

CREATED IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

Genesis 1: 1-5, 11-12, 20-23, 26-31

This past summer, I had the privilege of attending an online conference. The conference was led by indigenous scholars and western scholars influenced by indigenous perspectives. One of the sessions was on the creation stories of the bible. It was fascinating. For the past 2000 years more or less, we have assumed that authoritative interpretations of the bible could only come from those who studied in Europe or North America. To think that someone with no historic exposure to the bible or to a western university education could read a passage of scripture and discern truth in it totally beyond anything we in the Western world could understand, was unthinkable. It was our role as European and North American educated scholars to teach the rest of the world the higher truths of scripture. We did this through our universities and our missionaries.

But what if the experience of being colonized gives you eyes to see and understand the people who wrote the bible even better because they, too, experienced colonization? The trauma and experience of colonization shaped the biblical story, the God people experienced, and how they saw the world. Even if Western scholars have all the learning of ancient history, ideas and original languages, they lack a core experience they and we can only learn as we listen to colonized voices.

OK, so what truth emerges when we make such an effort to listen and understand? Let me begin with a story one of the indigenous scholars at this conference told. Risaw Walis is a theologian who is currently teaching at the University of Leeds in England. But Walis is also part of an indigenous nation of Taiwan. He told this story which is typical of what has happened many times over as Western nations and corporations move into indigenous lands in search of land to create wealth.

A large company wanted to take over some land to develop. But before they brought all their people in, they asked local indigenous people to help them clear it. But the people said that they had to get permission from the cows that were grazing on the land. Only when the cows moved off the land would they have permission to let the company take over the land. The company developers rolled their eyes, smiled and went away. Well the cows were still there a week later. The company developers were getting restless. Every day the land was not developed it cost their shareholders money. Another week went by and the cows had barely moved. The locals insisted that this was shared land with all creatures. Every living thing, including the land had a soul. All life was equally sacred. Humans could not just impose their will over other life. Relationships of trust and listening had developed over centuries. This could not be jeopardized because we humans wanted to master and control it all.

But of course, such thinking was foreign to western developers. "Just move the cows off the land" they insisted. And eventually, this is exactly what they did. They ignored the local indigenous wishes, they moved the cows off the land so that they no longer had access to their traditional grazing fields. The company was going to mine, farm and dig up the land and create wealth. That's what the land was for,

and the locals were going to help them. They could cooperate and get a little off the top, or they would be pushed off the land and get nothing. Their choice... But what choice was that?

Well, this story was told us as an intro to the whole discussion of this first creation story of the bible – Genesis 1. When I was growing up I was taught the biblical creation story in a very specific way. It was the way it has been taught for almost 2000 years. This story has been used to justify and sanction the colonial enterprise, the domination of the earth and all its creatures, and also the domination and mastery of inferior races. How so? Let's briefly review the traditional interpretation, and then let's explore the alternative, an alternative that may be totally new for you as it has been for me. Even as I've been on this journey of re-reading and rediscovering truth in the scriptures, each time I hear indigenous interpretations, I learn something new.

The traditional understanding of the story is this: God speaks the word, God commands and God creates. The earth is a formless void which means it is nothing. God creates out of nothing and makes it into something. This is traditional Christian doctrine. Day and night, light and darkness, land and water, plants and animals, birds and fish... They all come to be as they're commanded. God commands and creation obeys. God creates as God wills. And God sees everything God creates and it is very good because, of course, God creates it.

But God also decides to create creatures a little more like God, in God's "Image" and "likeness", we're told. That's us humans. But what does image and likeness mean? Well, humans are to "have dominion" over creation and "subdue" it. What can this mean but that like God, humans are to master and shape creation like mini gods. And even though it says that the image of God is "male and female" once you have subduing and domination in the equation, the world is organized around who has the strength, power and force to impose their dominion over others. Dominion becomes domination and subduing becomes controlling. Men over women, gender boxes for everyone, some races over other races some classes over other classes, and the land, oceans and creatures are all to be commanded and used for the flourishing of human civilization.

All humans are equal, yet some are more equal than others as they say... We are created in God's image. If this image is about power and control to enforce our dominance and shape creation to our purposes, then we are most like God when we are strong and powerful masters of creation... God has to be male because males have more power and strength, and God has to be white as some races are created to be superior to others. Dominating and civilizing go together. You're born with privilege and you seize it. You are a creator, ruler, dominator, subduer, controller. That makes you most like God.

Now this may all sound pretty harsh and extreme, but this is more or less the traditional interpretation of this creation story even though many have tried to soften it over the years. But is this what it says? From David Suzuki to others, the biblical creation story has been blamed for how we in the west have created earth-destroying technologies and a relationship with creation that is destructive. And certainly, if this is the only interpretation and the only honest translation of the words, we would be in trouble.

But... there is a whole other way of reading this story...

1) First of all God does not command a passive creation but invites life to come forth... God's creativity is an invitational creativity. God says: "Let". In English translation we may miss the meaning here. "Let" is more of an asking and inviting word than a telling and commanding one. "Let" there be light. "Let" the earth put forth vegetation. "Let" the earth bring forth swarms of living creatures, and "let" birds fly... and the further invitation to the animals as much as the humans is this: "Be fruitful and multiply". This is not the language of command, because in order for creation to flourish, the earth and all its creatures must respond to the invitation. God delights in creation because creation responds by saying "yes" in effect. God's invitation is accepted and God further responds by declaring it is all very good. God is delighted in how creation is coming to be in this wonderful, creative, interactive and reciprocal partnership!

But let me say a little more on this. The word 'good' in the original languages of Hebrew and later Greek means not just 'good' as we understand it in English today. 'Good' is originally more like: beautiful and wonderful. God is taken aback with awe and delight. God imagines what's possible, the creation responds and something totally new and astonishing comes to be. Why would God delight with awe at something created if God has it all worked out in advance? Once other life is invited into the creative process even God can't predict what will come to be. There is freedom in the process once new players in the creative process get involved. And God is delighted with the outcome!

2) OK, but let's go even further with a second point. The indigenous scholar I mentioned: Risaw Walis, also noted that among his people and what he sees here in this passage too, is that naming something also gives it authority. When God names the light 'day' and darkness 'night'... and the earth and water and creatures and humans too... when God so names them, God is giving them agency, freedom and power to interact with God. Giving other life a name acknowledges their personhood, their existence, their creational freedom to be and to respond without interference. Commanding, controlling and dominating someone or something as if they are a thing is stripping them of their personhood. But naming a tree or a cow and acknowledging their right to exist like we humans exist means we can't just do to the cow or tree what we want as if they're just things. We need to interact as persons, with respect. We need permission from them and we need to give thanks. You see the meaning here?

3) But let's go even further with point 3. What if "be fruitful and multiply" is not just about quantity but about diversity? Diversity is good. Forcing others to become like you and stripping them of their diversity is not good. Male and female are not two defined blocks of gender but a range that is part of the diversity as much as the languages, cultures, colours and creatures of all kinds are part of the diversity. That's how this passage is read in a totally different way.

If we're seeking to control a person or situation, we're not respecting their diversity. We want them to become like us and do what they're told. Rather than diversity we privilege hierarchy. Some are born high class and some are born commoners. Some are created to rule and some are created to be ruled. But diversity means there are other ways, other options, and we need to learn how to embrace others in all their difference. That's a whole other way of relating and control has to be thrown out the window.

It's not about cloning some imagined perfection, but anticipating newness and discovery in the diversity.

4) And even as I can go on and on about this creation story, let me add one more insight from a more indigenous reading of it. In our scripture reading as printed in your bulletin I've provided some alternative translation to some key words. What if we replaced 'dominion' with 'responsibility for', and 'subduing' with 'caring for'? How different a meaning this whole story has! If we as humans are created to image God and reflect God's likeness, rather than be masters of the universe and controllers of creation bending life to our purposes, and rather than treating life such as land and water and surplus peoples what we want for our comfort and wealth... Rather than this image and likeness, a different reading would give us a very different God to image and reflect.

According to this alternative understanding of creation, we as humans are living most fully our divine createdness when we seek out other life as partners, creating community together, caring for each other and for the earth and all its creatures. It's about drawing forth life from others by invitation rather than forceful command, by respecting their diversity, learning from it and delighting in it. It's about caring for the earth and being responsible all the life in it.

So then, how can we, you and I, in our own lives, with each of our relationships, with people, with plants and animals, trees and birds, soil and water and air... how can we create respectful relationships, caring relationships, relationships where we take on responsibility for the welfare of other life and not just ourselves and our families?... Our world needs a different narrative for our co-existence as humans with creation. This first creation story of the bible offers us a wonderful vision. Now, perhaps, as we move into a post-colonial era, we may listen to the wisdom and experience of those who have known domination and see the world differently. May they and we together help all of creation move into a different future... There is hope... if we pay attention and listen humbly, learning new ways to love... We are created in God's image and likeness, and that is all about love. Amen.