

Genesis 2: 4 – 22, John 1: 1 - 5 Newtonbrook United Church February 21, 2010
We Sing of God's Creation; a sermon by Rev. Allan Baker

There are different explanations on how creation came to be. Which ones do you subscribe to? In this 21st century, how does the creation story of the Bible fit with scientific knowledge, and how do we talk to others about the “how” and “why” of creation?

As this season of Lent begins, we are about to begin a journey of questions about creation, ecology, and our role in creation as disciples of Jesus – the One who we profess to follow. We will also reflect on our complicity in the destruction of the environment that God created to nurture life on earth. Are we called in this time of environmental destruction and climate change to interpret our scriptures differently?

In the Book of Genesis there are two stories for creation; the first tells the story of God creating all that is over a period of seven days. You're probably very familiar with the sequence of God creating everything in six days, and resting on the seventh. Ellen has just read to us the second account of creation that is in the Bible; one that is less frequently quoted, but it is in our scriptures, right after the first story.

In the Gospel According to John, there is spiritual statement that when creation began – implying a beginning, and that is an important concept because there are spiritual traditions that state that creation has always existed - the Word was with God, and the Word was God. *Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.*¹

This is similar to the statement in the Hebrew Scriptures – a book of the wisdom genre called Ecclesiastes – where it is written that:

*“That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is.”*²

In our modern day science, called physics, we call this the principle of the conservation of energy. Albert Einstein's theory of relativity shows that energy and mass are the same thing, and that neither one appears without the other. *“That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is.”*³ The ancient authors of Ecclesiastes have taught us wisdom for the ages. What about the creation stories of Genesis – are they relevant to our lives today?

There is “modern”, or scientific answer to the question of “how” the universe came to be. It is called the “Big Bang” theory of creation.

In the scientific story of creation, everything began approximately 14 billion years ago – that's a long time ago, even before I had hair on my head! In this story, the universe has been developing – some would say evolving – ever since. In our New Creed we affirm that: *“God has created, and is creating.”* Creation, according to our understanding of the Christian faith, is on on-going process.

¹ John 1:3

² Ecclesiastes 3: 15

³ Ecclesiastes 3: 15

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Bruce Sanguin, a United Church of Canada minister in British Columbia, has struggled with the fact that we have both a scientific and a faith story that respond to the "HOW" question – how did the universe come to be? He asks;

*"Can we create liturgies, sing hymns, preach sermons, and do mission in a manner that honours both stories? It is time for the church (he writes) to come home to a radiant universe. This will require some very intentional updating of what it means to be church, based on a new cosmology and on the insights of the scientific community."*⁴

What Sanguin is referring to is the old model of a three story universe; of heaven above the earth, and hell below. In the 21st century we know that the earth orbits the sun; which is a part of the Milky Way galaxy, etc. Yet, in church, we continue to sing hymns that indicate that heaven is somewhere "above." Heaven is "up there." While our scientifically trained minds "know" that we do not live in a three story universe, we continue to sing hymns in church that reinforce this false concept of reality. We even fail to pay attention to the words of Jesus that say that the Kingdom of God is within us.

Bruce Sanguin writes that,

*"Our images and models of God, the way we worship, the songs we sing, our prayers to a satellite God – whom we expect to beam back answers from some location outside the universe – just don't fit the spiritually inclined. ... We need new wineskins for the new wine the Holy One is pouring out in the 21st century."*⁵

This is, of course, a reference to the words of Jesus – a prophetic, religious reformer. They are words that the church likes to forget. We also fail to pay attention to God's statement: *"I am creating a new heaven and a new earth"*⁶.

Our constant challenge, as in the days of John Wesley, is to renew our religious ways that have become encrusted over time. Our religious ways, as Sanguin implies, are like a kettle that has not been cleaned for ages. The scale of calcium deposits on the inside of kettles that are not cleaned renders them less and less efficient over time. Worship can be like that. The mission of a congregation can be like that – without a cleansing review to look at effectiveness and relevance the mission of a congregation can become less and less effective. This often leaves people wondering why the congregation isn't as effective as it used to be. Although we know that we live in a continually evolving creation, we in the church often profess to seek new wine for our traditional wineskins.

Lent is a time of reflection. This is an opportunity for each of us to examine our way of life, and our spiritual traditions, and to discern if we are attempting to pour new wine into old wineskins.

⁴ Bruce Sanguin, Darwin, Divinity and the Dance of the Cosmos, page 27

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⁶ Isaiah 65:17

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Let's go back to the reading from Genesis today. In this version of the creation story;

*"The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it."*⁷

In Genesis 1, after God had created human beings in God's image, it is recorded that;

*"God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the face of the earth."*⁸

There is quite a difference in the purpose of life in these two stories. It is my opinion that our society has been operating on the basis of the Genesis One story – and we have had dominion over the cod fishery of Atlantic Canada, and the salmon fishery of the Pacific coast; and the fresh water fisheries of Lake Ontario and Lake Erie, and of the Don River.

I believe that it is time to listen to the other story in our scriptures – one that says our purpose in this garden of creation is to **"till it and keep it."**

This is new wine in our reading of the scriptures. It means sustainability, not exploitation of the earth for human purposes. It means living in an inter-connected world, not a hierarchy. Can we change from domination of God's world to living with respect in it?

David Korten writes about the power of changing the stories by which we live, and changing the world as a result.

*"We are an intelligent, self-aware, choice-making species participating in an epic creative journey. When Creation bestowed on us humans a capacity for wise and creative choice, it was presumably with the intention that we use this capacity to beneficial ends."*⁹

We have the opportunity as a community of faith to tell the story differently. We can see the results of how a story of "dominion" over creation is turning out, and how we are in fact complicit in the destruction of the garden of Eden. During this Lenten Journey we will be looking at other aspects of how our understanding of the scriptures needs to be changed in order that we might, as God offered, "choose life". Our United Church of Canada theologian Douglas Hall says;

*"Surely Christian mission today means the stewardship of life in this kingdom of death."*¹⁰

In the writings of the prophet Isaiah we read that God is making all things new. We have an opportunity to sing about our role in that process, a process of pouring new wine into new wineskins.

⁷ Genesis 2: 15 NRSV

⁸ Genesis 1: 28 NRSV

⁹ David Korten, *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community*, page 353

¹⁰ Douglas John Hall, *The Stewardship of Life in the Kingdom of Death*, page 13

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Hymn # 258 in Voices United – O World of God

Questions for Reflection:

- 1) What is significant in the Genesis passage about God creating “woman” last if there is an ascending order of creation?
- 2) What can we learn from the Genesis story about our relationship with others?
- 3) What does the Genesis passage teach us about our original nature and character? Our tasks in life? Our likeness to God?
- 4) If God is doing a new thing, what is our role as church in participating in this “new thing”?