

Creation Sunday
Proper 22C
10.6.13
Grace St. Paul's

In the name of the God who is present throughout the universe. Amen.

In the beginning, there was the lush, green river bisecting the most spectacular red rock desert I had ever seen. Next, a wooded trail leading through a side canyon of exquisite sandstone beauty. Then there were the red tail hawks, diving and dipping all around me. A lone coyote, looking at me with those piercing, beautiful eyes. There was a series of hoo-doo's, spindly monoliths punctuating an empty desert, lit up from the back by the afternoon light. Next was a slot canyon so narrow, I had to take off my pack to slip through. Then there was the vista overlooking the wildest scene of anticlines, synclines, and monoclines I had ever seen. A series of petroglyphs so numerous, I could not absorb all of them. This was followed by the sandstone arches, 20, no 25 of them; long ones, short ones, thick ones, skinny ones, asymmetrical and symmetrical formations, one more beautiful than the next. I was on sensory overload. It was the most overwhelmingly powerful vision of successively, stunning natural scenery I had ever experienced. And what was most unbelievable of all? It had all happened in the same day. I have never felt so connected to the earth and I had never had such a profound series of experiences of God, one right after the other.

Thank heavens it was the third week of June, affording the most daylight of the year. That was important, because there was still so much to see. As evening progressed and the sun dropped, creating an entirely new array of colors across the open desert landscape, I cajoled my bright green, rubber band powered Datsun B-210 up and down 50 miles of dirt road. Much to my surprise, the car did make it to the end

of the dazzling path. Three days later, it would drop a muffler in the back of beyond. But that evening, it coasted into the campground of the Needles district of Canyonlands National Park just like it was a four wheel drive vehicle made for that rocky terrain, which it certainly was not. In those days, this section of Canyonlands was as remote as any place in the continental U.S. I had no concern therefore, with finding a perfect campsite among the redrock formations surrounding us. And sure enough, the place was almost empty, though it was the height of the season.

After dinner, I wandered down to the natural amphitheater in the sandstone, where the ranger had gathered us around a small campfire. There were six of us there, miles and miles away from another human being. We sat, hypnotized by the flames, the circling red rock around us, and the dazzling array of millions of stars above us.

This morning, you have heard two creation myths, one from the indigenous people known as Hebrews and the other from our own Pascua Yaqui people here in Tucson. That night, around the campfire, I heard another creation myth for the first time. It was the cosmological story of the beginning of the earth, 4.5 billion years ago. The ranger told us that tale within the framework of a 24-hour day. At 2:67 AM, life began with single cell organisms called prokaryotes. At 8:27 PM, multi-cellular organisms appear for the first time. At 9:55 PM, insects appear on the land. At 10:45 PM, dinosaurs arrived. At 10:57 PM, the first mammals arrive. At 11:31 PM, flowering plants germinate. At 11:50 PM, hominids appear. At 11:58 PM, two minutes before midnight, modern homo sapiens arrive on the scene. At 11:59 and 59 seconds, one second ago, civilization occurs. At 11.9997 PM, European voyages to foreign lands happens.

Hearing the scientific myth for the first time in front of a primordial fire with images of flames dancing off the red rock walls did something to me. It changed me at the core of my being. Within that ancient land of rock and desert, it was so much easier to wrap my head around the tiny speck of time humans have had in the story of creation. Our time here has been less than the blink of an eye, but in that flash, we have totally altered the entire face and structure of the planet. 4.499 billion years of gradual change and evolution were punctuated with only a few cataclysmic events. But in the second of our existence, we have created upheaval and destruction even more pronounced than all those events of cosmological time.

This past Wednesday in our liturgy meeting, there was some discussion around my use of the word myth to describe the creation stories we just heard. That suggested to me that some of you might hear that word as pejorative. In our rational/enlightenment culture, where things are either true or false, real or fake, tangible or imagined, non-fiction or fiction, some have come to regard myth as a synonym for fable or fiction. But that is not what myth means. David Leeming has described a myth as “a narrative projection of a given cultural’s group’s sense of its sacred past and its significant relationship with the deeper powers of the surrounding world and universe.” I would add that a myth is one of the most powerful art forms we have. That is because it transcends literal truth. A myth exists to capture ultimate truth. Myths are about realities so profound, that they can only be understood through story telling. A myth is how we bring meaning to our lives and understand our place in the universe. That is why our Bible is a sacred text. It is a recording of the most ancient myths in our cultural and religious history.

Myths hold the collective wisdom of our traditions and cultures and I believe, if we listen to them, they hold the potential of saving us from ourselves and protecting the integrity of the sacred world in which we live.

The ultimate truths that are available to us in the three stories we just heard are as profound and important as anything I know. If we look at them collectively, there are three lessons that stand out for me that each of them teaches us. First, each story tells a tale of the awe and wonder that we experience as humans through creation. Each describes creation similarly to the way I did my experience in Canyonlands. It is something so wonderful, that we can hardly believe it. In the second chapter of Genesis, we learn of the multitude of creation and the beauty of it all, especially the trees. In the Pascua Yaqui tale, a single tree represents the wonder of all creation, with its audible harp like sounds. In the scientific story, the sheer length of time that it takes for creation to form helps us to realize just how magnificent it all is.

Second, each makes it clear that as human beings, we are all connected to the earth and to the cosmos in a direct way. What happens on the earth affects us intimately, whether that is through the tree of knowledge and evil in Genesis, or the singing tree in the Yaqui story, or the destruction of that tree in the scientific story.

Third, all three myths say the same thing about the role of humans within creation and how we have failed to live into that role. In the Genesis story, humans overstep their role in creation by doing the one thing God told them not to do, eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. As a consequence, humans are banished from the garden; and suffering, pain and death ensue. In the Pascua Yaqui story, the people that reject their role as humans become black ants. And in the scientific story,

we clearly learn of the destruction of the earth when humans make their appearance in the world. In each case, humans mess up the natural order of things by trying to do something they are not supposed to do. In the language of our sacred text, humans choose to not be images of God, but to be God themselves. Each time that happens in all three stories, chaos ensues and the world and creation suffer.

This is such a critical point in our biblical tradition's myths, that we get the same lesson all over again in the next three Genesis stories. Cain kills Abel, trying to take God's power over life and death. The story of the flood is about a people who display a similar arrogance, believing that they could take away other people's dignity. When that happens, creation goes askew again. And in case we missed the point the first three times, the fourth story says it literally. The Tower of Babel narrative has humans building a literal edifice so that they could reach God. This is the original sin, the realization that as humans we overstep our humanity and try to play God.

Each time this happens, we see the result. The world is broken. The beauty of creation goes haywire. God creates the world and then we knock it off its axis and create turmoil. That is the point. When we try to be God, we do the opposite of what God does. Instead of participating in creation, we make chaos.

The same lessons occur for us in today's Gospel. Some of you may recall that just last week the disciples heard the story of Lazarus and the rich man who did not see him. In addition, Jesus has told them continuous tales about focusing on the other or how they need to concentrate on seeing the plight of their neighbor or the alien. But once again, the disciples do not seem to get it. Instead of lifting up someone else to prominence, they, like all of us, are right back to looking out for themselves. They

immediately start asking Jesus not for assistance in caring for others but for more stuff for themselves. Jesus please, "Increase OUR faith!" WE need more of it. We want more of it because we need to be able to do all the cool stuff you can do. We need more faith so that we can be just like you. We want, we need to be able to heal others like you, so that we can be just like you. We need to move mountains and mulberry trees just like you can. If we could just do all the miracles you could do, we could be just like God.

At first listen, there does not seem to be anything wrong with the disciples, or any of us for that matter, asking for more faith. But in light of the lessons that have come previously about caring for neighbor, the request is a self-centered one. In addition, Jesus's understanding of faith apparently does not jive very well with the disciples. When the disciples say it, faith is a noun, something we acquire. When Jesus says it, it is a verb, something we are to do.

Jesus follows with a story about expectations of masters and slaves. It is difficult for us to hear, because it offends our sensibilities. It seems to condone the place of the slave in first century culture. However, if we can get past that by remembering that slaves were part of that culture, Jesus's point seems unmistakable. As humans, our role is not to be master, it is to be slave. Their job, he tells the disciples through the story, is not to be God but to be human, which is a very different job description. When the disciples ask to have their faith increased, what Jesus hears them asking for is an increase in their power. He apparently hears them asking to move beyond their roles as humans and to share in his role as God. It is the oldest and the newest sin in the book.

For many years, I struggled immensely with all of this. As I continued to watch humanity destroying its relationship with the rest of the planet and demolishing much of God's world in the process, I began to wonder if perhaps the world would be better off if we were not here. I questioned whether the only real way to save the world was to take humanity out of the picture. But the beauty of our creation myths and today's Gospel help us to come to terms with the real problem. It is not humans being humans that has caused the problem at all. It is humans trying to be God.

All three of our creation stories make it clear that if the world is going to be preserved, humanity must take a central role in the process. We are called, they tell us, not to be God, as we have tried to be so many times, but instead to be images of God. As an image of God, we have a gigantic duty on earth to care for each other and all creation. But we must remember that as an image, we reflect the Holy One. Being a human means recognizing our limitations and accepting the fact that we are not number one. Once we live into that humility, then we need to assume our role in God's creation. We are to image God by doing just what God has done. This means instead of creating chaos, we participate in creation. We co-create with God by sharing in bringing life, justice and peace to all of the world.

Which is exactly what Jesus tells the disciples this morning. Stop trying to be me and instead image me. Don't believe in me but believe in what I have done. Follow in my footsteps. Put your faith into practice by lifting up the lowly and the oppressed just as I have done. And by doing it, you will find that you have plenty of faith already, enough faith to move a tree or even a mountain, when that is what is necessary to protect it.

This morning then, let us embrace our creation myths with everything we have. Let us continually immerse ourselves with a sense of awe for the wondrous world that God has given us. Let us allow today's liturgy to soak through us like a gentle summer rain. Let us reconnect ourselves with the earth and the entire cosmos, seeing our place in the sacred web of life and caring for all of it like a mother cares for her children. Finally, let us stop trying to be God when it comes to our relationship with the earth. Let us stop making believe that we get to do whatever we want with it. We have seen all too well what happens when we do that. Chaos ensues. Creation topples in on top of us. Instead, let us embrace our humanity fully and completely. Let us place ourselves back into the web of life by being images of God, co-creators with God. In so doing, not only will we save ourselves and save our planet, but we will be living the dream, the dream of a pristine, untouched land of swirling beauty, sprawled before us like nothing we have ever experienced in our lives. That is not only your dream and my dream but God's dream. Let us make that dream a reality. Amen.