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“Caring for Creation”

Genesis 1:1-2:3

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In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day and the darkness God called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

And God said, 'Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.' So, God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

And God said, 'Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.' And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, 'Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.' And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning the third day.

And God said, 'Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night: and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in

the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.’ And it was so. God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

And God said, ‘Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.’ So, God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.’ And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.” And it was so. God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind and the cattle of every kind and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

Then God said, “Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

So, God created humankind as God’s reflection,

*in the divine image God created them;
male and female, God created them.*

God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the air and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. God saw everything in this creation, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Thus, the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So, God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

Genesis 1:1-2:3

The Creation Evidence Museum, in Glen Rose, Texas, should not be confused with the Creation Museum, in Petersburg, Kentucky. Both museums have a Noah's Ark, but the one in Texas is only a 25-foot replica, while the one in Kentucky claims to be actual size. Both museums

promote a pseudoscientific, young Earth creationist explanation of the origin of the universe, based on a hard-not-to-laugh-at, literal interpretation of Genesis one and two. Both museums have a lot to work with, because the creation accounts may have inspired more goofiness than any other stories in the Bible.

In the early 1600s, Archbishop James Ussher opened his Old Testament, counted backwards and established the first day of creation as Sunday, October 23, 4004 BC. Remarkably, the Archbishop was able to calculate the dates of other biblical events, concluding, for example, that Adam and Eve were driven from Paradise on Monday, November 10, 4004 BC. Ussher did not, however, tell us what time of day God began creating. That was left to Reverend John Lightfoot of Cambridge University who, in 1644, concluded that God began creating at 9:00 in the morning. Wouldn't you think God would get to work by 8:30?

Books have been written—and surprisingly, published—debating the length of a day in Genesis. People have not only asked how vegetation, which is created in verse eleven, survived without sunlight, which is created in verse fourteen, but have been able to keep a straight face while asking these silly questions. Pseudo-scientists have foldout, wall-sized charts, based on the curious suggestion that God planted dinosaur fossils as a dinosaur-sized practical joke.

The stated purpose of the Creation Evidence Museum, the one in Texas, is to “support a literal six-day creation and arm congregations with the scientific facts to support their faith.” Those who mistake the poetry of scripture for the prose of a science textbook miss the point. The

words in Genesis are not mere history. Genesis is not about “When?” or “How?” but about the far more important questions of “Who?” and “Why?”

When I was a student in seminary, my Old Testament professor made this point by having us compare the Hebrew story in Genesis 1 with the Sumerian epic Gilgamesh, which was written about 2000 BC—500 years before Genesis. There are significant differences between the Assyrian story and the Jewish story, but there are also striking similarities. Both have six days of creation. Both begin with a divine spirit in the darkness, then light shows up on day two, firmament on day three, dry land on day four, stars on day five, animals and humans on day six. In Genesis, God sanctifies the seventh day. In the Assyrian version, the gods celebrate on the seventh day.

My teacher had us compare and contrast these two stories to make the point that if we think Genesis one is about history, then we are missing the point. But maybe instead of ancient, dull Sumerian literature he would have made his point better, if he had us read James Weldon Johnson’s poem, “The Creation:”

And God stepped out on space,
And (God) looked around and said,
I’m lonely—
I’ll make me a world.

And far as the eye of God could see
darkness covered everything,
blacker than a hundred midnights
down in a cypress swamp.
Then God smiled,

and the light broke,
and the darkness rolled up on one side,
and the light stood shining on the other,
and God said,

That's good!

Then God reached out
and took the light in his hands,
and God rolled the light around in his hands
until (God) made the sun,
and (God) set that sun a-blazing in the heavens.
And the light that was left from making the sun
God gathered it up in a shining ball
and flung it against the darkness,
spangling the night with the moon and stars.

Then down between
the darkness and the light
(God) hurled the world.

And God said,

That's good!

Then God himself stepped down—
and the sun was on his right hand,
and the moon was on his left.
The stars were clustered about his head,
And the earth was under his feet.
And God walked, and where he trod
his footsteps hollowed the valleys out
and bulged the mountains up.

Then (God) stopped
and looked and saw

that the earth was hot and barren.
So God stepped over to the edge of the world
and he spat out the seven seas.
(God) batted his eyes,
and the lightnings flashed.
(God) clapped his hands,
and the thunders rolled.
And the waters above the earth came down,
the cooling waters came down.

Then the green grass sprouted,
and the little red flowers blossomed,
the pine tree pointed his finger to the sky,
and the oak spread out his arms,
the lakes cuddled down
in the hollows of the ground,
and the rivers ran down to the sea.
And God smiled again,
and the rainbow appeared,
and curled itself around his shoulder.

Then God raised his arm
and he waved his hand
over the sea and over the land,
And (God) said, Bring forth! Bring forth!
And quicker than God could drop his hand,
fishes and fowls
and beasts and birds
swam the rivers and the seas,
roamed the forests and the woods,

and split the air with their wings.
And God said,
That's good!

Then God walked around,
and God looked around
on all that he had made.
God looked at his sun,
and he looked at his moon,
and he looked at his little stars.
God looked on his world
with all its living things,
and God said,
I'm lonely still.

Then God sat down
on the side of a hill where
He could think.
By a deep, wide river he sat down.
With his head in his hands,
God thought and thought,
till he thought, I'll make me a man!

Up from the bed of the river
God scooped the clay.
And by the bank of the river
He kneeled him down.

And there the great God Almighty
who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,
who flung the stars
to the most far corner of the night,
who rounded the earth

in the middle of his hand,
this Great God,
like a mammy bending over her baby,
kneeled down in the dust
toiling over a lump of clay
till he shaped it in his own image.

Then into it he blew the breath of life,
and man became a living soul.
Amen. Amen.

Genesis imagines God enjoying creating, imagines God calling into existence that which did not exist before, and imagines God as not only the composer of creation, but the conductor as well, still proclaiming creation good. The heavens continue to declare the glory of God. We should live in appreciation of what God is doing and distress at the destruction of what God is doing.

In 1854, Chief Seattle, the chief for whom the city of Seattle is named, delivered a speech to an assembly of tribes preparing to sign away their lands. He spoke of the white man ravaging the earth: "He treats his mother, the earth, and his brother, the sky, as things to be bought, plundered, sold like sheep or dried beads. His appetite will devour the earth and leave behind only a desert. All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth. Man did not weave the web of life. He is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself."

Chief Seattle, the Greta Thunberg of the 19th century, was right to be angry at what we have done to creation. We have treated the earth harshly. In some cities breathing the air is the equivalent of smoking ten cigarettes a day.

Our rivers are so filled with pesticides and toxic chemicals that the fish cannot be eaten or the water drunk. We have thinned the ozone layer so dramatically that scientists say it is causing an increase in skin cancer and cataracts. We have driven countless species into extinction. The rate of disappearance is now over one per day.

Glaciers are melting. Sea levels are rising. Temperatures are rising. We have put profits above the planet. We have shown disrespect to the creator by showing disrespect for the creation. We need to mourn the death of forests, fruitful lands that have become deserts, wild animals left without grass, lands ravaged by war, and people left homeless.

Kurt Vonnegut writes, "I really wonder what gives us the right to wreck this poor planet of ours."

The environmental question may be the most urgent issue of our time. We have to understand that the earth is not ours. The Bible has a different view of creation. Many think that when they own a piece of land, they have the right to do whatever they want with it. The truth proclaimed throughout scripture is that the earth is God's. We live in a borrowed world.

Parker Palmer, a writer and teacher, was leading a retreat for government officials in Washington, D.C. A staffer from the Department of Agriculture said that he had, on his desk, a controversial proposal aimed at preserving Midwest topsoil, which is disappearing rapidly due to short-sighted farming methods employed by agribusiness. This official had been a farmer in Iowa for a quarter of a century, and was sympathetic to the bill, though his superior opposed it.

By the end of the retreat this person decided that he had to follow his farmer's heart and promote the proposal, come what may.

When asked how he would handle his boss, this farmer-turned-bureaucrat said the retreat had helped him remember something important: "I don't report to my boss. I report to the land."

Reverence for God's creation is central to the Christian faith. God has molded a world that is full and rich, interrelated, and interdependent. Throughout scripture, human beings are depicted as the stewards of the creation to which God still holds ownership.

Far from the earth being ours to use and abuse as we wish, we are, as God's children, called to care for the earth, helping to bring healing to this beautiful, fragile planet. The church has a responsibility to challenge a society where consumption is the ultimate value and the sacred nature of creation is almost forgotten.

We cannot make everything right, but there are things we can do. We can step up our recycling, dishtowels instead of paper towels, cloth napkins instead of paper napkins. We can be thoughtful consumers, buying products with as little packaging as possible, reusing grocery bags, avoiding disposable items—no plastic forks, and taking our names off junk mail lists.

We can reduce our energy consumption. The use of 40 percent of the earth's energy by six percent of the population is unfair. Altering our lifestyles, even a little, will lower the price the earth pays for our presence. Some of us can eat lower on the food chain. According to one study, if Americans reduced their intake of meat by ten

percent, 60 million could be fed by the grain saved.

We can live more simply. Learn to enjoy things without owning them. Vote for candidates who work to preserve God's creation. Teach our children to love God by loving God's earth.

Dave Foreman says, "Pay your rent for the privilege of living on this beautiful, blue-green, living Earth."

We can live with gratitude. Social scientists are teaching us that we are more effective when we work with gratitude than when we complain. We need to act with gratitude. Cherishing what remains of the Earth is a key to survival. Creation is a sanctuary charged with the grandeur of God. We love God by loving the earth, sky, and water.

We hope for the renewal of the earth, not because we are naïve optimists, but because the Spirit of God brings healing to the world. If we look at creation with astonishment, awe, and wonder, we will work with God for the hope of life everywhere. We will care for the earth and its creatures because we love God and our neighbors.

For some of us, the next step is to look at our children and grandchildren and see the future looking back at us. We need to say, "We won't steal your future. We won't betray your trust. We'll take care of the world."

The Jewish commentary on the creation story in Genesis one pictures God guiding the first human beings around the Garden of Eden and saying: "Look at my creations! See how beautiful they are. I created everything for you. Make sure you don't ruin my world, because if you do, there will be no one after you to fix it."

(Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13)