

Created

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Genesis 1:1-2:4a

2 Corinthians 13:11-13

The first chapter of Genesis is not the Bible's only account of Creation. There's another one in Proverbs 8, in which the figure of Wisdom works alongside God in the building of the world. Probably the most famous additional text is the first chapter of John's Gospel, which echoes both Genesis 1 and Proverbs 8. You'll likely recall as well the second chapter of Genesis, which looks very much like another account of creation.

When I think about different ideas about Creation, I'm thinking theologically, not scientifically – Genesis was not written as a book to explain how the world works, it was written as a book to explain God's interactions with the world. That's one of the reasons Genesis' editors, and those who assembled the collection of Bible books later, felt perfectly fine about including more than one account of Creation. It doesn't worry me that Genesis doesn't match the geological record, or that cosmological theories don't line up precisely with the first chapter of John. I also don't get excited that evolutionary theory sort of follows the order of sea life, plants, and then land animals in Genesis.

To me, it's the theology that matters. As Cheryl Lindsay writes at UCC.org, "The contrast with other creation accounts of the ancient world is significant and begins the biblical corpus. The Holy One creates not out of pettiness, spite, avarice, or violence. Creation brings order, diversity, and relationship. It flows out of the identity of the Creator. It is progressive from the beginning, and the stage of rest is yet another progressive step. Creation continues. Rest, by nature, is a pause from activity. Because the Holy One is Creator, creation never stops, it rests."

What matters to me is that all of the Bible's Creation accounts emphasize both God's deliberate choice to make a world of living things, and God's love for that created world. What's the refrain of this first chapter of Genesis? "And God saw that it was good," finally stated as "very good."

You don't have to believe in God's creative action to believe that the universe has value. Some atheists do. Some believers in religions that don't believe in a divine creation do. Christianity itself begins with the assertion that the world is good, that substance is good, that existence is good. The poet and hymn lyricist Brian Wren writes,

Good is the flesh that the Word has become.
Good is the body for knowing the world,
sensing the sunlight, the tug of the ground,

feeling, perceiving, within and around,
good is the body, from cradle to grave...

There are human belief systems that simply don't accept this. A number of ancient religions did not value the world because they believed it was a divine accident, a by-product of conflict between gods. Some strands of Christianity, I'm sorry to say, have overemphasized soul over body, and as a result have permitted abuses of human bodies and cultures as well as permitting destruction of natural resources and beauty. Some contemporary philosophies, both Christian and non-Christian, stress the primacy of human beings in the universe, and not only tolerate but encourage deforestation, mountaintop removal, and habitat elimination. Just last month an Environmental Protection Agency committee ended review of gas and oil drilling for impact on endangered species in the Gulf of Mexico. Have we already forgotten the Deepwater Horizon accident sixteen years ago? A deepwater well blowout spewed oil for four months.

I don't think we've forgotten. I think there's a different belief system at work, that says that if certain people benefit, other life on the planet can be disregarded and, if necessary, destroyed.

Whatever some people may think, that view simply isn't consistent with Scriptural thinking and assertions. Many have stressed that people, in verse 28, receive dominion. OK. Does that imply that human beings can do anything they want? Are human beings who have dominion over other human beings allowed to do anything they want? Is that true of parents? Of community leaders? Of national leaders?

Is it true of pastors? Do you really want me to have unquestioned authority to do anything I want?

If you weren't sure about that, I'll help: the answer is no, you don't. There are provisions in our church bylaws that set limits on the things I can do. There are provisions in the United Church of Christ that set limits on the things I can do.

When we look at dominion in Genesis, the one who exerts power over things is God, and what does God do with that power? God brings order to chaos. God brings light and shape and form. God brings life, and not just life: God brings a system in which life can sustain itself, and other forms of life.

If we assert that we have an unquestioned, unlimited dominion, then exert it in ways that destroy the living systems of God, we are not living out a divine commission. We are tearing at the environment that sustains our lives as well as those of other living things.

God values this world. If we follow God's ways, we value this world. As much as the honu in the sea or the 'io in the air, as much as the ohia on the mountainside or the paho'eho'e as it flows, we are God's Creation, a manifestation of holy will and love. We are created.

As the twelfth century theologian Hildegard of Bingen wrote, “God says, ‘I, the fiery life of divine essence, am aflame beyond the beauty of the meadows. I gleam in the waters. I burn in the sun, moon, and stars. With every breeze, as with invisible life that contains everything, I awaken everything to life.’”

It’s the sixth day in which God declares all that has been made “very good,” and that is the day of the creation of the animal life of Earth, ranging from the creeping things – I think that’s probably the insects that we don’t like very much – to humanity itself, made in the image of God, “Male and female he created them.”

Male and female are... very good.

There are, again, different ideas floating around as to the relative value of male and female. History is dominated by the idea that men are worth more, that they are more reliable, that they are better trusted with power than women. It’s a curious idea. According to the FBI, people arrested for violent crimes in 2019 were 72.5% men and 27.5% women. Men in government have started nearly every war ever fought on this planet. Would women do better? I don’t know. I do think we’ve run the experiment long enough to say that it’s time to try something else to see how that works.

More to the point, this basic assertion demands that we accord full value and respect for the dignity of women. The claims of “complementarianism,” the idea that women are of equal value to men but that the two sexes are designed for different kinds of social roles, is simply sexism with a slightly softer texture. “Women, you have equal value to myself” is a meaningless expression when it’s followed by, “and because I’m a man, I’m in charge.”

The image of God does not depend on gender. It just doesn’t.

Humanity in God’s image also means that all people have value. Period. End of sentence. Someone of another religion has the same value as you or me. Someone of another nation has the same value as you or me. Someone of a different political party has the same value as you or me. Someone with power has the same value as you or me. Someone without power has the same value as you or me.

That means we can’t use distinctions within humanity to discount, devalue, or disenfranchise other human beings. Legal immigrants? Full value. Illegal immigrants? Full value. Dark skinned people? Full value. Light skinned people? Full value. Gay people? Full value. Straight people? Full value. Republicans? Full value. Democrats? Full value. Politicians? Full value. Teachers? Full value. Road repair workers? Full value. Incarcerated prisoners? Full value.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians, “There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” I’d argue that he was right, but the basis is not just in the action of Christ, but in the creative work of God.

Amy Frykolm writes at JourneyWithJesus.net, “We are all, Hildegard teaches, carriers of the divine light. We have interior gardens in which we cultivate these qualities of love, wisdom, and greening inside ourselves. And as love and wisdom flow through us, we participate in the greening of the world. We are, she writes, ‘so entangled with the strengths of the rest of creation that we can never be separated from them.’”

We come into Creation because of the love and grace of God. We come into a Creation already loved and graced by God. We come into a Creation in which we participate in the greening of the world. We come into Creation to celebrate, enjoy, and nurture other people, other creatures, the trees and shrubs, the very flowing fiery rock itself, because all of it, including ourselves, is very good.

Amen.

by Eric Anderson