

September 12, 2021
Season of Creation—Year A (Word)—Week 1 (Earth)
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Genesis 1:1-25
Psalm 33:1-9
Romans 1:18-23
John 1:1-14

Today we kick off our four-Sunday observation of the Season of Creation. The Season of Creation began as a faithful response to the increasing severity the environmental crisis. It isn't formally part of the Christian calendar, like, say, Advent or Lent. But, at this moment in history, it might be more important.

On these four Sundays we take a break from the usually assigned scripture readings to hear instead readings that focus our attention on the natural world. Today's readings emphasize the theme of the week, which is planet Earth. Our Hebrew Scripture reading was the beginning of the Book of Genesis. It's the story of creation, or most of it. Because today is designated as Earth Sunday, we stopped partway through the sixth day, just before God's creation of human beings. We'll hear about that next week, on Humanity Sunday.

For preaching purposes, my thought was to follow the readings and talk only about the Earth this week and leave all mention of humanity for next week. I couldn't actually do it. I started off well enough, thinking about the natural landscapes I love and the natural wonders I have been blessed to observe. But I realized that I feel passionate about those things in large part because of my human reaction to them. I don't suppose it's just me. Much of nature writing is about the human experience of nature. Apparently human beings tend to talk about the Earth in terms of its value to human beings, whether their intent is exploitation or conservation.

When it comes to Genesis, I generally look for metaphorical truths rather than literal facts. Still, we might find in Genesis 1 at least one suggestion of fact: humans arrive on the scene relatively late. Scientists say that the Earth is around four-and-a half billion years old. They also say that the first human-like creatures evolved only about two-and-a-half million years ago. Recorded human history is only a tick on the geologic time scale.

Early humans arrived late, but recent humans have more than made up for lost time. As a result, it has become harder and harder to talk about the Earth without talking about humanity's impact on the earth. We have entered the Anthropocene, "an unofficial unit of geologic time, used to describe the most recent period in Earth's history when human activity started to have a significant impact on the planet's climate and ecosystems."¹

Since it's harder and harder to talk about the earth without talking about humanity's impact on it, so let's just do that, with help from Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg. In January 2019, at age 16, she addressed the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. You can find the video on YouTube, and if you haven't seen it, or if you haven't seen it in a while, you really should watch it. Part of what Thunberg said was this:

Our house is on fire. I am here to say, our house is on fire.

...

We are at a time in history where everyone with any insight of the climate crisis that threatens our civilization—and the entire biosphere—must speak out in clear language, no matter how uncomfortable and unprofitable that may be.

We must change almost everything in our current societies. The bigger your carbon footprint, the bigger your moral duty. The bigger your platform, the bigger your responsibility.

Adults keep saying: “We owe it to the young people to give them hope.” But I don’t want your hope. I don’t want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act.

I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if our house is on fire. Because it is.²

It seems obvious to me that Greta Thunberg is right. The evidence is in front of us for all of us to see. There are literal fires in the western United States and Canada, with smoke that reached all the way to New Haven, wildfires consuming thousands of acres for the second summer in a row. Coastal Louisiana was disappearing even before Hurricane Ida blew through and also all the way to New Haven. The last seven years were the warmest seven years on record,³ and ecosystems from the equator to the poles are under stress. Of course all that is just climate change related to fossil fuels and greenhouse gases. Humans have littered the Earth’s land and water and atmosphere with garbage. The most privileged humans are disproportionately responsible; the most vulnerable humans are disproportionately suffering.

It’s obvious that Greta Thunberg is right—and still I have failed to act as if my house is on fire and we are in a crisis. I said to someone recently that the climate situation is so desperate that I should be sitting in the middle of the highway, tearing my clothes and pouring ashes on my head. That’s what I *should* be doing, but I’m not. I worry, I worry a lot, but at the same time I’ve gone on my way. It is so hard to feel like anything any one of us can do might actually make a difference. Consider the COVID-19 pandemic. A shockingly large proportion of the American population refuses to make even the small sacrifices of getting a vaccine and wearing a mask. I can’t imagine successfully mobilizing the action necessary to stop climate change and clean up the Earth. Still, that’s what we have to do.

Over the summer I was able to spend some extra time in nature. On one hand, it gave me so much relief from all the worries of the last year and a half. On the other, I couldn’t shake the horrible feeling that everything I looked at is in the process of dying. I realized that I am feeling not just existential worry but also deep-seated grief. Last week I stumbled on the Norwegian word *økosorg*. Apparently it’s a new term that translates into English roughly as *ecogrief*. That’s exactly what I’ve been feeling: *ecogrief*. You know what? Maybe that’s not a bad thing. Grief is painful, but it’s also useful. It helps us to put away denial and accept reality. It brings our attention to what’s truly important in our lives. Sometimes grief even reveals injustice and ignites action. It’s possible to experience grief and still *do* something. It’s not too late.

So you're hearing me say it first: I know I need to do more. I'm presently trying to readjust and recalibrate my own relationship to the Earth and Earth's resources. To be bluntly honest, Christian history and tradition is not overly helpful with this. When it comes to environmental protection and ecological justice, Christianity has most often been on the wrong side of history's judgment. But we don't have to let that continue going forward. For help, we might even return to Genesis. Genesis extols the beauty of creation, as both fact and truth. It reminds us God did a lot of creating before adding humans to the mix. What God created, God saw as good—and that was *before* humans had the chance to change anything. In recorded history, what God saw as good long predates the Anthropocene. We might even talk to the Biblical literalists, who believe that the Earth and its occupants were created by God in their current forms between 6,000 and 10,000 years ago. It seems to me that they have some imperative to preserve that which God saw as good.

Today, on this Earth Sunday, I thought I would talk about the natural landscapes I love and the natural wonders I have been blessed to observe. I thought I would talk about the incredible things that scientists are still discovering, things like bioluminescent deep-sea creatures and species interconnectivity and animal sentience and the mechanisms of the slow passage of geologic time. We can't actually separate humanity from Earth. At this moment of climate crisis, we shouldn't even try. But I think I need to place humanity back in its proper place, in relationship with all the other myriad elements that are animate and inanimate on the Earth. Today, let's lift up as worth preserving all of that, not just for what it can do for humans, but for the value of those things in themselves. They are God's miraculous creation and therefore of infinite value.

I'll close with some brief comments about today's reading from John. It's one of the loveliest passages from the New Testament, and it's also a little troublesome. For one thing, compared to the other three gospels, it says something very different about Jesus and who Jesus is. For another, it casts Jesus back into Genesis, in a way that Genesis doesn't actually support. Still, Christians might hear this as, if not hope, then encouragement, as it affirms that God's creative and re-creative work always has been and always will be. Through Christ, we get to participate in that creative and re-creative work. So look around. There is no more amazing or imperative calling.

Notes

¹ "Anthropocene," Wikipedia, available online at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthropocene> (accessed September 12, 2021).

² Greta Thunberg, from her address at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, January 19, 2019. The written transcript of these remarks is available from The Guardian, available online at <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jan/25/our-house-is-on-fire-greta-thunberg16-urges-leaders-to-act-on-climate> (accessed September 12, 2021). A video is available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M7dVF9xylaw> (accessed September 12, 2021).

³ "2020 Tied for Warmest Year on Record, NASA Analysis Shows," NASA, January 14, 2021, available online at <https://www.nasa.gov/press-release/2020-tied-for-warmest-year-on-record-nasa-analysis-shows> (accessed September 12, 2021).