

Wonder vs. Worship
(Creation as the Basis for the Jesus Story)
John 1:1-3, Colossians 1:15-17, Hebrews 1:1-3

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During the Poetry Project events in this sanctuary last weekend, we were led in a number of songs. For someone of a literal bent or a theological bent, the songs were a little confusing, drawn as they were from various traditions. Some were gospel songs or Latin chants; some were African greetings or Hindu children's songs. The only one that made me wonder if *Yahweh Sabaoth*, the Lord of Hosts, would come down upon us was the song to Mother Earth. We told her that we loved her and we asked her to bless us, or something like that. We sang to her the way Christians would sing to God or Christ.

Is there anything wrong with that? Is that like singing to America, America—personifying something that is not a person? Or is there something else going on—at least for the devotees who led the song—when they sing of Mother Earth as a living conscious being? Some of my friends who aren't comfortable speaking of God speak of "the Universe." They say "the Universe didn't want that to happen" the way another generation would say "it wasn't God's will." The goal of spirituality, for them, is getting in touch with the Earth or getting in touch with the Universe. Is that the same thing as developing a relationship with the living God?

What I share with my friends is a sense of wonder at the natural world. Even a single wave—as in Grace Luddy's photographs—can be a source of endless amazement. From the Rocky Mountains to the rounded rocks of Block Island beaches, everything is astounding. Plants are endlessly complex and flowers are endlessly beautiful. The workings of a single cell are beyond our comprehension. Our own bodies are a mystery to us, and the more we learn about how the human brain works the more incredible it seems. The only possible response if you are awake to the world is wonder.

I like the Zen practice of focusing my attention on the thing-in-itself rather than seeing it as referring to something else. Only by looking at the rock as a rock or the teacup as a teacup do I have an avenue into the essence of things. But as a Christian my wonder at the natural world always moves to wonder at the skill and power and imagination of the being who could call it into existence. Wonder leads to worship—not of nature but of its Creator.

I have long been touched by a quotation from Katherine Mansfield. She was a short story writer from the beginning of the twentieth century, a free-thinker, an early feminist, and an atheist. She wrote in a letter about standing in a lovely spot in the Alps: "If only one could make some small grasshoppery sound of praise to someone, of thanks to someone, but to who?"

Christian theologians have often said that God has left us two books: the book of Scripture and the book of Nature. The beauty and complexity of the natural world—perhaps even its fierceness and violence—reveal something to us about the one who created it. John Calvin wrote that "[God] revealed himself and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe...he shows his glory to us, whenever we and wherever we cast our gaze....this skillful ordering of the universe is for us a sort of mirror in which we can contemplate God."

Nature is sacred, but it is not God. A contemporary theologian at Cambridge University has written, "The Bible has de-divinized nature, but it has not de-sacralized nature. Nature remains sacred in the sense that it belongs to God, exists for the glory of God, even reflects the glory of God, as humans also do. The respect, even the reverence, that other creatures inspire in us is just as it should be. It leads us not to worship creation...but to worship *with* creation" [Richard Bauckham in *Living with Other Creatures*:

Green Exegesis and Theology]. I wonder at the earth on this Earth Day and every day, but the reverence I feel for the earth and other creatures ultimately points me to a reverence for God.

The important thing is the way we think about the source of all things. Is our source the earth itself, or the universe, or is there a Creator? I dare not use the word “Creationism.” Belief in creation often means the fundamentalist view that if you can’t believe that the world is 6,000 year old, then you can’t believe in Jesus, because faith depends on a literal interpretation of the Bible. I don’t have a problem with God using evolution over a very long period of time to create the world we know.

It’s not important to take Genesis 1 literally as six 24-hour days—the Hebrew text *itself* doesn’t seem to be intended literally. (The sun isn’t even there until the fourth day, and the point of the six-day scheme is to tell us to observe the Sabbath.) It didn’t bother the final editors of Genesis that the story in chapter 1 and the story in chapter 2 don’t match.

What *matters* to the authors of Genesis and to Jews and Christians through the ages is that *God* made everything, and God made us. The source of all things is not things themselves, nor a chaos or soup that preceded them. Everything that is was called into being by God. This world is no accident; it is God’s idea. Human beings are God’s idea, too. We are first of all *creatures*, not self-made but dependent, a consequence of God’s action, not self-determined. But we are also created in God’s image and we are designed to reflect God’s goodness and to be in relationship with God.

The world is not God, but the world *is* good. Christians make a terrible mistake when they fall into the Greek trap of saying that spirit is good and matter is bad—or following Plato’s notion that this is not the real world, the real world is the ideal realm of forms above. Christians are first of all Jewish—and only secondarily Greek or Western. If you read the New Testament without taking Genesis 1 seriously, you warp it. The Bible is clear: This world is the real world. This is the world God intended. This is the world that God will restore and make right.

The whole earth matters to God. Listen to the words of the German scholar Claus Westermann: The simple fact that the first page of the Bible speaks about heaven and earth, the sun, moon, and stars, about birds, fish, and animals, is a certain sign that the God whom we acknowledge in the Creed as the Father of Jesus Christ is concerned with all these creatures, and not merely with humans. A God who is understood only as the god of humankind is no longer the God of the Bible [*Genesis 1-11: a Commentary*, trans. J. J. Scullion, SJ, Augsburg, 1984, p. 176].

So yes, it is obvious from Genesis 1 that God cares about the earth and all its creatures. They were not made for *our* benefit only. Humans did not even exist when God made them. They have their own goodness, utterly apart from us. And in Genesis 2, the humans are assigned the task of *caring* for the garden.

Now contrast what we can call “creation monotheism” with the two main alternative views: (1) Valuing heaven instead of earth, as if the nature were evil and no longer of concern to God, and (2) Worshiping the earth as a spirit being, as if everything *is* God, or God is *in* everything. The Christian view is rooted in the Jewish view:

- 1) God created the world as good, but separate and less than God.
- 2) The current state of affairs on the earth is largely the result of human choices.
- 3) God will someday bring peace and justice and flourishing to the earth through his Messiah.

See the damage that the *Left Behind* view of the world does to our Biblical faith? That view—that Jesus is coming to take us *out* of this world to a heavenly world—misses the whole idea that Jesus is establishing the kingdom of God on earth and that he came to make things right. Jesus is not finished; the Messiah has yet to bring peace and justice and flourishing to the earth, but it is in process and it will happen.

The *Left Behind* view is a virus that infected parts of the church in the 19th century, and has led to a lot of other-worldly-ism. It has done as much damage to the faith as Plato and the notion that the real world is the spiritual one. Both ideas lead to neglecting the earth rather than taking care of it. The prophets say that the will of God is for plants and animals and humans to flourish on earth in a state of *shalom*; it is not God's will for the earth to be depleted or destroyed.

Jesus did not come to take us out of this world but to bring God's rule *to* this world. Salvation in the New Testament does not mean being taken out of this world to dwell in heaven. Salvation is the Messiah coming to bring the life of the age to come, the Messianic age (also translated "eternal life"). It is Messiah bringing an age of peace and justice and flourishing. Salvation is the new heaven and the new earth *merged* in the book of Revelation. It will be complete when the kingdom comes (as we pray) on earth and God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

The understanding of God as the Creator of the world is essential to understanding who Jesus is. In his recent book *When God Became King* [HarperOne, 2012], N. T. Wright says that Jesus came to complete the two big stories in Genesis and Exodus—the creation of the world and the creation of Israel. Jesus is God's way of bringing to fulfillment the creation—making the world right and restoring the image of God in humanity. Jesus is also God's way of bringing to fulfillment the covenant he made with Israel—by means of installing the Messiah/God-with-us as King of Israel and King of the world.

But there is one more leap I am going to ask you to make. The early Christians understood the cross-resurrection-ascension event as the beginning of the new age under Jesus the Messiah. But they understood—from the very earliest evidence we have of the early church's worship, in the 40's most likely—that this Messiah was not a human that God had chosen to reign; this Messiah was God coming to earth as one of us. Jesus was God become human. Jesus was now to be worshiped as God—and as the Creator of the world.

If we assume that Jesus had a starting point when he was born as a baby, this is pretty hard to accept. How can we say he created a world before he was born? But what the early Christians understood was that when Jesus was born he was actually the eternal God who existed before the universe—making himself small in order to remake the world and remake us. Only in this way could God remake and restore the human race to what he intended.

So in the passages Martha read to us you have this startling assertion that *Jesus Christ* created the world. John says "All things came into being through him." Colossians says "By him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible...all things were created through him and for him." You can't understand Jesus if you don't understand the God of Genesis 1—and vice versa. Hebrews says Jesus Christ is the agency "through whom God created the worlds." All of these passages are poetic. The first two were probably sung before they were put on paper, as early hymns.

What does this mean to us? Obviously it means that Jesus is to be worshiped along with God. But I think it also means that there is no great divide between nature and grace. Sometimes we act as if the natural world, the real world, is down here, and the realm of the spiritual, the realm of grace, is up here. But the New Testament is trying to tell us that it is all one. There is only one world. This is what God becoming human has revealed to us: that the God who made us is not one who operated at the beginning of time and then kept his distance. The God of Israel's history, the God of liberation and justice, is the same God who suffered as Jesus as victim to the forces of history. We have not been made all wrong from the beginning and need to be remade entirely to be worth anything. No, Jesus made us in his image and he is continually at work in us to restore that image in us.

The hymn we sang earlier begins with a remarkable title for Jesus: "Fairest Lord Jesus, Ruler of all nature." I'm thinking about that as we approach Earth Day. The One who loves me is the One who created everything and holds it together and rules over the natural world. He will not let it come to

nothing, ultimately. He came to make it new. Paul says, “If anyone is united with Christ through faith, there is a new creation.” If you build your life around Jesus as your Creator, your Savior and Lord, then something profound happens. Creation starts over for you. The image of God in you is remade, and the life of the new age, the age when the world will be restored, begins for you.