

FINDING OUR PLACE IN THE CIRCLE OF LIFE

Genesis 1: 1-13

Why does our scripture reading this morning stop the creation story on the third day? Why stop with the creation of the earth and all that grows on it? Isn't the culmination of the creation story the creation of all creatures and especially us humans on the 6th day just before the creator takes a Sabbath rest on the 7th? Isn't it us humans who are made in God's image? Aren't we humans the crowning jewel of creation, the apple of God's eye, the centre of the universe? Certainly, this is how we western peoples of Europe and North America have read the creation story. We are the centre of the universe. God has designed everything for us. The earth is our playground. The earth and all its creatures are a garden of beautiful delight, rich in resources and produce for our enjoyment and use. Our created purpose as humans, then, is to manage, control, shape, grow, and consume an otherwise compliant natural world in all its ebb and flow...

But this is not how the story would have been read by ancient peoples. Nor is it the way the story would be read by indigenous peoples. How you read this story reflects how you see yourself in relationship to the earth and all its creatures. And in this regard, let me offer up a distinction, a distinction that has to do with science. According to a great Canadian philosopher of the past generation by the name of George Grant, modern science, while bringing us so many wonderful things, has also helped change the way we relate to mother earth. Ancient people believed the purpose of science was to create in us humans a sense of awe, wonder and reverence. The more we came to discover and learn about the workings of nature, the more we would respect and revere nature.

But even more than that. According to this ancient view, the more we learn about nature, the more we learn how to live in partnership with nature. Our purpose as humans in relation to the earth is to better integrate ourselves with nature rather than dominate it. Our purpose as made from the very dust of the ground, as the bible tells us, is to learn from mother nature how to better live as humans who have great power to do harm as much as we have great power to serve nature's greater flourishing.

But with modern science, according to Grant, the purpose has now become to discover and learn about nature in order to manipulate, use, control and change nature. As little gods we have come to believe we can mould the earth like clay and make of it whatever we want to better convenience our desire for pleasure and comfort. But what have we actually done? With our technology we have created real privilege and comfort for some and a hell on earth for others, and we've opened up all kinds of pandora's boxes of trouble we're trying to deal with going forward. More science is needed to deal with all the problems much of our use of science

has created. And the problem, according to Grant and many others, is not science itself. It is the human thinking behind the science. As western people we have become distorted as to our purpose and how such a purpose shapes our relationship to mother earth.

Ok, so what's the alternative? Well, what if we looked to mother nature to teach us how to live and to inspire us in so living? What if the creation story in our bible is very intentional in having us humans created last. What if by coming last our purpose is to learn from the earth and its creatures how to make better choices for ourselves in how we will contribute to earth's flourishing rather than its destruction, thereby, destroying ourselves too? Hmm...

Let me point to two ancient traditions of spirituality that may help redirect us modern day people. First, Grant was a big fan of Plato the philosopher. And even though Plato has often been interpreted as anti-earth, there were spiritualities in the ancient world inspired by Plato focussed on better integrating our human way of life with the earth and with nature's rhythms and flows. One such tradition was called "*Theorgia*". *Theorgia* is best translated as: "divine work" – you know the kind of "work" we attribute to a great artist or musical composer. God the artist has done some wonderful work in creation and our purpose as humans is to learn about it by observing it so we can truly enjoy it, celebrate it, and then pattern our lives according to it.

Theorgists would develop worship rituals according to the seasons of the year and create festivals honouring nature's cycles of death and regeneration, of reciprocity, of giving and receiving, and much more. We learn from nature how to better live as humans with each other and with nature as a whole. Salvation according to Theorgists was a journey toward greater wholeness through deeper integration of human life with the natural world. The more we mould our lives to that of nature the more we humans become whole. It's the total opposite to how we humans relate to the earth today, seeking to mould it into our image, thereby alienating ourselves from nature altogether.

And then there's "Celtic" spirituality which comes out of ancient Scottish and Irish traditions. The Celts believed there were two scriptures God gave us humans. There was the book that is our bible and there is the book of nature. We must learn from both books as humans in order to know God's will. If we pay attention to nature and observe nature not to take from her but to learn how to better live from her, what do we learn?

Well, let me get a little more practical. Let me offer a wonderful illustration from the sacred book of nature expressing to us the sacred work and will of God for us humans. Are we prepared to study nature in order to learn God's will for ourselves?

One of the privileges my family have is a cottage a few hours north of Toronto. While the cottage itself is modest, the land around it is magnificent in so many ways. Adjacent to the

cottage is a small piece of land which is old growth forest, dense with foliage and moss. The treeline is so thick that sunlight barely gets through even on the sunniest of days. One day a few years ago our daughter Naomi discovered a plant that seemed to really stand out in the lush greenery. The plant was a ghostly white. Research on google identified it as a very unique plant. The scientific name for it is: "Monotropa Uniflora," more popularly known as the "Ghost pipe" because of its shape and translucent white colouring. The ghost pipe can be found in a number of shaded areas within forests across North America. OK, so what's so special about this plant?

First of all, the way it grows is fascinating. Rather than sunlight nourishing it, (the scientific word is photosynthesis) it is fed under ground through the nutrients from tree roots. The roots of trees not only feed each other, but feed all kinds of life visible and invisible, and they even create wonderful artistic work like this beautiful white plant.

Second, even as this plant stands on its own, it is a great source of nutrition for various fly species, bees and especially bumble bees. They then take the pollen and disperse it across other plants creating further vegetation.

Third, indigenous people discovered in this plant valuable medicinal properties and developed herbal medicine from it. But medicine for what? When properly prepared this plant is an anxiolytic. Anxiolytics are the basis for all anti-anxiety and anti-depression medication. Also, this plant contains salicylic acid which is the key ingredient in skin care products and exfoliants. Wow! All this from one little plant!

So, what are we being taught here from the book of nature that is God's artistic work in partnership with mother earth? The trees don't only live for themselves. They feed life and create life beyond themselves. This life then feeds other life, and all life is giving and sharing even as it is receiving. A healthy life and a flourishing life is dependent on other life and without relationships of reciprocity in nature there is no future for creation.

OK, so what role do we humans play in this larger ecosystem of which we are a part? Do we also cultivate reciprocal relationships with other life human and non-human? Or have we created a world of greedy take-what-you-can-get-for-yourself-and-your-own-kind and to heck with the rest? How long do you think that can last before it catches up to us? How long will nature put up with our destructive selfishness and alienation for each other and the rest of creation?

God is calling out to us through mother nature: Wake up! It's time to change! It's a number one priority no matter how much it must disrupt the life you have created for yourselves in oblivion of what truly makes life whole. Let's develop our science to serve life, not destroy it. Let's honour God's beautiful work in partnership with mother earth by learning how to better

help it flourish and help ourselves flourish in such partnership too. The book of nature has much to teach us if we open ourselves to learn a better way to live.

What do you think? Amen.