



KALAMAZOO

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

Sermons

Down to the River to Pray
April 23, 2017 – Second Sunday of Easter

Genesis 1:20-31 Ezekiel 37:1-10
The Rev. Elizabeth Candido

Roland Emmerich tells a scary story about climate change in his 2004 movie, *The Day After Tomorrow*. This is the sort of movie that plays on TV while you are folding laundry on Saturday afternoon. The movie is an apocalyptic drama in which the earth fights back against humans. The basic thesis is that humans have caused such disastrous climate change that the earth is forced to “right” itself, and over about a three-day period, the climate plunges itself into a very deep ice age with horrific storms. Most of humanity is wiped out in the disastrous freeze but a few heroes survive. A group hides out in the New York Public library where they burn copies of the tax codes to stay alive. It is fun, campy, and a decent thriller. Climate Change is the bad guy of the film, and while humanity has caused this calamity, it will also be human ingenuity and the human spirit of striving that will ultimately save those who survive. While this is not an important movie, it is a story we share and stories are important. The stories we tell about ourselves, about our world, shape us and call us to action.

One final scene from the movie is a glimpse of earth from the space station after all the storms are over and the world is beautiful in all of its snow-covered glory. It is the famous blue marble earth picture but refreshed with a snow. There is something very powerful about seeing our earth as a glowing orb floating in space. It poses a sort of hypothetical question, what will you do with this world of ours? I was listening to Neil Degrease Tyson’s *Star Talk* podcast the other day and he mentioned that it was just shortly after the now famous earth rise picture was taken and popularized in the late 1960s that the Environmental Protection Agency was founded in America. It is a powerful image, our earth, floating in space. It reflects back at us a deep truth that we might otherwise be willing to ignore. Seeing our planet, so singular and fragile shows us the reality of what another story was trying to tell us.

In the Genesis creation story, God creates earth, separating day from night, land from water. Constituting life and abundance where there was nothingness before. Each day’s labor ends with God looking upon the work God has done and declaring it good. This story matters for many reasons, but for its earliest readers, perhaps the most important thing about this story was the repeated insistence that the world was good. We know that this first genesis creation came into circulation around 7th century BCE, a very long time ago. If you look at other creation stories from about that same period in the same part of the world they are a lot like ours. They include creation, primordial waters, land being separated from oceans, etc. Notably though, in those other stories, and in particular the Babylonian one which is perhaps the closest relative, the world that is created is not good. The image of a planet hanging in space isn’t precious and beautiful, it is broken and degraded. Humans are cloying, crying beings whom the Gods resent. The earth is the dead and wasted body of a once glorious being. Work is a punishment that demeans all people.

Our Genesis account is a rebuttal to this mythological worldview. Remember, the Hebrews were a small, minority tribal community. And the Genesis story of creation was a forceful rebuttal to the dominant narrative. The Hebrews heard the stories of creation that their neighbors were telling and they rejected them. “No,” they insisted, “we are the chosen people of God, created to glorify God. This earth was created with intention and love. We work the land as sign of caretaking and love.” Most importantly, the earth, all of it, is good. God looks at it and at us and delights. The story the Hebrews told and the one we continue to tell is a powerful antidote to the Babylonian view. We are gifted life with this world because life is a good thing. There is a moral center to our world, a moral goodness to life. This world we live in, this planet hanging alone in space, God looks upon it and declares it is good. The stories we tell are powerful. They shape us and they call us to action. If we believe the world is good and there is moral value to this world, we treat it with honor. If we look up at the stars at night and see endless wonder and feel ourselves cradled in God’s hand, we know our lives have purpose and meaning. If we see a universe crafted in

awesome and immense splendor, then we feel a responsibility to that grandeur. If we see our tiny marble planet as fragile and in need of our care, then we will protect it. It is this vision that our Genesis story of creation affirms.

Of course, one of those quirky truths about being human is that we can believe more than one thing at the same time. Most of us have a couple of stories operating in the background at any given moment. While most of us would probably affirm, that God loves the world, that this world is good, we do not necessarily live that way. Capitalism has its own version of the creation story and it competes for our attention and even our devotion. In this story, the earth is a benign given. It just is. The value of the earth is created by the things we make from the earth. The value of the damage done to the earth is determined by the loss of pleasure and utility we suffer as a result. Of course, the partner to capitalism is consumption. Humanity consumes the earth because we can. Because it is there. Not because we hate it or think it's bad. But because we see its purpose to be giving us something. Something we want. The story of consumption and capitalism encourages us to think of the earth as a tool as a means and not as an end to itself. We rarely think about whether our tools are good or bad. Tools don't have moral value. A creation story that sees the world as something to be consumed and used isn't concerned with the value of creation in and of itself. I worry that the Christian community has too often acquiesced our responsibility to God's creation story in favor of the background noise of consumption that is always present. Have we come to see the earth as a thing? As having no moral value in and of itself?

Our second scripture reading was the story of the dry bones. God takes the prophet Ezekiel to a field littered with the bones of the dead. God tells Ezekiel to prophesize to the bones and they are knit together into human form with sinew and muscle returning until they stand. However, there is no life in them. God orders Ezekiel one more time, tell them to breathe, prophesize to the breath. Finally, the spirit of God enters into them and those who were once dead were now alive. It is a vision of new life. Of resurrection. Can the dry bones live? Yes, in God, they certainly can. It is Easter now and we tell a different story of resurrection. Not a vision, but a lived example of God bringing back life from a place where only sin and death were possible. This is the central story we tell about who we are as Christians. We are a people who knows that God overcomes and brings new life. And key to our understanding of resurrection is the sure knowledge that it is God, and not our own, whose power brings life over death.

Some Christians have responded to this truth, but declaring climate change a non-concern. After all, God loves us and won't let really bad things happen to us. And some even suggest that Jesus will return before we really need to be concerned about the state of our planet. But as in so many other aspects of life, God doesn't promise to make things easy for us or to save us from ourselves. For the most part, it does seem that God has declined our invitation to serve as our personal clean-up crew. The responsibility for caretaking the earth, as far as I can tell, remains firmly in our hands.

In the movie version of climate change, people think themselves to survival. The heroes use their skills to survive the ice age, but the question hangs at the end of the movie. Are they smart enough to live on the earth in a new way? A way that honors the goodness of the created world? It's a very real question for us all. Can we think our way into a more sustainable earth? Can we create a new technology for carbon capture? Can we develop more sustainable systems of agriculture? Can we create better political systems that protect access to clean air and water and food? Can we live in partnership with our earth?

I would suggest that the only way we can learn to live this way on the earth is by remembering that the earth in and of itself is valuable and good. No matter what we begin to imagine as our technologies of the future, if they don't start there, with that basic affirmation, then we are already lost. The earth, and all the fullness thereof is God's and it is good. In and of itself, it is something to be valued. We cannot breathe life into dead bones. Can the bones live? Of course, they can. If the people call upon the Holy Spirit to breathe new life into our relationship with the planet, of course, they can. It starts with an affirmation of who and what we are. We are God's. We are part of a creation God has called good. In our lungs is the breath of God and we share that sacred air with the birds of the air and the beasts of the field. Our bodies, sinews, flesh and bones are made from the same stuff as the mud beneath our feet and the stars above us. We are marvelous creations in the midst of a universe of marvels. We are perfectly capable of living with this knowledge and truth. The question remains for us always though, will we? Our stories shape us

and call us to action. May we each of us, center our stories in the knowledge that we and the world we inhabit have been looked upon by God and declared to be good. Amen.