

Text: Genesis 1:1 – 2:3
Title: Digging the Basement
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Roger Allen Nelson

Sixteen years ago, while speaking at camp for kids in the Adirondacks, my son and I slipped out to a little mountain town theater to see *The Fast and Furious*. (Who knew we were watching the opening installment of an eight-movie-juggernaut?) And, by theater I mean a room with wood floors, folding metal chairs, and free popcorn. When we got back to camp we walked to the shores of Sacandaga Lake and looked up. The sky was spangled with more stars than we could ever count or imagine. We could see the clouds of distant galaxies, the movement of satellites, the occasional shooting star....

It felt like we could see nebula, planets, constellations, and quasars.

It felt like we were watching the cosmos continue to expand outward.

It felt like we were looking up into the face of God.

In awe-soaked-silence we just stood there and looked up. I was afraid to say anything and risk soiling the moment. *The Fast and Furious* couldn't have been more of a tawdry trinket.

Maybe you've had a similar moment where you were overwhelmed by the beauty, complexity, and inscrutable scope of creation....

I have that with this text.

It's overwhelming.

I'm afraid to say anything and risk soiling the moment.

I'm with Martin Luther who wrote,

...interpreters have confused and entangled everything with such a variety, diversity and infinity of questions that it is very clear that God reserved for himself the majesty of this wisdom and the correct understanding of this chapter, leaving to us only the general idea that the world had a beginning and (that it) was created by God out of nothing.

So, rather than shoot for the stars, rather than try to squeeze the majesty of this chapter into a tawdry trinket, I want to point to something that tickled my imagination this week.

Let's come at it this way.

Here's a little preaching trick: Look for the activity of God in the text. Seems simple enough, but a lot of sermons go sideways with moralisms based on the behavior of Jacob or David or Mary Magdalene. A simple trick for a better sermon is to focus on what God does. What are the verbs attached to God? And, in this text, that would be easy enough. In our translation, the first three words set the stage. "In the beginning, God...." And then out rolls this beautifully structured poem of activity.

God creates.

God speaks.

God makes.

God sees.
God blesses.
God rests.

Good enough. The activity of God. But....

But, this morning I want to draw our attention to those places where God hands over activity, or shares creating power. I want to draw our attention to those things that God doesn't do. I want to draw our attention to the other verbs.

On the third day God announces that the land is to "produce vegetation." Some translations have it as "bring forth." The same happens on the fifth day: the water and sky are to "teem with living creatures." The word here has the same sense as "produce" or "bring forth." On the sixth day, again the same thing, "Let the land produce." And....

And, on the fourth day God sets the sun and the moon in the heavens to "govern," or "rule." This is the same word used in the instructions for how humanity is to tend after fish, fowl, and furry things.

On the surface, all of that may not seem like such a big deal, but it suggests that from the very beginning creation isn't simply passive and static before God. God creates and invites a dynamic relationship. God's means of creating involves sharing power. God gives to creation the agency to produce, to change, to adapt, to grow, to evolve, to respond...

As Steven Bouma-Prediger puts it:

Both human and nonhuman creatures are called to participate in the creative activity initiated by God. Like a risking parent, God lovingly empowers his creation for its own benefit.

I like that. There is a delicate dance between God and creation. There is a wonderful interplay. God creates, loves, and binds himself to creation ~ even to creation's freedom.

And, therefore, it makes perfect sense that the first commandment God gives to humanity calls forth our participation as God's vice-regent in creation.

Be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.

Again, that suggests an interplay between humanity, creation, and God. In the words of Neil Plantinga:

...a human steward of God's good creation will never exploit or pillage; instead she will give creation room to be itself. She will respect it, care for it, empower it. Her goal is to live in healthy interdependence with it.

Dear friends, we've been given the mandate to extend the creative act of God. We are called to unfold, discover, enjoy, celebrate, care for, protect, extend, and create within creation....

Last year, as we started a preaching journey from Genesis through the Gospels, to the story of the early church, I suggested that one way to read scripture was as a struggle between chaos and *shalom*. And then, again and again, from September through May, we saw God long for, command, point toward, break in, and finally embody his will for *shalom*. The story ends in creation restored to God's *shalom*. Thanks be to God.

But, this year I want to offer a different reading. I want to start in the basement. I want to dig down to the footing upon which everything else is built. Let this commandment be the basement.

*You are my stewards ~ my representatives.
You are the embodiment of my reign on earth.*

And then, every other instruction is an extension of this fundamental calling. Every other commandment from prophet, priest, and king, from savior, disciple, and apostle, fills in and fills out the implications of that first commandment. The rest of scripture is built on this basement.

I like that way of thinking about it because it links care of the earth with care for others. It suggests that how we steward the earth is an expression of how we love our neighbor. To conserve and preserve the diversity, beauty, and richness of creation is at the core of how we live out the great commandment to love God and neighbor ~ the commandment upon which hangs all the law and the prophets.

And therefore,

even if you think that someday this world is going to be tossed in the trash,
even if you think the end is coming soon,
even if you think this world is not our home,
even if you think the resources of this world are expendable and exploitable,
even if you think climate change is a hoax perpetrated by a conspiracy of greedy liberals
it still behooves us to care for this earth as an expression of loving our neighbor.

At the very least, insuring that others have clean air, clean water, and equitable access to food and energy, seems to be a minimal expectation for how we would love our neighbor ~ let alone be faithful to the commandment to love our enemy.

Richard Millhouse Nixon said in his 1970 State of the Union speech that the environmental cause was as "fundamental as life itself." But, it is also fundamental to scripture. If we are digging a basement it starts here. For without flinching, backing down, or waffling, we would proclaim:

The earth is the Lord's and everything in it.
Creation is good.
The movement of God throughout history is toward creation's *shalom*.
And we are covenant partners with God in that conspiracy of reclamation.

So, dear friends, on a morning when hurricanes are lined up in the Atlantic, forest fires rage in the west, millions in India, Nepal, and Bangladesh are dealing with flooding, and Mexico is shaken by an earthquake... On a morning when creation is simultaneously beautiful and broken, fragile and resilient, traumatized and breathtaking we are called to nothing less than a foundational commitment to:

- conserving resources,
- preserving land,
- cleaning up the spoil of sludge and toxic waste,
- investing in renewable energy,
- developing technologies that don't pollute,
- taking our children into nature,
- treading lightly,
- and keeping covenant with Creator and creation
 - for the sake of others,
 - for the sake of all the babies being born and baptized around here,
 - for the sake of the earth.

And all of that is built upon the basement of God's first commandment to us. In the words of Wendell Berry:

The care of the Earth is our most ancient and most worthy, and after all our most pleasing responsibility. To cherish what remains of it and to foster its renewal is our only hope.

Amen.