

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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Celebrating Creation

And God saw everything that he had made, and indeed it was very good.

– Genesis 1:1-2:4a

A great biblical scholar once taught that the basic message of the Bible is “brown to green.”

- Brown to green – deserts blossoming, new life emerging out of what seemed dead and buried.
- Brown to Green – resurrection hope overcoming despair, God’s power breaking forth where other powers seemed to have prevailed.
- Brown to Green – at the end of a long winter, in seasons of grief and sorrow, when we have despaired that love and joy can ever again visit us, they surprise us by slipping unobtrusively back into our lives..
- Brown to Green – creation and new creation, Genesis and Revelation, the tree of life in the Garden of Eden and the Trees of life in the New Jerusalem.

I’ll save Revelation for another day and focus today on the first story of Brown to Green, the first story of Creation in the book of Genesis.

Some of you who already understand this will forgive me if I say again, what I have said many times, but that needs to be said again and again, that Creation and Evolution are not competing accounts of the world’s beginnings between which we need to choose. They are rather, two different forms of discourse, one in the language of scientific theory and the other in the language of poetry and myth. There need be no conflict between a scientific account of how life came into being, and the essential meaning of these stories, about God bringing order out of chaos and blessing all that lives. The creation stories are not about what happened long ago. They speak to our sense of being invited into existence, the goodness of creation, and the place of human beings in that creation. They are not science, but gospel.



Three weeks ago, after the Sunday service, my son Sean, his girlfriend Gillian, her stepfather Bob and I loaded our gear and our bodies into two vehicles and started driving North. For two days, we drove, covering more than 1500 kilometers. Along the way, we

passed through Treaty Six territory, Treaty Eight and Treaty Twelve. (slide) We crossed the boundary of the Northwest Territories and the 60th parallel, quite a bit further north than I have ever been before, into the territory of the Dehcho, or Dene. North of High Level, there were no gas stations and we had to carry jerry cans so we wouldn't run out of fuel. When we got close to our destination (and by close, I mean within a couple of hours drive), we dropped one car at Lindberg Landing on the Liard River, which is an impressive river, and continued to Fort Simpson, where the Liard joins the Mackenzie, and becomes truly gargantuan. It was an epic drive, along mostly paved roads, and we saw black bears, sandhill cranes, marmots, bison, and even a wolf along the way. The drive gave me a renewed sense of how big this country is. But as far North as we were, we were still below the Arctic Circle. According to Google maps if I had boarded a plane and flown further north, it would take another 22 hours to get to Tuktoyaktuk on the Arctic Ocean. What an immense country we live in!



(slide) From Fort Simpson we caught a float plane to just above Virginia Falls, (slide) a waterfall twice the height of Niagara Falls. For the next nine days and eight nights we were as far from civilization as I have ever been. By day we floated by raft and inflatable



kayak down the Nahanni River; by night we slept in sleeping bags and tents, on air mattresses that were only a centimetre or two thick. Mine had a slow leak and every couple of hours I would wake up to feel the cold, hard ground was a little too close for comfort. It was marvelous!



In 1978, Nahanni National Park Reserve became the first site in the world to be granted World Heritage status by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), in recognition of the uniqueness of its



natural history. The Nahanni is one of the world's few examples of an antecedent river, a river that is older than the mountains it dissects. The river has cut deep canyons, which UNESCO calls the "finest examples of river canyons in the world, north of 60°."

(slide) I was struck by how wild the area is, how we could spend days on the river and only see one other party of canoers, and the beauty of the mountain terrain. Gillian's stepfather Bob is a geophysicist and was constantly exclaiming about what the steep canyon walls revealed about the geology of the area. (Slide) There on the canyon walls beside us was evidence of millions of years of pressure and



movement, vast amounts of sediment from ancient seas compressed into layers of rock that were then heaved and warped and broken by enormous tectonic forces. It all made me feel pretty puny, pretty tiny, like the blink of an eye in geological time. And beyond the things we could see, there were many questions around every corner, questions that even

geophysicist Bob didn't know the answers to. We found some animal bones in a creek bed, but couldn't identify the animal. Further up we found the horn from a Dall mountain sheep, but never saw a living sheep. We saw paw prints of black bears and found the droppings of grizzlies, but rarely saw a wild animal. There was a lot going on around us that we were oblivious to.

As Paul Simon sings, "These are the days of miracle and wonder..."

- Everywhere you look, miracle and wonder.
- Everywhere you don't look, miracle and wonder.
- Everywhere you can't look, miracle and wonder.

Being in the wilderness gives you an acute sense of your own vulnerability. One day, as we made camp, we were startled by a black shape and a sudden crashing through the undergrowth. It was a black bear, (slide) and it had been in the bushes less than fifteen feet from one of our tents. Fortunately we startled it as much as it startled us, and it ran away in a safe direction. We saw a few black bears, mostly from a safe distance, making their way



along the river's edge. But in such a remote area, you develop an acute sense that humans are not at the top of the food chain. So we carried bear spray constantly, but never had to use it. Besides black bears, there are grizzlies, wolves and cougars, none of which prey on humans, and most of which are more scared of us

than we of them. But in the wrong circumstances, any of those animals could do us serious harm.

We are vulnerable for other reasons as well: a rock slide, a stumble in a steep place, a flash flood in a narrow valley – there are many ways you can get seriously hurt in the wild, and being so far from medical care, you gain an acute sense that nature can be cruel and callous. This is the other side of creation. Most of the time, the natural world is relatively reliable and predictable, but sometimes it is horrifyingly chaotic and destructive. Tectonic plates shift, volcanoes erupt, storms ravage, random mutations cause cancer or birth defects, infectious diseases devastate populations. This is the dark side of the created order.

It is no accident, therefore that the Bible begins with storm and chaos and darkness and deep. The story in the first chapter of Genesis is not abstract statement, but pastoral message addressed to a people in exile, to a people in chaos. When the Babylonian armies swept through Jerusalem in 587 BC, destroyed the temple, murdered thousands, put many of the rest in chains and transported them hundreds of miles to the northeast, it created the greatest crisis in Israelite history.

Like the native experience in residential schools, the Jewish exile disrupted family life, undermined culture, community and language, and raised troubling questions about God's faithfulness. To the ancient mind, if your nation was defeated in battle then the victorious nation's gods had beaten your gods. So it was perhaps natural that Israelites wondered: had Marduk and the Babylonian pantheon defeated the Israelite God Yahweh? It was a chaotic time.

And to that experience of chaos and storm and darkness and deep, a voice speaks: "Let there be light! Be still!" It is the powerful voice of God, ordering creation. God is no longer understood as a tribal god who had chosen Israel, but as the power behind all that is, the one who can call all creation into existence. The liberating God is now revealed as the power behind creation. God's power does not demand, but invites. It is not oppressive power, but gracious power. It is an astonishing proclamation. To a people in chaos, torn by doubt and worry and disillusionment, the story speaks of a powerful, gracious word of God which can order chaos, bringing light out of darkness, solid ground under our feet, and variety out of oppressive conformity.

In the midst of trouble and struggle, when life is unfair, when children are neglected and abused too often, when the good die young and the unjust prosper, when gentle breezes are less obvious than earthquakes and storms, the story

assures us that God's creation is still good. The chaos is not yet completely overcome, and still does untold damage, but God is at work.

And in the midst of this creation, the human has a special and unique role. The human is named as the image of God, in God's likeness, the one creature able to reflect God's gracious and self-giving love to the rest of creation. And that means that in the face of chaos, suffering and strife, in spite of how puny we may feel in the face of millions of years of geological time and vast distances, we still have enormous power and enormous responsibility. Humans can certainly exploit tragedy, block compassion and bring further chaos, or we can bring light love and peace through our generosity and care, as we do when we reach out to anybody that is going through struggle and suffering. There is perhaps no more horrible form of suffering than loneliness and pretty much any kind of pain is much easier to bear when we know that we are not alone, that people care, that God cares.

There is a wonderful old tale, about some students asking a rabbi when night ends and day begins. "Does it begin when there is enough light to see a human figure silhouetted against the sky?" one asks. The rabbi shakes his head. Another student asks, "Does night end and day begin when you can tell the colour of another's shirt?" The rabbi shakes his head. A third student asks, "Does night end and day begin when you can see well enough to recognize a person's face?" Again the rabbi shakes his head. The students give up, and the rabbi speaks: "Night has ended and the day has begun when you can look into your enemy's eyes and recognize your brother or sister." When that happens, when we look into someone's eyes with compassion, then we know that God has created again, bringing peace out of chaos, light out of darkness, love out of apathy, and life out of death. Let it be. Amen.

Genesis 1:1 – 2:3 – a new paraphrase, by Ross Smillie

In the beginning
 the very beginning,
before life,
 before light,
 before time,
 before God created the heavens and the earth,
there was a void, an abyss,
 and over the deep was darkness,
all was formless and chaotic
 and a mighty wind from God
 stirred up the face of the waters.

Then God spoke,
 saying, “Let there be light!”
And there was light.
 And God enjoyed the light, for it was good.
So it was that light was separated from the darkness,
 And God called the light Day, and the darkness Night.
The Night, the Day, and the first day came to an end.

Then God spoke,
 Saying “Let there be sky!”
And so it was that the chaotic wind and waters were calmed
 And the waters separated, some above the sky and some below.
The Night, the Day, and the second day came to an end.

Then God spoke,
 Saying, “Let the waters below the sky gather together so that there may be dry land!”
So it was, and God called the dry land Earth, and the gathered waters were called Seas.
 And God enjoyed what had been made, for it was good.
Then God spoke,
 Saying, “Let plants and trees grow from the earth,
 and let them bring forth seeds and fruits.”
So it was, and the earth brought forth vegetation,
 plants bearing seeds of every kind
 and trees bearing fruits of every kind.
And God enjoyed what had been made, for it was good.
 The Night, the Day, and the third day came to an end.

Then God spoke,
 Saying, “Let there be lights in the sky to separate the day from the night,
 To give light and to mark times and seasons and days and years.
And so it was.
 God made the two great lights

The greater light to rule the day
and the lesser light to rule the night.

And God enjoyed what had been made, for it was good.
The Night, the Day, and the fourth day came to an end.

Then God spoke,
Saying, "let the waters teem with creatures, and let the sky be filled with birds!"
And so it was.

God made every living thing that moves, of every kind, in great variety,
From the great whales of the sea to the smallest hummingbird.
And God enjoyed what had been made, for it was good.
God blessed them, saying "Be fruitful and multiply:
Creatures of the waters, fill the lakes and rivers and seas;
Creatures of the air, fill the skies!"

The Night, the Day, and the fifth day came to an end.

Then God spoke,
Saying, "Let the earth be filled with creatures:
Insects and animals and other creatures of every kind."

And so it was.
God made every kind of wild animal, and cattle and other beasts suitable for livestock,
And every kind of creature that creeps on the ground.
And God enjoyed what had been made, for it was good.

Then God spoke,
Saying, "Let us make humans to reflect our image,
Able to live in our likeness,
So that they can be responsible for the fish in the sea, the birds in the air,
The cattle, the wild animals and every creeping thing on the earth.

God created human beings to reflect God's image
Male and female God created them.
And God blessed them, saying "Be fruitful and multiply,
Fill the earth and till the soil.

Be responsible for the fish in the sea and the birds in the air
and every living thing that moves on the earth.

I have put into your hands
every plant that produces seed
and every tree that bears fruit
to be your food.

To all animals and birds, everything that moves and breathes,
I give whatever grows out of the ground for food.

And it was so.
God cherished everything that had been made, for indeed it was very good.
The Night, the Day, and the sixth day came to an end.

And that is how the heavens and the earth were made,
 Along with all their inhabitants.
And on the seventh day God finished the work,
 By resting.
And so God blessed the seventh day and made it a Holy Day,
 Because on that day God finished the work by resting.