

“How does the creature say ... #1 - Awe and Praise”

Riverside United Church

September 8, 2024

Scripture Lesson: Genesis 1: 20-31

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 humankind 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 in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he 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 that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Prayer of Illumination: (v1, Voices United #229)

God of the sparrow, God of the whale,

God of the swirling stars,

How does the creature say Awe, how does the creature say Praise.

“How does the creature say ... #1 - Awe and Praise”

When I was at church a couple of weeks ago at Wesley - St. Matthew's United Church in Pugwash, NS, I was struck anew by the power of the words to the hymn written by Jaroslav Vayda. I had been wondering what themes to focus on for these weeks leading up to Thanksgiving. I had decided in the spring to take a break from lectionaries that offer a system of Bible readings for the church year, but I hadn't really arrived on an idea for what to do. These weeks leading up to Thanksgiving have recently been designated as the Season of Creation, but I hadn't really found a resource that grabbed my attention until I sang in Pugwash - Hymn 229 in Voices United, "God of the Sparrow."

I think one of the things that drew my attention to these words was the use of the word *creature* - "How does the creature say..." It could have said "How does the human say..." "How do we say ..." But the hymn reminds us of the diversity of creation - "God of the sparrow and of the whale ..."

This summer I attended Berwick camp in Nova Scotia, and the leader for the Exploring Faith Today program invited us to be paying attention to creation. Each morning she would ask us "What did you notice in creation?" A couple of weeks later I was sitting on the cottage deck and my eyes were drawn to a spider and I watched that spider for awhile as it worked on spinning its web. There were a lot of spiders this summer and I did feel a bit sad, often in the morning, when I walked through the strands that had been spun across doorways and other places.

This morning we have read part of the first creation story in the book of Genesis. We have heard the days five and six of the litany of creation which concludes each day with the affirmation that God saw that it was good. On day five we hear that the birds of the air and the creatures of the sea - the sparrows and the whales - are created. And then, on day six a lot happens. The animals of the earth, including all the creepy crawlers are created. And then it is time for human beings.

One of the intriguing details of this litany story is that as the description of the creation of human beings is offered, the words of God are: "let us make humankind in our image ..." Why is the first person plural - "us/our" - used? Who else is involved? The only other characters in the story at this point are the other beings - the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, the animals including those that creep along the ground.

Nancy Sohn Swartz has written a wonderful children's book, *In Our Image* in which she highlights this point in the creation story and imagines the excitement of the animals in being included in this important moment. They thought about which gift they could give so they would always be connected to man and to woman.

“Make them brave,” said the tiger.
“Make them gentle,” said the lamb.
“Make them loud,” roared the lion.
“Make them quiet,” hushed the clam.
“Make them small,” said the ant.
“Make them large,” called the whale.
“Make them fast,” snapped the cheetah,
“Make ... them ... slow,” drawled the snail.

I won't read the whole book, but you may get the point. Let us make humankind in our image, because there is a connection amongst all creation.

One of the reasons that we need a season of creation is that humanity has often forgotten that connection. Humanity has often not noticed the intricacy of spider webs or the balance needed for the growth and sustainability of the planet. In the creation of humankind description, there is the instruction that humanity may have dominion over the created order and the understanding of having dominion has been understood as stewardship of creation by some and as doing whatever we want by others. We know that creation is out of balance in so many ways as exploitation has become more dominant than stewardship.

We are invited back to balance. We are invited back to awe. We are invited back to humility.

How does the creature say awe? How does the creature say praise?

In these words, we are reminded that we are creatures - along with many other diverse birds, fish, animals, insects, trees and plants. We don't know how all the other creatures say “awe” and “praise,” but we are beginning to know more about the intelligence and communication in the created order.

Earlier this year, the Book Discussion group here at Riverside read the book Elephant Whisperer by Lawrence Anthony, and it was astonishing to read how elephants communicate and how they remember and mark time.

At Berwick camp this summer, in the annual Trivia night competition there was a question about which is the smartest animal and I don't remember the other three choices, (it was a multiple choice question) but I do remember that “pig” was the right answer. Our team got that right mostly because we thought it was most unlikely answer. I thought of that fact the other day when we passed a transport truck full of pigs - those piggies

were heading to market and I wonder if they knew that!

A couple of years ago, the Book Discussion group read a book by Suzanne Simard, Finding the Mother Tree that described her research into how trees are able to communicate and share nutrients.

We are invited to wonder and praise, and so we are invited to ponder, “How does the creature say Awe? How does the creature say praise?”

One of the ways that we respond is to know these stories of creation. Anthropologists will tell us that most cultures have a creation story: a story that describes the beginning in a way that gives purpose and meaning to that culture. In our culture, we have the two creation stories from Genesis and we have robbed them of their depth and possibility of meaning, because we have been engaged for too long in a debate about creation vs. evolution.

Most cultures do not see their creation story as the *how* of creation, but we are caught in this futile and simplistic understanding that these Genesis stories are literal accounts of how the world came to be. Christian faith as a whole is overshadowed and therefore diminished by voices which persist in denying the *how* of science and evolution.

There are so many reasons why we need to reclaim and proclaim that the meaning of these stories is about why? not how. Why are we created? What is the meaning and purpose of our lives? The stories do not offer easy answers to those questions, but they affirm the goodness of creation, the interconnectedness of creation and the reality that the human gift of knowledge is a challenging gift.

Creation stories offer a depth of truth that contain layers of meaning. We need these stories - and it is helpful to read and to know various creation stories - because they remind us how little we do know. The science of evolution pointing back to a big bang 12.4 billion years ago, and the information about the swirling stars in galaxies far, far beyond our comprehension - also invite us to awe and to humility.

We have come from various directions and paths of life and experience to gather here today, and in gathering we are invited to remember that we are created in the image of wonder, of love, of hope, of blessing and that invites to live with meaning and purpose. May the creatures know awe, may the creatures offer praise. May we know the assurance of Holy blessing that reminds and assures us that *it is good*.
Amen.