

Steward's Song

Genesis 1:24-2:3; Genesis 2:4b-9, 15-24

The opening chapters of Genesis have no intention of being a how-to book for creation, not a blow-by-blow account of what took place at the earth's inception, not a scientific, geological record. Nor were they penned with a historian's eyewitness observations (no human witnesses were present). Rather, they are a pre-history, a work far more concerned with THEOLOGY than with GEOLOGY. They constitute a creation myth, or more accurately, two distinct creation myths.

Now I want to take a moment to speak about the importance of myths, because many people have bought into a narrow view of the word "myth" that means "untruth," like a fantasy, or a fabrication, or an "old wives' tale." So, some scientists will look at the first chapters of Genesis, for example, and scoff that they are not factual or provable, they're "just a myth," while Biblical literalists will do back handsprings to explain how the creation story in Genesis 1 and the creation story in Genesis 2 are somehow the same, unified factual, historical account. Spoiler alert: they aren't and they can't be. Genesis chapter one speaks of six days of creation, with a logical, sequential progression from light to land to heaven and earth, to birds and animals, to creation's crown, humanity, male and female, created on the sixth day. And on the seventh day, God rested.

Genesis two, by contrast, does not speak of seven days of creation but of one: "In the day that the Lord God made the earth and heavens," the second myth begins; and God's very **first** creation in this version is man, then a garden of plants and trees, which the man is to keep and to tend, then animals and birds which the man calls by name, and then finally (and presumably as creation's crown) a full and equal partner, woman.

These creation stories are not interested in facts—but in truths: they do not traffic in teachings about biology or geology or zoology or herbology but deep understandings or underlying assumptions about God, who created all things, about humankind and our place in God's creation.

Now the fact that something is a myth does not make it trivial, or unimportant. Mythologies create entire sets of assumptions of how the world works or how it should.

There is a cultural mythology or an underlying assumption in our country, for example, of universal equality. Everyone has an equal place at the table in the United States of America, hard work will inevitably allow you to rise, so this understanding goes. It is a mythology of a melting pot and of a welcome table—give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, longing to be free. Let them thrive and let them rise. Ours is a land of unlimited opportunity, for everyone. That myth, that description, gives us one set of assumptions about how America works.

Meanwhile, there is also a simultaneous competing mythology in this country of the supremacy of our Northern European Christian settlers. This mythology has enabled us, in our history, to take the lands of the Native Americans (manifest destiny), to enslave Africans, to build our railroad systems on the backs of Chinese Immigrant labor, to inter US citizens of Japanese descent, and to treat refugees with unwelcome. It has led our country to view with suspicion, at various times in our history, Catholics, or Jews, or Muslims, or in a general sense, non-Europeans and non-Christians. This is more of an Animal Farm mythology: all people are equal but some are more equal than others. We speak of the first mythology openly—but the second has often guided our actions.

So, what are we? A melting pot and a land of opportunity? Or a land of exceptionalism and individualism?

It matters which mythology you choose, you see. If all are equal, we live with one set of assumptions; they will impact our attitudes, our actions, our culture; if Christians of European descent are seen as superior to or more entitled than African Muslims or Hispanic Catholics, or indigenous peoples, that will result in an entirely different conception of society.

If you want to know what myth we primarily buy into, you can look to our laws, our culture, our actions. And frankly, both myths are in our country's DNA—if we are honest, both are operative. Look for the signs of both as you go through the next week. But all of that is only by way of example—maybe a topic for an evening discussion at pub theology.

The point is that our myths, or our FOUNDATIONAL stories of how the world works are not unimportant or trivial, they matter deeply: Myths shape our worldviews and our worldviews shape the world.

Well, all of that brings me back to our creation stories from Genesis, and how they may unconsciously invite us to treat God's creation. The most well-known of the creation myths, perhaps because it comes first, is the beautiful and repetitive creation story from Genesis 1: On the first day, God created, and it was good; on the second day, God created, and it was good—all the way up to the sixth day: humankind is created in the likeness of God, given dominion, or rule, over all living things, and given the command: be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it.

There are several aspects of this myth that are like the "all animals are equal but some are more equal than others" approach. Humanity is created last—as though God saves the best for last; humans are said to be created in God's image, placing humans in relation to God differently than anything else in God's creation (call it human exceptionalism); and then there's that divine command—be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, subdue it (manifest destiny, perhaps?). That one word—subdue...that is a world-making word.

The Hebrew word, *kabash*, translates as "to bring into bondage, to conquer, to dominate." It is an urging to humanity to rule an unruly world, to continue to impart order upon chaos, just as God did in the beginning. All of creation is placed in service or subservience to humanity. It is there for the convenience of humanity, if you will.

Now contrast that mythology with the Genesis two creation myth: here God creates man first, then God creates a garden and places the man in it to till it and to tend it, to nurture and to care for it, to see to its growth and its fruitfulness. God creates woman as a helpmate, a pastoral partnership—and God forms the rest of creation and brings each new creation to man to see what man will name it. Do you know what happens when you name something? You cherish it differently... it becomes not just a thing. You care for it. Ask any parent whose child has named a stray animal! You just became its caretaker!

So, two myths—one we subdue creation, and one we tend it. One we own it or rule it, one we live in its garden. And the myth we see as primary, as descriptive of our relation to creation...it makes all the difference. It is the difference between the world's resources being ours to extract, to consume, to claim, to rule over...like a king or an emperor ruling over a territory, subduing its population, extracting revenues; and the world's

resources being ours to conserve, to preserve, to tend, to nurture, to care for, like a gardener tilling and fertilizing the soil.

Now as with our American cultural myths—if you want to know which one we ACTUALLY VALUE, or BUY INTO, or hold primary: you can look to our actions, our decisions, our choices. We talk a good Genesis 2 green game—we speak of valuing conservation, and recycling, and nurture, and nature. But are we more about ecology? Or economy? Conservation? Or convenience?

I can look at my own actions and choices every day, often in a single trip to the grocery store. My grocery store sells ears of corn, for example, but it sells them in two ways. One is just this unruly pile of loose ears of corn. The other is the same corn—but partially husked, placed in a Styrofoam tray, shrink wrapped in plastic (for “freshness”) and pleasingly displayed for my inspection and purchase. Which do I choose? Do I pick up four loose ears of corn and place them in the reusable shopping bag that I brought from home? Or do I pick up the Styrofoam tray, go to the checkout, and have them put it in a convenient plastic bag? Spoiler—I’m no saint—I’ve done both. It takes me roughly the same time to prepare the corn either way. But that Styrofoam tray, that shrink wrap, that plastic bag—what happens to them?

Well, the Styrofoam tray, the one that lasted the five-minute trip from the grocery store to my house and then went into the garbage as I cooked supper? It will outlive my as-yet-unborn grandchildren in some landfill. And the plastic bag? Well, Ideally, it gets recycled. But somehow, so many of them escape and end up, like the old Bob Dylan song, “Blowin’ in the Wind.” And from there, they end up in the highways, by-ways, and waterways of the world—and eventually...well, this photo from the University of Bergen shows thirty plastic bags removed from the digestive tract of a malnourished whale. All in the name of convenience. If we ponder the impact of plastic—wonderful, convenient, inexpensive, omnipresent plastic, which is really a post-World War II phenomenon...well, it is certainly here to stay, forever and ever. The future, to quote the movie *the Graduate*, is in plastics.

Now the point here is not to get preachy...but it is simply to press upon our sensibilities and to ask—do we operate out of a foundational creation mythology of subjugation and extraction, of convenience and consumption,

or do we examine the impacts of our actions—and possibly change our actions—as nurturers of creation?

Our choices literally make all the difference—they impact our environment, our climate, our future, and God’s world. So, what can we do? Well we can learn more—read articles, study alternatives...just this week at Grace, we will welcome to our AWG Spring Luncheon Fred Stoss, a climate messenger who will share his learnings on Climate Change.

We can also make choices, large and small in hopes that our choices make an impact. Does my purchase of one Styrofoam tray of corn make much difference one way or another? Probably not. But if I refused—and you refused—and our neighbors refused—if enough of us refused--to buy corn in Styrofoam trays.... if the grocery stores noticed that the corn in the bins was selling out, and the corn in the Styrofoam stayed on the shelf...how do you think they would begin to sell their corn?

If people bought only reusable K-cups and not the single serving disposable ones—how do you think coffee would be packaged? If we all preferentially bought products from recycled plastic—the market would encourage more plastic recycling. Conversely, if we don’t? The market won’t.

But in the end, I don’t think that policies, or practicalities will save us from ourselves. I came across a quote this week by environmental lawyer Gus Speth— “I used to think the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate change. I thought that with 30 years of good science, we could address those problems. But I was wrong...the top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy...and to deal with those, we need a spiritual and cultural transformation. And we scientists don’t know how to do that.

Sounds like what we need—is a whole different underlying understanding—a whole new mythology, a renewed sense of creation theology.

I’ll close with my favorite creation myth or creation story—it isn’t found in Genesis. It’s actually found in the Chronicles of Narnia, in the book The Magician’s Nephew, which is the first book, chronologically. The story talks of the creation of Narnia, by the Lion Aslan, the Christ figure. “In the darkness, something was happening at last. A voice had begun to sing. It

was very far away and Digory found it hard to decide from what direction it was coming. Sometimes it seemed to come from all directions at once. Sometimes he almost thought it was coming out of the earth beneath them. Its lower notes were deep enough to be the voice of the earth herself. There were no words. There was hardly even a tune. But it was beyond comparison, the most beautiful noise he had ever heard. It was so beautiful, he could hardly bear it.”

The voice of the earth is then joined by other voices, the cold, tingling, silver voices of the stars as they come into being. “The Eastern sky changed from white to pink and from pink to gold. The voice rose and rose, til the air was shaking with it. And just as it swelled to the mightiest and most glorious sound it had yet produced, the sun arose.”

“The lion was pacing to and fro about that empty land and singing his new song. It was softer and more lilting than the song by which he had called up the stars and the sun: a gentle rippling music. And as he walked and sang the valley grew green with grass. It spread out from the lion like a pool. It ran up the sides of the little hills like a wave.

Polly was finding the song more and more interesting because she was beginning to see the connection between the music and the things that were happening. When a line of dark firs sprang up on a ridge about a hundred yards away, she felt that they were connected with a series of deep prolonged notes which the lion had sung a second before. And when he burst into a rapid series of lighter notes, she was not surprised to see primroses suddenly appearing in every direction. Thus, with an unspeakable thrill, she felt quite certain that all the things were coming (as she said) ‘out of the lion’s head.’ When you listened to his song, you heard the things that he was making up; when you looked round you, you saw them.”

Now, this story is a view of creation from a fiction or a fantasy book—but think of the mythology that it depicts—a creation in harmony, sung into being by its creator. No one voice has primacy, but each part of creation takes up its place in the harmony, from the deep rich voice of the earth to the high clear voices of the stars, each thing, as it is sung into being, takes up its place in the song. In a choral piece, it is by design that one part or one voice does not dominate the others. They blend and harmonize, they work together to create a beauty of the whole.

And if we saw ourselves in that role—not as rulers of creation, or even as tenders of creation, but as a part of a beautiful whole, all sung into being by a loving God...well, maybe that's the best image of all. How do you view creation—and what is your place in it? The myth we choose—the role we assume--makes all the difference. Amen.