

Season of Creation - Humanity
September 16, 2018
Gen. 1:26-28; Phil. 2:1-8(9-13); Mark 10:35-45

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Humans: Creatures and Servants of Earth

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The hurricane, now a storm of a lesser but yet powerful status, called Florence remains at the top of news reports. And it is much on our minds and in our prayers.

And in such a context, we celebrate Humanity Sunday as a part of this year's Season of Creation. Our humanity and the lives of many humans are being challenged powerfully by this storm, as well as by other significant so-called natural disaster events of late—heavy rains (We got 8 inches here at church last weekend.), wildfires, flooding, persisting heat, and so forth. And these events that plague us are exacerbated by many decades of human activity—chiefly the burning of fossil fuels. We humans are now so powerful that scientists have given the historical epoch in which we now live a new name—the Anthropocene. By our own activity God's good creation, Earth, is being changed dramatically before our eyes and by our own hands. We are no longer in the Holocene—the whole new time covering the last 12,000 years. We now stand at the beginning of the Anthropocene, an epoch defined by the effects of human beings—"Anthropos" is Greek for human being.

The various Sundays in the Season of Creation have titles that highlight a domain of creation. The sequence we have observed over the past three years is:

- First Year (2016) – Ocean Sunday, Fauna Sunday, Storm Sunday, and Cosmos Sunday
- Second Year (2017) – Forest Sunday, Land Sunday, Wilderness Sunday, and River Sunday
- Third Year (2018) – Earth Sunday (last week), Humanity Sunday (today), and upcoming are Sky Sunday and Mountain Sunday.

By including Humanity Sunday, the intention is to emphasize that human beings are part of creation. Earth is not simply a stopping place for human souls en route to heaven. We are not merely "pilgrims on this barren land," as one of our hymns proclaims. Earth is home for humans. And we have not taken adequate care of our home.

As humans, we have also come to realize that we are not separate or disconnected from the various forces of nature. Florence and other disasters make it, one hopes, increasingly difficult to deny our fundamental connectedness. We are totally dependent on the various ecosystems of Earth for survival, ecosystems that have existed for millennia. The movement of oxygen in the atmosphere is necessary for us to breathe. The movement of moisture in the clouds and the seas is essential for us to enjoy a drink. The movement

of worms in the soil is vital for us to receive our daily bread. Humanity is profoundly disrupting these essential movements.

We are children of Earth, made of earth, air, and water. Earth penetrates our being and replaces each cell in our body every seven years. We eat Earth, are made from Earth, and excrete Earth. We are Earth beings. On Humanity Sunday, we celebrate our connection with creation, our dependency on Earth, and our intimate relationship with a Creator who continues to meet us “in, with, and under” this creation. And we lift up that connection as one that requires our best thinking, our most well-considered collective action, and our uncompromised moral and ethical commitments for the sake of Earth care and preservation.

The scriptures before us require careful thought too. They could lead us in helpful directions, or they might be used to offer rationale for continuing abuse of God Creation. Scripture is just that way. It’s a hard book.

Let’s begin at the beginning. Genesis 1:26-28 takes the tack that has held perilous sway over our theological reflections about creation for far too long.

Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’

So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’

Now listen to the alternative that I want to lift up as good and righteous this morning, Genesis 2:15:

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

Gen. 1:26-28 vs. Gen 2:15. rule and subdue vs serve and preserve. Yes, both are here in the opening salvo of prehistorical profundity. But which shall we choose and why?

In the historical process of European colonization, the Gen. 1 text provided the rationale for conquering the wilds, clearing the landscape, and ruling as God’s people. To a large extent, the climate crisis our planet now faces is due to the claim of Western Christians that they had the right to exploit nature.

Genesis 2 tells a different story—and one we must (absolutely and unequivocally, MUST) claim and elucidate and integrate, behold and treasure. Gen. 2:15, properly

translated, calls us to serve and preserve. This is the more powerful, far wiser, and now compelling and necessary biblical view of the human relationship with Creation.

Genesis 2 begins by announcing that the ground was not yet green, because there was no person or power to “serve” or nurture her. The usual translation, to “till,” is odd and uncommon. In any case, this primal absence of a servant for Earth moved God, the gardener, to take some of the soil from the ground and, like a potter, to mold the soil (“adamah” in Hebrew) into a figure called an “adam,” a human being. So in Genesis 2, humans were created from Earth for the purpose of serving Earth. Earth (listen well here), Earth was not created for humans. Humans were created to serve Earth! After all, care for Creation is essential to caring for others.

Oh, that this had been the winning interpretation of those early Christians who shaped conceptions of the human-Creation relationship as designed by God. But, of course, things went the route that permitted people to abuse this holy planet, often principally for the sake of profit and usually without concern for future generations.

By the way, I must pause here to make a point I have made before but that bears repeating often. It occurs to me as I remind you of the adamah-adam connection in Hebrew. From Earth comes the Earth creature. In our tongue, similar connections are easily made. Does anyone know what I’m talking about here? (Speak Up.)

That’s right. Our word for Earth creature is “human” and the cognates of that word are many and instructive. What are they?

Human. Humus. (See, already English does what Hebrew does—a human is a soil creature.) How about “humility.” More on that later. Or “humor.” What would we soil creatures be if we were not possessed, at least somewhat, of the characteristics of humility and humor? These are at the essence of what it means to be human—in my opinion and apparently in the minds of those many generations of human beings who imbedded these related words in the roots of the word for soil. Hmm. That was a bit of a pun, wasn’t it? Roots and soil. Oh, well.

In the end, Philippians resolves the question posed earlier about which take on Genesis is best and why. The ancient hymn about Christ we heard a few moments ago takes a clear and powerful side of the question. This human called Jesus Christ not only divests himself of the royal majesty, power, and rule of God, but in so doing becomes a true human being, a humble servant. And that image of a genuine human being is the radical opposite of the image of Genesis 1—and Psalm 8, by the way. In Christ, the image of humans as royal overlords in creation is countered. Christ is himself the true image of God; as such, he exposes the deficiency of the claim that the image of God involved dominion and rule and royal lordship as an integral part of being human.

Indeed, Christ became a servant or slave. Some disciples may have wanted to hail Jesus as a king, like the Messiah promised of old. Jesus, however, is no typical human king, but a servant like the first human in the garden of Eden. And Paul enjoins his people

to have the same mind as Jesus, the mind of a servant. From the point of view of Earth, this servant mind-set means that humans also ought to serve Earth and not, as Paul says, to focus “on your own interests.”

The full implications of the incarnation celebrated in this hymn may only be appreciated when we recognize what we have already noted about the nature of human beings as Earth beings. A human being is made of Earth—soil, atmosphere, water, and more. By becoming flesh, as John reminds us in the reading from last Sunday, the Word “becomes” an integral part of Earth. Jesus Christ too is a child of Earth, an Earth being. As such, Christ is also a servant of Earth.

Christ says as much. He came “not to be served but to serve.” He came not as one who rules (Genesis 1) but as one who serves (Genesis 2). So Christ himself resolves any dispute about which version of how humans were created by God to relate to Creation is the good and right and true and healthy one. Those who reflect the way of Christ as the full revelation of the image of God will not rule creatures and subdue creation. Instead they will serve and preserve the planet. (adapted from Norman Habel, “Season of Creation”)

Oh, that it might be so!

Here is the most basic answer to the age-old questions about why we are here. Who are we? What are we here for? What is my purpose?

The answer is that we are Earth creatures created to serve the Earth. Indeed, this is both our calling and our joy. We are most fully human when we care for creation in humility, when we serve Creation and seek to preserve the diversity and beauty of all that God has made.

Yes, I know that not everyone enjoys gardening. But I’ll bet that everyone enjoys an activity that expresses their creativity. This is where we gain access and experience inklings of the image of God in us, the image of God being revealed in Christ-like humility as we give shape to creation in our caring use of what God has given for the sake of goodness, truth, beauty, and unity.

I’ll also bet that most of us like to get our hands dirty in some creative pursuit. God is calling us to get our hands dirty, to look for ways that we might add something that serves and preserves and celebrates the holiness and the glorious beauty of Earth.

Just in case you need more evidence of our being made to serve Earth, hear again the words of our Lord from today’s gospel: “You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them...But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve...” Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord unto abundant and eternal life. Amen.