

“Ask the Tree”

Sermon preached at Church on the Hill
Lenox, Massachusetts

“Forest Sunday” • First week in the Season of Creation • 3 September 2017
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Text: Genesis 2:4b-22

This morning’s reading from Genesis gives one of the two accounts of God’s creation of humankind, and all creatures and growing things. This translation by Everett Fox captures some of the rhythms of the original Hebrew poetry. Let us prepare ourselves for the Word of God as it comes to us in the reading of Holy Scripture.

^{2:4b} At the time of YHWH, God's making of earth and heaven, ⁵ no bush of the field was yet on earth, no plant of the field had yet sprung up, for YHWH, God, had not made it rain upon earth, and there was no earth creature to till the earth — ⁶ but a surge would well up from the ground and water all the face of the soil; ⁷ and YHWH, God, formed the earth creature, of dust from the earth, God blew into the creature’s nostrils the breath of life and the earth creature became a living being.

⁸ YHWH, God, planted a garden in Eden/Land-of-pleasure, in the east, and there ... placed the human whom God had formed. ⁹ YHWH, God, caused to spring up from the soil every type of tree, desirable to look at and good to eat, and the Tree of Life in the midst of the garden and the Tree of the Knowing of Good and Evil.

¹⁵ YHWH, God, took and set the earth creature in the garden of Eden, to work it and to watch it.

¹⁸ Now YHWH, God, said: It is not good for the earth creature to be alone, I will make the earth-creature a helper corresponding to itself. ¹⁹ So YHWH, God, formed from the soil every living-thing of the field and every fowl of the heavens and brought each to the earth-creature, to see what the earth-creature would call it; and whatever the earth-creature called it as a living being, that became its name. ²⁰ The earth-creature called out names for every herd-animal and for the fowl of the heavens and for every living-thing of the field, but for the earth-creature, there could be found no helper corresponding to itself.

²¹ So YHWH, God, caused a deep slumber to fall upon the earth-creature, so that he slept, God took one of his parts and closed up the flesh in its place. ²² YHWH, God, built the part taken from the earth-creature into a woman and brought her to the earth-creature.¹

1

Quick quiz: how many days did it take for God to finish creation?

¹ Adapted from Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses*, The Schocken Bible, Vol. 1 (New York: Schocken Books/Random House, 1995).

On which day did God make humans?

If this story of God's creating the world seems slightly unfamiliar, if it doesn't quite match what you recall from Sunday school, you're right. There are two versions. They tell the story in different ways. Big differences: in the story that appears first, God speaks everything into being. God says "let there be light," calls together the waters, tells land to appear, then vegetation, then animals and finally, on the sixth day, a human, an earth-creature, made in God's own image.

But in today's story there are no separate days. Rather than speaking, God simply does the creating. First, God makes a solitary earth-creature. Next, a garden with good soil, then trees, then animals, and finally a creature to be companion to the first.

As big as the differences are, there's a similarity that outshines them all. In both stories, both ways of thinking about the creation, God does the creating. God speaks and God makes and all of this happens in a way that is full of creativity and life.

And the main thing I want to say about those stories, today, is that they can save our lives and the life of the planet. But the stakes are high.

Human activity is destroying the planet. We are desecrating earth in small ways by reckless development and thoughtless pollution of land, sea, and sky. The awful combining of our recklessness has provoked the climate into chaos. Some say that climate-generated disasters are part of an entirely natural process and nothing to worry about. But I believe that melting glaciers are something to worry about, and increasingly violent, destructive, deadly storms are something to worry about, and the loss of crops and arable land due to drought or flooding is something to worry about.

But that's not exactly the point of this sermon.

Because the Bible has a more basic concern. How did we get into this mess in the first place? How do we begin to find our way again? That's the Bible's concern.

2

[Story of Seattle church and tree.] "Has anyone spoken to the tree?" The question was absurd — but the questioner showed a belief that the tree was something deserving of respect, because it and we share the same Creator.

One day during a major storm we watched a massive branch break off a pond pine. After the sharp crack sounded an alert, the branch slowly pivoted on a hinge of bark and sapwood, as the heavy heartwood ripped and splintered. The extremity of the heavy branch gathered speed, hurtling toward the ground, thousands of pounds propelled by gravity, restrained by nothing but air and raindrops. The very tip of the branch reached our deck, soft needles whisking the railing. The ton of wood stopped only when it struck the tree, hanging alongside the trunk it had sprouted from decades ago.

Just to observe the intricacy of one tree, and just to witness the destructive power of a storm, can be an act of faith. Faith always includes our remembering God's creative work: here, the extraordinary intricacy of a tree, both sturdy and vulnerable.

Our faith also leads us to examine what is not God's work. We watch storms like hurricane Harvey, which was generated not by God but by vagaries of weather. We observe that

the storm's devastation was made worse by human recklessness. When we lay down roads or raise up buildings for our convenience or our profit or for a good view, two ungodly things happen. We damage the work of God, in which God's glory is revealed. And we lose our awe of God, often replacing it with awe for human works.

As awful as is the flooding in Texas —

and in Mumbai, India, where over 1,000 were killed and in Nigeria, with over 100,000 displaced;

and as awful as are the wildfires devastating Montana, forcing thousands to flee;

— bad as those have been, there's a likelihood that catastrophes of weather and climate will grow more severe. And there are good calls to action, from knowledgeable groups like 350.org and Interfaith Power and Light. They deserve our steadfast support. Yet here in this holy space and time, we have a deeper call to action. Here we listen as scripture speaks to our broken world. Here we remember the ecological crisis and we hear, as Pope Francis has said, a summons "to a profound spiritual conversion."

If God's great work is the creation itself — filled with fertility and variety, fecundity and decay, life and death — then our first great task of faith is remembering. Remembering means listening to the story that tells how God's own self is a part of the earth and animals and plants; remembering means putting back together the story that restores our awe of the Creator.

Let it be said that yes, the tree evolved, as did every creature, over millions of years since the first cell fissioned into two. But to listen to the story of creation is to deepen our awe. Every bit of the creation expresses something essential about God: like us, the tree is a precious, intricate work from the hand of our God who is the force of life itself.

We can't heal the pond pine branch that fell in the storm: that's gone for good, like so many trees and crops and bridges in the path of Hurricane Harvey and the floods and fires and droughts around the globe. But the death of that one tree in a freak storm makes me freshly aware of the death of too many trees for no good reason whatsoever. What we do to one another and what we do to God's creation on earth is a perfect mirror of the eternity that waits for us. Maybe it would be a good idea, every time we see woodlands fall to development or logging or mining, to stop and pray long enough to summon tears of mourning. Weep, humans, for the callow and casual destruction of what God declared to be good.

Some who argue for unrestrained exploitation of our forests end up saying, that's the cost of our way of life. But we who are people of God put God before our way of life. When our way of life causes damage to God's creation and God's creatures, it is time for our way of life to change.

A fellow preacher said: "Our polluted, exploited earth begets a barren, poisoned heaven. Our humility and awe and cooperation with nature creates our paradise."

John Muir once wrote, "God has cared for these trees, saved them from drought, disease, avalanches, and a thousand tempests and floods. But [God] cannot save them from fools."

It may, in fact, be too late to save the planet. Because we have been fools. We would rather use fossil fuels to drive our commerce and heat and cool our houses, because we have worshiped our way of life and forgotten what is holy.

Isn't it time we let go of that illusion? We cannot afford the price. You and I may not see the worst of the coming environmental disaster, but our grandchildren and great-grandchildren probably will.

4

And the Bible actually has a way forward for us. Not a step-by-step plan to save the planet, but a way to live that brings us back into a faithful relationship with the God who made all that we are and all that sustains us.

The way forward begins by revering God and what God has done. We begin at the beginning by believing the story of creation: believing that the forest deserves our respect and our reverence, and cutting it down for the sake of a road or a lumber sale or a pipeline cuts into the heart of God.

What if our bottom line were reverence for God? Our way of life would not be making the budget work in our family or church or nation: no, our way of life would be joyful reverence for all that God has made. That comes first. We become part of the healing of the world God has made.

5

In case this is the first sermon you have ever heard — and just in case this is the last sermon you will ever hear — let me say it plain and clear: God's creative work is never done! Today is your next opportunity to revere God, and live in delight in the earthly garden God created for us and all living beings!