

This Is My Father's World

If any of you are like me, the first thing you did once you sat down this morning is check to see what hymns we would sing. If I hadn't been involved in the worship planning, I too would have come in, sat down, and eagerly flipped through my worship guide to see if any of my favourites were included. If you did that this morning, you might notice that we will be singing one more hymn than usual. Originally, the closing hymn for today was to be the one we just sang "God of the Sparrow".

Pastor Doug gave me complete freedom to design this morning's earth day liturgy any way I wanted . . . but that doesn't mean he didn't add his 2 cents along the way. He asked me why I chose "God of the Sparrow" as the final hymn. I said it was because it had a nice tune and spoke of creation. His reply was, "so does 'This is My Father's World'." Then he added, "Have I taught you nothing? You should always try to close the service with something familiar". So, to make a long story, short we compromised and kept them both.

"This is My Father's World" is a familiar song . . . it is one we love to sing. It is a great hymn of praise and thanksgiving that points us to God's created beauty . . . the rocks and trees . . . the skies and seas . . . morning light . . . the lily white. Great reminders of the poetic first creation story we read in Genesis, where with a word God turns cosmic chaos into ordered life and beauty.

According to Jewish and Christian tradition the book of Genesis was dictated by God to Moses. A fun and wonderful tradition, but a serious look at the bible reveals that this is nothing but folklore. A careful study of the text itself reveals that the narrator actually lived well after Moses. Lived at a time when the Canaanites had disappeared from the Promised Land (12.6) and when kings ruled over Israel (36.31; 49.10). The people, places, religious practices, and the language of Genesis indicate that the book was primarily composed and compiled during the centuries of monarchical rule and immediately thereafter, roughly the tenth through the sixth centuries BCE.ⁱ

So you might wonder why I am boring you with all this ancient history. My purpose is to point out the fact that this Genesis story was not written as a literal play-by-play account of the creation of the world. Not a historical account written by God and dictated by Moses to tell us how the world came into being. The truth is we don't know how the world was created. No one was around to observe it. If we really wanted to know how the cosmos came about exploring the big bang theory is a more plausible place to start than the creation story.

So why do we read this story? To understand that we have to go back to that historical context. Look at what was happening in the life of Israel when it was written. The stories of Genesis are actually a combination of many sources (which is why we have two very different creations stories). Richard Boyce describes it this way,

Though these verses appear at the front end of the scriptures, we must always remember they are not where the original story began. The story of this people, who now "remember" the story of the world's creation, began by the banks of some other waters, in a land that was also a "formless void": the land of Egypt, by the banks of the Nile, where these desert nomads found themselves crying out under hard labour as slaves. The kind of wondrous work they experienced in the birth waters of the Red Sea is therefore the template with which they imagine the

wondrous work of God before the ordered world began. As they had experienced the spirit of God bringing order out of chaos in Egypt, so they now testified to the similar work of the spirit “in the beginning”.

The writer most likely imagined this earlier creative work of God during the days of Babylonian exile, when all the earlier order of Israel’s worship in Jerusalem had been forced to stop. Where would you look in order to trust the ongoing ordering of God when the temple is destroyed, power has been shattered, and captors follow a different calendar and worship different gods? Shackled in a prison cell, with only a slender slice of sky visible from the deep, the ongoing divide between day and night the only sign that God is still creating order out of chaos, the wind or spirit of God the only sign that God is still moving over the waters. This is a story of creation for our weak days when we are tempted to despair.ⁱⁱ

That is if we even allow ourselves to despair. Statistically we just went through the mildest winter on record, but we don’t really need statistics to realize that something peculiar is going on. In early March many of us found ourselves dining on outdoor patios, an activity normally reserved for July. I enjoyed that as much as the next person but what really concerns me is our lack of conversation around why this weather is so nice. Al Gore first hit the road with his slide show warning us of the “inconvenient truth” of climate change 13 years ago. But most of us have preferred to ignore his warning. We know the effects of our love for our oil based lives but we choose to bury our heads in the sand. Paying attention to what is happening to the world would force us to do one of two things, neither of which is very appealing. If we pull our heads out of the sand we will either have to change or admit that we don’t really care.

So we can continue to pretend that outdoor dining in March is just a happy circumstance, melting polar ice caps just a normal cycle of the cosmos, extinct species and starving fish just a cruel consequence in the circle of life.

Or we can admit we don’t care about future generations, recognize that we prefer cheap gas over cheap water, would rather try to fill the void in our lives with cheap plastic gadgets than worry about any life for future generations. Acknowledge that our climate controlled comfort is more important to us than an uncontrolled climate with no comfort for others. Continue to put more stock in oil company Prophets for profit than those we easily profane as “tree huggers” as if that were a bad thing to be.

The only other option is for change, to admit to the “inconvenient truth”. Really recognize that “this is my father’s world”, not just singing it, but living it. To turn around and witness how the weather and climate has changed just in the last few decades. See how more and more people are being diagnosed with cancer, and that asthma cases are skyrocketing. That numerous plant and animal species are endangered, that farmland is disappearing, that the coral reefs are bleaching. And to noticing that the whole creation is groaning in labor pains.

Anglican priest, Franklin Vilas writes,

But what? is waiting to be born? A new generation of environmentalists? No. The Epistle to the Romans tells us that the creation awaits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God. Who is that? The children of God are those who have been born of the spirit, and who honor God as parent and the creation as the gift it was meant to be. It is us. The creation, and that involves all living creatures called into covenant with God, the whole creation awaits the revealing of human beings who will live no longer by the laws of violence and greed, but by the law of love.ⁱⁱⁱ Love of God, love of one another, and love of all creation.

My brothers and sisters in Christ it is no coincidence that this creation story from Genesis was last read on the Sunday we celebrated the baptism of our Lord. In baptism we become covenant people. A part of God’s creation. An important part. We are claimed by God. God says I will be your God and you shall be my people. Baptism is the Genesis of Christian life. If we realize the creation story is a story written by those as a way of expressing how they experience that

covenant, a liturgy that helped them to know who they were in their time and place. We would do well to use this story in the same way. To recognize during times of turbulent chaos like Luther did (making the sign of the cross on his forehead) that “We are baptized” and renewed in a creation that had our names in it from the very beginning. We are christened to creation. Our DNA comes from the original light and lightness.^{iv}

Take these steps not because you are an environmentalist or heaven forbid a “tree hugger”, but because you are responding to the Gospel of Jesus Christ-- and His call to serve and love the world which was created through the Spirit that dwelt in him-- the world he came to heal and to save.

For this indeed is “My Father’s World”.

Let us pray,

Light from light
Creation from chaos
Life from death
Joy from sorrow
Hope from despair
Peace from hate

All your gifts, all your love, all your power.
All from your word, fresh from your word,
all gifts of your speech.

We give thanks for your world-forming speech.

Thanks as well for our speech back to you,
the speech of mothers and fathers
who dared to speak
in faith and unfaith
in trust and in distrust
in grateful memory and in high hurt.

We cherish this speech as we trust yours.

Listen this day for the groans and yearnings of your world,
listen to our own songs of joy and our own drudges of death,
and in the midst of our stammering,
speak your clear word of life
in the name of your word come flesh.

Amen.^v

ⁱ Harper Collins NRSV Study Bible

ⁱⁱ Richard Boyce in “Feasting on the Word” Year B, Volume 1, pp. 221-222

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.rci.rutgers.edu/~lcrew/joyanyway/joy209.html>

^{iv} Donna Schaper in “Feasting on the Word” Year B, Volume 1, pg. 220

^v Brueggemann, Walter “Your world-forming speech” in “Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth, pg. 70