

"God is Green"

Genesis 1:1-2:3

Welcome, Prayer

It's really great to be outside this morning. Living the Upper Peninsula reminds me of how blessed we are. We are surrounded by water and trees, hills and waterfalls, wolves and bears and cougars. Well, you can't have everything.

Mostly, the wilderness of the U.P. reminds me of the first two chapters of Genesis, which describe the beginning of all creation. Yet even with its picturesque beginning, Genesis is sometimes a controversial book. It undeniably has mythological qualities to it. In the 21st century, it's fair for us to ask, "Did all of creation really happen like that?"

Let me give you the best answer I can to that question. Genesis is a story, not a news report. If you want to study cell biology, cosmology, astronomy, and a bunch of other 'onomies, you could spend a lifetime reading. Genesis only has around 32,000 words. The first chapter has about 750. In other words, it's a short story. By definition, humans weren't there at the beginning of creation, so someone had to tell us how it was done.

If you went back 10,000 years, you wouldn't talk about telescopes, solar system, atoms, and photons. People might have only traveled 20 miles their entire life. How would they understand a light year? They couldn't. We barely do. Genesis doesn't describe the Big Bang or dinosaurs, because at the time it was spoken in the oral tradition, and then finally written down hundreds of years later, no one knew about those things.

So what does Genesis tell us? It tells us how important the world is, and how important our place is in it. Genesis tells us that we humans are stewards of God's creation. It was given to us as a gift to care for, to protect, not to destroy.

God still actively creates today. Any gardener knows that. I'm constantly surprised just by the trees that sprout up all over my lawn. I don't have to do anything, and things just grow. Foxes, skunks and deer run through our yard. Life is around us, abundantly. Maybe to understand our place in the world and why we need to protect it better, we need to hear the story like it was told the very first time. Let me try.

Close your eyes if you want to. Imagine a sunrise, maybe the sunrise you saw today. Every sunrise is the creation of a new day.

Stand at the edge of a body of water, say Lake Superior, or even the coast of the Mediterranean in ancient Israel. It's very dark, but you can feel the sand under your feet. It's cloudy, no stars are visible.

The very first thing you see, long before sunrise, is twilight. You see Light.

Light emerges from darkness, separates itself. This happens every 24 hours. God calls this cycle Day and Night. Now that we have a name for it, we can count it. Day One.

As more light appears, you can start to recognize shapes and lines, just barely. Order is emerging out of chaos. The obvious first thing you see is the horizon, what the Bible calls the “waters” above and below. There is a boundary between the blue expanse above and the one below. God calls it the Sky. The cycle continues. Day Two.

The horizon glows brighter. Now you discern land, an island in the distance, and the shoreline in front of you. The water also has a boundary with dry land. If you turn around, you see trees, their leaves waving in the slight breeze. The land is inherently connected to plant life. Plants provide oxygen for us to breathe. God calls these things “Sea and Land.” On this day, God also looks around and begins calling things “good.” Day Three.

Finally, the sun actually rises. It's too bright to look at when it gets above the horizon. How did you know when the sunrise would happen? We humans track the regular movements of the sun, moon, and stars. We know dates, seasons, and time. In modern era, we calculate down to the millisecond. We accurately predict solar and lunar eclipses. Because we have order, we can study the sky and all the things that move in it. God has filled the Sky with lights for us. Sun, Moon, Stars, comets, meteors. They move like they are alive. And God proclaims they are good. Day Four.

Now that the day has actually broken, you start observing with your ears and eyes. Birds are chirping. A fish jumps, breaking the surface of the water. In the tide pools, thousands of creatures are swimming. Starfish, coral, sharks, and whales. In the sky are hundreds of birds – eagles, crows, herons, vultures, robins,

seagulls, and geese. God has filled the sky and seas. And God again proclaims they are good. Day Five.

Lastly, you give your attention to the fully lit forest behind you. There are squirrels, cats, dogs, deer, lions, elephants – big mammals - as well as lizards, snakes, frogs and newts. Spiders, ants, beetles. Everything with four feet, or more, is creeping, crawling, living, and breathing.

And finally, you notice yourself. Maybe in the reflection of the water. You are also living, breathing, moving, and thinking. When you take stock of all you see, you realize that it is within your grasp to use it, preserve it, and even destroy it. The awesomeness of that responsibility hits you full in the face.

God looks around at everything, visible and invisible to our human eyes. God takes the world in with one glance, and God calls it very good. Day Six.

Friends, that's how the world was created, and is re-created, every day. Open your eyes and look at the world God has given us.

I want us to focus in specifically on the end of Day Six, on verses 27-31.

First of all, the Bible tells us that we are made "in God's image." This is not to be confused with "we are gods." Actually, we are, or should be, a reflection of God. We have emotions, the capacity to love and hate, to create and destroy, to encourage and protect life or to hasten death. Among all creatures, we have the unique ability to communicate in writing and to affect history. We have the freewill to respond to God and to others.

Second, God commands us to be fruitful and multiply, to increase in number. "Fill the earth and subdue it" (1:28) is the quote, and it unfortunately has been taken as an excuse to squander our natural resources. We should never confuse God's command with our own selfishness. In God's perfect creation, we were meant to live in harmony with all.

Third, God provides us with resources; literally, food to live. God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food." (1:29)

Some take this to mean we should all be vegetarians. That's not my view, but I do see great value in eating healthy and sustainably. More importantly, we

should recognize that the earth, by design, has all the resources for all creatures to eat and live.

So what happened to paradise? What happened to Eden?

My friend Ellie says, there's really only two parts to the Bible. The first two chapters, where everything is perfect, and everything else, where God works to clean up our mess. The first two chapters, before what we call "The Fall" in Eden, describe an idyllic world where everything has its place and lives together in harmony. Genesis 3 through Revelation explain how humans rebel against God and how God redeems us from the mess we made.

Of course, God send us Christ, and through the work of the cross, we are redeemed and made whole again. But that doesn't stop the decay and destruction that still exist in our world. When we read Genesis, and other scriptures that describe God's creation, we ought to be struck by our responsibility to care for God's creation, to sustain this beautiful place for other generations who will come after us. In short, I think there is a need to repent for our poor stewardship of the earth.

Environmentalism is a moral issue, not just a scientific issue. Each of us has a footprint that impacts others. It can be something as simple as smoking near a ballfield during a game – Jonah and I saw this on Tuesday, and from a hundred feet away, our lungs were impacted, if only temporarily. We chose which cars to drive and how often. I get a lot of guff about driving my Prius, but more importantly, I haven't replaced it in 16 years. Think of the time, energy and resources saved by simply choosing to drive used cars, or not driving at all, just walking or taking a bike.

Some decisions are made at the macro level by whole countries and governments, over which we have little control. I understand that. But there are micro decisions we make every day. Little things like using reusable coffee cups instead of throw away plastic and Styrofoam.

The question is, do we love our neighbor? Because on this planet, we are all neighbors.

I've thought about this message for a long while. It never really felt like the right time to preach it, until I realized what the issue was. When we worship on

Sunday morning, we are usually isolated from the natural world. Our windows are not transparent. When we sit inside our walls, climate-controlled buildings, we stop thinking about our world. Coupled with our indoor jobs, we might spend a few meager minutes walking outside every day. We have disconnected for God’s creation.

If we pollute and harm God’s world, we silence God’s voice. Romans 1:20 says, “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.” If we destroy the very world God made for us, how can we hope to see God?

God calls to us through the Word, through the Church, through friends, and even through sermons. My point is that God also calls us through nature, not to replacing any of those other sources, but complementing them, amplifying them. There is a reason why summer camps are usually not held in downtown metropolises. God speaks more clearly to us in the purity of nature.

So, what will we do? Will we protect and cherish God’s creation? Will we limit our consumption? Will we actually stop and think about what we buy and how we live, and ask if we are making the best possible decision, not just for our wallets, not for our convenience, but actually for the entire world? That is a huge challenge! I suggest starting with a simple step. Pick one thing you can do. Everyone has something within their power.

God is great, and God’s creation speaks to that greatness. We must do our best to prove we are worthy stewards of all God has abundantly shared with us.

Let’s pray.

Sing “How Great is Our God.”

The reasons I chose to do the baptismal covenant renewal today are twofold. First, it is always good to remind each other of the promises we make to God and to our church. Second, water is an essential part of baptism, and it reminds us of our duty to keep it clean, not to waste it. Water is a sign of grace and blessing. God’s love is abundantly poured out on us today through the power of Jesus Christ. We must not waste the opportunities God gives us to partake in

means of grace. Similarly, we should not waste the valuable natural resources God has given us to use in our sacraments. *(Continue with renewal.)*

Memory Verse: Hebrews 11:3

"By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible."

Reflection Questions:

1. How often do you spend time outdoors? Have you ever felt God speaking to you through creation?
2. In what ways do humans strive to protect the environment? In what ways do we fail?
3. Why is tending for creation an action that shows we love our neighbors?
4. What is one step you can commit to doing to preserve God's creation for the next generation?