicile, meaning a home, our dwelling place. And earlier this week I told someone that Teddy had been more subdued that afternoon, meaning he was calm, playing peacefully, a little quiet. And I started to imagine a relationship very different from the image of the powerful ruler using the power of force to keep people in line.

Instead, I had the image of Miss Marianne, a lovely lovely librarian who, until her retirement had led the Born to Read library program at the East Shore Area Library, and possibly at other branches of the Dauphin County Library system. This program engages the very youngest library goers in developing an early love of reading. Now, I have seen many people attempt to wrangle and teach a room full of babies and toddlers, I've even tried to do it myself. Often, it's a bit chaotic to say the least!

But Miss Marianne had an amazing gentle way of engaging these young ones. They sat, or stood and walked around, enraptured and rather than the atmosphere being stressful or confusing, it was calm and there was space for the children to listen, learn, and grow. You probably wouldn't say that Miss. Marianne had dominion over these toddlers, but she was certainly leading them and guiding them. And she certainly kept them subdued. She did this not with force, but by taking many years to gain a deep understanding of these little ones, their needs, and their ways. And I watched her continue that work with each individual child- adapting to the kiddos that were in the room on any given day. In other words, she exercised dominion, by creating a space most conducive for the learning and growth of those kids, and she kept them subdued by seeking to understand and be in relationship with them. And she did this all not for her own sake exclusively, but primarily because she deeply valued these children.

Throughout our Genesis passage God exercises dominion over creation, but God's example is far more like the image of Miss Marianne, than that of the powerful, conquering, emperor-King. God is at work creating space for life to emerge. It is the work of nurturing, tending, and delighting in all that is good in creation. When human beings are made in the image of God, we are made as part of creation, linked to it, connected to it by our very existence. And we are also invited to be co-creators with God, continuing the work of making space for life to thrive and flourish, human life, animal life, plant life, and even forms of life we don't fully understand or can't easily categorize!

For far too long, this passage and especially those words "dominion" and "subdue" have been used to justify human abuse and exploitation of our natural world. It has led to the suffering of the natural world, animals,

and human beings- especially those who lack wealth and power and are least responsible for the damage. We confessed this together this morning. Yet the amazing grace of God means that despite our failings God continues invites us into relationship with God and that means we are still called to participate with God in the work of caring for one another and the natural world. Of course, it is easy to become overwhelmed and despairing when it comes to the task of doing better. I have thought all too often in my life that the little amount I can do could hardly make a difference overall. We are caught up in systems that contribute to the destruction of this beautiful creation, and it is hard enough to make changes to our own lives, let alone to convince others that changes are worth making. And so perhaps we can use Genesis 1 as a model for responding to that call in such times as these. We take it a day at a time, we cultivate relationship and understanding with the natural world and each other. And keep asking the question "How can I start creating space for life to emerge?" Perhaps it means simply consuming less, getting creative to avoid single use plastics, limiting carbon emissions. Perhaps it means creating space for conversation, learning, and challenge for people caught up in systems that are damaging to our world. We will not be perfect at it, but God continually invites us. So today, I challenge each one of you, to prayerfully consider one change you could make or action you could take to care for the earth. Know that whatever you choose to do, even if it is just a small step or a beginning, you do it not alone, but together with God our creator, in whom all things are possible. Would you pray with me?

Loving Creator,

Stir our hearts and open our minds to discern what action we might take in the coming days and weeks to respond to your call to be good stewards of creation. Give us the trust that each action will have ripple effects and with the power of your Holy Spirit will be able to accomplish more than we could ever ask or imagine.

Amen.