

TREATING THE EARTH AS A PERSON, Part 1

Genesis 1

One of the greatest philosophers of the ancient world was a man named Plato. And one of the greatest books he ever wrote was called *The Republic*, around 400BC. In the book Plato tells a story, a parable, or another word for a parable – an allegory. It's known as "the allegory of the cave." Plato's theory is that knowledge out of ignorance into truth is a journey. And he describes the journey as one moving out of darkness into light. It's as if we begin the journey living inside a cave. The only light we get is from the sun as it shines through cracks in the cave wall and opening. These small points of light create shadows against the wall of the cave. We look at these shadows and we imagine that what we see is what is real. But all we're really seeing are shadows.

The journey toward genuine truth begins once we are awakened to the fact that there is a whole world outside the cave. And once awakened, we commit to making the journey out of the cave. It is a difficult and fearful climb out. The cave is safe and familiar after all. It's all we've known. We don't know what's out there. But once we make it outside the cave we are exposed to a light that's so bright and dazzling we are overwhelmed. But with exposure over time our eyesight adjusts and we realize that all this time what we supposed was real inside the cave was actually a distortion of reality. The goal of learning according to Plato then, is a journey of emerging ever more committedly into the light of knowledge and truth by exposure to the sunlight, or, as he also calls it: "the Good."

And you know, this is very much my journey of learning reading and rereading the scriptures... I've read and studied over many years - three years of seminary, seven more years for a Ph.D, and a library full of books since then... But in many ways I've been living in a cave, a cave of a western colonial outlook. I can read passages and whole books of scripture over and over again. I can read commentary after commentary from the best biblical scholars. But perspective and context requires the experience and outlook of diverse people and points of view ignored or silenced. And once we open ourselves to that kind of sunlight,

everything looks different. After doing this kind of meticulous study over several decades, sometimes I feel like I'm learning things for the first time like a child... It's breathtakingly wonderful actually. It's exciting and liberating...

So then, today is the first of a two-part sermon which addresses how the bible conceptualizes the natural world. I've always known there are many passages in the bible about the natural world. And the way the natural world is referred to is foreign to what I've known growing up as a European and North American. But listening to and studying the perspective of indigenous peoples from around the world and indigenous scholars who read the bible in particular, there is a whole other world of knowledge and truth opened up akin to being overwhelmed by the sun. I'm slowly adjusting to the light...

Here's another step toward the sunlight of knowledge for me... During my study leave week in October, I read several great books. One of them was entitled: *The Hebrew Bible and Environmental Ethics: Humans, Nonhumans and the Living Landscape* (Mari Joerstad). The book was recommended to me by indigenous writer and activist Patti Krawec. It's one of those significant books that totally changes the way you see the world through the biblical worldview, a worldview I was unable to fully comprehend before reading this and other books too. Like any substantial book, what different people get from it varies according to where they're at. I know my bible and I know most every reference the author is making. What I had never put together is how all these passages of scripture speak to a way of understanding nature and the earth so very different than anything I've known before.

What do I mean? Well, what if we thought of the earth like a person? A person has some freedom, or should have some freedom. A person can act spontaneously, but they also act and react in relationship to what is happening around them. A person also has emotions. They can get upset and cry. They can get mad and act out their anger. They can get sad and despair and over time this can affect their overall health and wellbeing. They can also get happy and excited and act out their excitement in all kinds of creative ways.

Well, imagine if we thought of the natural world as not some ordered machine that breaks down or malfunctions every so often, but as a person with feelings and freedom to make choices? We can try to control persons because they threaten us with their freedom or because we don't have a relationship of trust with them. Or we can try to love them by respecting their freedom even when they behave in ways that challenge us. We can also try to build relationships of trust and care where we both flourish as we draw forth the best from each other. We either grow in relationship or we wither and die isolated and alone. The natural world does its thing. Sometimes it reacts in ways hard to predict and it can be catastrophic. It's a reminder to us that mother earth is her own person. And the better we build a respectful and loving relationship with her, the better we have a chance at flourishing together.

Imagine if we thought of mother earth exactly the same way as we thought of a family member, a neighbour, a friend, or even a cherished pet. Imagine thinking of the tree we pass by every day in our garden or at the park that way, or the soil under our feet as we do a person we value, respect and depend on for our own personal well-being and flourishing. How would that change the way we inhabit our world?

Well, for the remainder of this sermon, I'd like us to reimagine how we may read the opening chapter of the bible that frames in a core way our identity and purpose as human beings in relation to the earth we inhabit. If we are created in God's image as we're told, we have to understand who this God is and how this God works we are called to image, no? What sunlight of knowledge and truth are we being exposed to in this opening chapter of the bible?

First of all, God's pronouns are plural. "Let **us** make..." is used throughout. Who is "us"? Is it the Trinity? We don't know. Scholars can only speculate. There's mystery here. But what is certain is that we and us is relational language. It's not as if God is deciding everything God's self. No. God is somehow also seeking affirmation and support, maybe even inspiration... God is collaborative and God is seeking input. God doesn't want to go it alone as if God knows best. God's best always comes out of relationship, out of a back and forth. Isn't this fascinating?!

Now if this sounds a little too out there for you, let's look at the actual verses of Chapter 1 with fresh eyes, shall we? And in this regard we must note that there are 4 steps God makes on each "day" or stage of creation.

1. First of all, the same God whose pronoun "us" suggests relational collaboration, is the same God who uses the word "let" before the "us." "Let" is invitational language. To let someone do something rather than do it for them is to invite their participation. God is inviting participation from creation. "Let there be light... Let the waters under the sky be gathered together... Let the earth put forth vegetation... Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures... Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind..." This is not the language of command but the language of invitation to participation. God is inviting the forces of nature, the waters and the earth to participate and act...

This also means that unless they act, God's creative activity will be thwarted. You see, God is dependent on creation participating freely and in that creative interaction something beautiful will come to be. This is also why at the end of each stage of creation God is imaged as stepping back and delighting in what's come to be. God does not control and micromanage it all. It is a creative and collaborative process. How good creation is depends on this kind of interaction where we each inspire out of the other incredibly beautiful results. Isn't this fascinating?!

2. Second, it's only after the invitational letting, and the forces of nature, the earth and the waters acting on that invitation, that God then makes something to help it along. God says: "let there be light" and God delights in the light. God is then inspired to separate the light from the darkness and then name the light day and the darkness night. And this two step reciprocal activity goes on throughout the days of creation. First is the invitational letting, then there is nature who chooses to participate, and then God creates. Isn't this interactivity amazing?!

3. Third, this back and forth reciprocity of creative activity between God and creation continues to an additional step when it comes to the earth and the waters. Once they come to be, God does some more Inviting: "Let the earth put

forth vegetation...” and the earth brings forth vegetation of all kinds... “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures...” and swarms of living creatures swim the waters... “Let the earth bring forth living creatures...” and living creatures come forth from the earth... God invites and the earth responds and God is delighted... What if the earth said no? Clearly there is freedom and choice here with the language very deliberately used. God will only delight in the goodness of what comes to be if creation is not just something God does but something that becomes a cooperative, reciprocal project.

4. Finally, God also addresses the animals and creatures of all kinds, inviting them to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.” God is not going to create for them. God is inviting them and empowering them to create new life. God has created them with the capacity to do so and the will and inclination to do so. The creative process is something done together and all parties must choose to participate for the flourishing of the whole. This requires relationship and trust, no? There’s nothing of control, command, domination and subjugation here. Creatures are not robots. They are imaged as choosing to respond to God’s invitation freely. Isn’t this amazing?!

And so, this is why following good post-colonial scholarly advice, I’ve retranslated some key words when it comes to the 6th day of creation. God invites or “lets” the creature called “humankind” come to be with a diversity of gender like all other creatures of the earth. And human kind is also created, we are told, in “the image of God.” So who is this God we humans are supposed to image? The traditional translation has us dominating creation and subduing the earth and all its creatures. Does this make any sense? No. But if we replace “dominion” with “responsibility” and if we replace “subduing” with “caring”, as I have done, we get a very different picture of our purpose as humankind in relationship with the earth and its creatures. We are to treat mother earth as a person, like we should treat all living creatures as persons. And if we do not, we will all suffer and die.

Doesn’t this make so much more sense of our world and our lives? Does it not so much more refreshingly ground our purpose and call as human beings made in God’s image, especially at this 11th hour of our creational destiny on this planet? Unless we relearn that the earth is a person and is, in fact, a mother to us, our

doom as a species is sealed. It's not too late to leave the cave and make our way out into the light... All of this new knowledge may be overwhelmingly bright for a while, but with exposure and adjustment of our lifestyles we will walk a new way and live the truth ancient peoples knew better than us.

Let us pray: Come to us, O God, and take us by the hand as we make our way, step by step, out of the cave of our self-engrossed lives into the sunlight of a fullness of togetherness with all life around us... May we learn how to build relationships of greater trust and care with all persons, human and non-human, and especially now with our mother earth. Amen.