

The Amazing Cosmos
February 8, 2009

The first chapter of Genesis deals with so many important subjects. I could preach sermons on at least ten different topics based on Genesis 1. Usually when this first creation narrative is told, we focus on how God brought order to the chaos, how human beings are created in God's image, or how God rested on the seventh day, which encourages us to implement the rhythms of Sabbath rest in our own lives. The verses I selected to read today are some of the more neglected ones in this magnificent opening chapter of the Bible. They focus on the importance of and the intricate details involved in God's creation of plants, vegetation, birds, fish, and land mammals. Listen now to God's word from Genesis 1.

Genesis 1:9-13, 20-25:

And God said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called the Seas. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it." And it was so. Then earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky." So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth." And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind." And it was so. God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good. (Prayer)

These verses from Genesis 1 help us, as human beings, to get a sense of perspective. Yes, God created us in God's own image, but the Lord also made every living creature that moves, as small as the mosquito and as big as the elephant. The Lord made us in all our biodiversity and saw that it was indeed good that all the plants, animals, and humans would have a place here on this earth.

In Genesis 1, God tells humanity that we have the responsibility to be good stewards or caretakers of creation. Over the centuries, Christians have misused and misinterpreted God's command for us to have dominion over the earth. Some falsely believe that we have permission to do whatever is most convenient and profitable for

humans, with no regard to its cost to this earth. But, to borrow a phrase from CNN, our “Planet is in Peril.” In 1900, the world produced 150 million barrels of oil. In 2000, it produced 28 billion barrels, an increase of over 180-fold. In 2006, the world pumped 31 billion barrels of oil, but discovered fewer than 9 billion barrels of new oil.¹ Our world oil reserves are dropping rapidly. Human activity is destroying the natural habitats of many creatures, which has led to the extinction of several species, pollution levels are making it dangerous for some people to even go outside on certain smog-filled days, and ocean levels are rising due to the melting polar ice caps. Global warming is real. The scientific evidence is clear and overwhelming. What is our response as people of faith? All of us have a responsibility for taking care of the planet God has entrusted to our care.

The author and theologian Sallie McFague suggests that the first step, for us as Christians, is to use different language for talking about God and ourselves. Rather than focusing on our individualistic desires and interests, McFague argues that the Christian is called to think about the common good since all of us, including the animals, are God’s creatures.²

The biblical witness, especially texts focusing on creation, supports McFague’s view of an interconnected, interdependent world. How many creation stories do you think there are in Scripture? Most people assume that there is only one; others have noticed that Genesis has two creation stories. Genesis 1 describes God’s creation of the heavens and the earth in seven days, although that does not mean seven literal days. In Genesis 2 and 3, we hear the second creation narrative, the story of how God created Adam from the dust of the earth and then made Eve as his partner in the Garden of Eden.

Many of you already know that I have started my Doctorate of Ministry, a part-time degree intended to benefit pastors and the churches they are serving. This January, I took a course on God’s “Word for a Warming World: The Bible, Creation, and the Science of Wonder.” Our professor, William Brown, began the class by pointing to Proverbs 9:1, which speaks of the seven pillars of creation. During our course, we studied seven Old Testament creation texts. These seven pillars are passages that give us a picture of who God is as Creator. The texts that are being read this morning from Job, Genesis, and Psalms are three of the seven pillars that we studied which speak of creation. Why read all three on the same Sunday? We examine the contributions of all three because the Bible does not speak as a single, monotone voice saying the same thing over and over again. Instead, the Bible provides a great chorus of voices; looking at the biblical witness in concert can help us see God our Creator through the richness and diversity of all of these accounts. It is not a matter of having to choose which one is right and which one is wrong. Each text communicates how a different person has experienced God. Listen now with a sense of wonder to the Psalmist’s account of creation.

¹ Lester R. Brown, Plan B 3.0: Mobilizing to Save Civilization, p. 27.

² Sallie McFague, A New Climate for Theology, p. 3.

Psalm 104:24-30:

How manifold are your works, O Yahweh! You have made them all in wisdom! The earth is stock full of your creatures! There is the sea, both vast and wide. There are creeping things beyond count, living things small and great. There go the ships, and there is Leviathan, with which you fashioned to play! All of them wait for you to provide their food in due time. You give to them, and they gather it up; you open your hand, and they are well satisfied. You hide your face, and they are terrified. You take away their breath, and they expire and return to their dust. You send back your breath, and they are recreated. You renew the face of the earth.³

One: This is the Word of the Lord. **All: Thanks be to God!**

A children's book written by Robert Wells entitled Is a Blue Whale the Biggest Thing There Is?, has helped give me the perspective to see how big our universe is. Wells begins his book with the largest animal on earth, the blue whale. Just the flippers on its tail are bigger than most animals on earth. But a blue whale is not anywhere as big as a mountain. If you put one hundred whales in a huge jar, you could put millions of whale jars inside a hollowed-out Mount Everest.

Even Mount Everest is tiny compared to the size of our entire planet. But the earth is not anywhere near as big as the sun. You could fit one million earths inside of the sun. But our sun, which is a medium-size star, isn't anywhere as big as a red supergiant star called Antares. Fifty million of our suns could fit inside of Antares. But Antares is not anywhere as big as the Milky Way galaxy. Billions of stars, including supergiants like Antares, make up the Milky Way. But the Milky Way galaxy is not anywhere near as big as the universe. There are billions of other galaxies in the universe.

And the Creator of this massive universe is God, who through the Holy Spirit's power, brought it all into being. The size of our universe boggles my mind and humbles me. It makes me realize just how big God is and how small of a piece of the puzzle that we even are exposed to. In light of creation's grandeur and majesty, great is our God and greatly to be praised!⁴

The language in Psalm 104 helps us understand the proper relationship between God and humanity. All the verbs the psalmist uses to describe God are active verbs. God made, God fashioned, God provides, God gives, God hides, God takes away, sends back, recreates, and renews. On the other hand, all the verbs in Psalm 104 associated with human beings are responsive. God provides, then we wait; God gives, then we gather what God gives us; the Lord hides God's face, then we are terrified. God takes away our breath, and then we expire.

In our goal-oriented society, we are encouraged to make long-range plans. Many feel anxious about our future and believe that we should know exactly what is ahead of us. High school students often feel the pressure to know what their intended college major will be and what their career path is, all at the age of seventeen. But Psalm 104

³ This is William Brown's translation of Psalm 104:24-30.

⁴ From Craig Brian Larson and Leadership Journal. 750 Engaging Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Writers, p. 201.

tells us that we are lying to ourselves if we think we have control of how our life will unfold. A phone call in the middle of the night, an unexpected battle, or a surprising gift can turn our lives upside down. Rather than becoming unglued when things do not turn out the way we planned, Psalm 104 invites us to be resilient and to ask ourselves, “How can we respond constructively to the curve balls life has thrown our way?” We cannot stop misfortune from coming our way, but we can seek to rise above unfortunate circumstances.

Job certainly knows what it is like to face tremendous hardships. Most people associate the book of Job with human suffering, rather than creation. Job, a righteous man, loses everything. He loses his fortune, his livestock, his health, and all of his children are killed. This good man cries out in anguish and grief over the loss of his sons and daughters. When I feel overwhelmed and wonder how much more I can take, I turn to Job for comfort, not because the book gives easy, pat answers, but because it is honest about the struggles we all face and the questions we ask amidst the valleys of life. Job’s so-called friends come to visit him, declaring that he is experiencing divine punishment, but Job develops a voice of protest. He wants God to account for what has happened to him, but for thirty-seven chapters, God is silent. Job wants to ask God why life can seem so unfair and why suffering is such a bitter part of the human experience.

Suddenly, in a whirlwind, God comes to Job. Note that God does not answer Job’s questions; the Lord, not Job, sets the agenda for their conversation. God instead points to the majesty of creation. Job wants to talk about his own experience, but God opens his eyes to see the glories of the cosmos.

How many of you remember the television program *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* from the 1980s? Now MTV has a show *Cribs*, which is based on a similar idea. On both shows, celebrities invite camera crews over to their homes to show off their fancy mansions. God is giving Job a tour like those celebrities do, but remember that God’s house is the entire expanse of the cosmos. With delight, God reveals to Job what was involved when the Lord formed the foundations of the earth, set the skies in their place, and sends forth lightning.

Nikola Tesla is the scientist who invented the method of generating electricity through an alternating current. Many people regard him as a greater scientific mind than the better-known Alexander Graham Bell. During storms, Tesla would sit on a couch by his window. When lightning struck, he would applaud: one genius was recognizing the work of another. Tesla could appreciate better than anyone the wonder of lightning because he had spent years studying electricity. The more we reflect on God’s mighty works as Creator, the more deeply we will applaud all of the Lord’s impressive work.

G.K. Chesterton once said, “The world is not lacking in wonders, but in a sense of wonder.” God’s wonders are all around us. Go from here with your eyes wide open at the beauty and majesty of God’s creation. May we, like Tesla, be prepared to applaud at God’s amazing cosmos. Thanks be to God that we are a small part in God’s plan for the enormous expanse of the universe! Amen.