Creator Creates Creation

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

Genesis 1:1-2:4 ~ September 11, 2022

Creator God, still our minds and awaken our souls that we may receive anew the truth of your love. Amen.

We have one story today. This one story is enough. More, it is lavish abundance. In the beginning, when the earth was welter and waste, God said, “let there be…” And it was so. And God saw that it was good. There was evening and there was morning on that day.

The cadence alone beckons: breathe, be still, listen. As Moses before the burning bush, take off your shoes. For the ground on which you stand is holy ground. When I was a child, my parents read this story from a book with bright watercolor illustrations. My little sister called it the, “it was good” story. “Read us the it was good story, Daddy!” And we’d all snuggle and squirm on the couch together to listen.

Biblical scholars would affirm that Becky’s title was spot on. Walter Brueggemann says the text is likely dated to the sixth century BCE (Before the Christian Era) and addressed to the Hebrew people who at that time were held as exiles in Babylon. Thus, it served as a refutation of Babylonian theological claims; it is promise amid loss. This is no abstract statement about the universe, “it is a theological and pastoral statement addressed to a real historical problem. Its affirmation is: ‘this God can be trusted, even against contemporary data.’ I need not rehearse the week’s headlines to awaken our souls’ deep thirst for a reassuring word that the powers of Babylon – organized for profit, wealth, control and dominion; born of pride, greed, and the rest – they will not, in the end, hold sway.

God saw that it was good. Hearing it today, we feel the continuing power of this story to orient, locate, center us anew in the midst of chaos. Remember, in the beginning, God. Breathe that in. Brueggemann again: “All other philosophical and political questions… of meaning and power are subordinated to this fundamental issue of the relation of the creator and creation. Upon this, everything else hinges….” Let’s open ourselves to this truth.

I am increasingly drawn toward a Celtic understanding and practice of Christianity, an ancient path with roots in earliest civilization in the British Isles. Writes John Philip Newell, a leading voice in Celtic Christianity today, the Celtic tradition, “cannot be reduced to a set of doctrines or beliefs; instead, at its core is the conviction that we… need to keep listening to what our soul already knows….” We need to keep “listening for the heartbeat of God” in the world about us. Let me name a few of the essential lenses or emphases.

The goodness of creation is at the heart. God is found in and revealed through all of creation and in all creatures.

Flowing from this affirmation of the goodness of creation, emphasis is directed not toward the problem of our original sin, but toward the gift of our original blessing. In the depths of our being, before humankind is fallen, before we are in sin, there is God, there is creation, God’s creation is good; we are a blessing. We are made in the image of God, male and female God made us in God’s own image. To look into the face of a newborn child is to look at the very image of God.

Further, God is not seen only in the face of humankind; all of creation shows forth the glory of God. The stars above, the deep roiling sea, mountains and plains, ostriches and tree frogs, algae and lilies alike. This is an affirmation of panentheism, of God within all things. Everywhere, wrote Pelagius in the 4th century, “narrow shafts of divine light pierce the veil that separates heaven from earth.”

In practice, this leads to deep reverence and care for creation. The whole earth cries glory. You may have experienced what the Celts call “thin places” – where the light and immanence of God shines through.

In practice, this way of seeing leads to seeking – and expecting to find – the presence of God, the Christ, in all persons and beings, and thus be committed to creating a just society. And, from earliest days, the Celts affirmed the divine feminine as women and men lived together in monastic communities.

At a time when the institutional church is trying to find new ways to proclaim the Good News, and a time when, as bell hooks would say, the capitalist white supremacist heteropatriarchy is found wanting, these ancient Celts seemed to have been on to something.

Finally, this is offered not as a teaching we need to master or attain. Rather, it is offered simply as true; deep within we already know it. Writes Newell, “We know things in the core of our being that we have not necessarily been taught, and some of this deep knowing may actually be at odds with what our society or religion has tried to teach us. This [practice] is about reawakening to what we know in the depths of our being, that the earth is sacred and that this sacredness is at the heart of every human being and life form.” There are many ways we can pay attention during the course of our days, but at its essence, says Newell, we are listening for the heartbeat of God.

One highlight of my recent sabbatical was the six days Sarah and I spent on the Island of Iona: a tiny island in the Atlantic Ocean off the south west coast of Scotland. On Iona the weather is inescapable, omnipresent, alive. Ocean winds bring rain, clouds, sun in rapid succession; changing tides with the rising moon; chilly in early May; sea birds, sheep, fish; spectacular green moors and white sand beaches on ancient rock veined with earth’s deep core of red, green and blue. Something wild, something beautiful and holy there is about Iona. A thin place, indeed, that awakens the soul to “the transparence of God in the universe.” (Teillard de Chardin)

Drawn by its allure after sailing from Ireland, St. Columba and his monks – yes, our St. Columba; this St. Columba – settled on Iona in the year 563 and by word and deed began the spread of Christ’s Good News among the Celts of Scotland. The burial place of twenty-six kings including Macbeth, pilgrims have sought Iona’s healing powers for fourteen centuries. We joined their eternal throng, bundled up, walked o’er rocky hills, through wet bogs, stood in icy surf, and sang our prayers in the Abbey each morning and each night. On Iona, God’s holy creation sings a new and ancient song.

That’s well and good, but we’re not on Iona and may never get there; we’re here in DC. That’s okay; its good; we’re never apart from earth, sky, and weather. Iona was a portal. Can you picture now in your mind’s eye some place where you have been, far away or close to home, where the beauty or power of creation flooded your senses, filled your breast, quickened your pace, or stopped you in your tracks to whisper, or sing, how awesome is this place! Take a moment, picture it now.

I invite you, for today and in this coming week, to be intentional about paying attention: to the world, the creation around us, the truth you already know. To arouse and nourish a deeper sense of awe. Find a few minutes each day to watch a bird eating at the feeder, to listen to the leaves of the trees rustling in the wind, a stream or river on its course. Notice, be still, breathe, say, “thank you, God; thank you.”

Naturalist John Muir wrote, “In God’s wildness lies the hope of the world.” From which, Newell affirms, “our source of hope [for today] is already present deep within the wildness of the natural world.” There is much to be done, it is true; even much to be done to undo the harm we have done, I know. But *doing* is not always the best response. “We are not called to be masters of the earth; [we are called to be] lovers of the earth.” Let us begin with awe, to allow ourselves to be re-oriented, recentered in the story of our creator God who said, “let there be…light, and darkness; night and day; let the earth put forth vegetation; let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures; let birds fly across the dome of the sky; let there be humankind in our image.” And it was so. And God saw that it was good. So God hallowed the sabbath day of peace. There was evening and there was morning on that day.

As all the earth cries glory, so God’s children say, Amen!