

“A Different Pair of Spectacles”

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For this Festival of God's Creation, we have a very short lesson that gets us into the idea that God cares about and is active in all of world, not only in humanity. In our text, Jesus has just been baptized. As he steps out of the water he notices the Spirit – as a dove – descending upon him. Hear our lesson.

Mark 1:12-13

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

“O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!”

Today is the fourth Sunday after Easter. It's also Earth Day, which the Church in its wisdom has rewrapped to highlight a faith connection to an otherwise secular holiday. This is a good thing; after all, as the Psalm 24 tells us, “The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world and its inhabitants too.”

What does the Festival of God's Creation mean to you? Would you close your eyes for a moment? In your mind's eye, picture a perfect spring day. Open all your sense, what do you hear? Smell? Feel?

Now think of the perfect summer evening. Where are you? What are you doing? Even if your focus was on derby cars or Ferris wheels, hopefully you noticed some natural beauty, though, of course, God is present in our vehicles and toys as well as in daisies and spring peepers.

We have a great deal to be thankful for as we survey to lively abundance of God's creation. And yet, I would suggest to you in these minutes that God intends for the earth to be even better. And that God has intended this from the beginning.

Most years, I have used Hebrew Bible lessons – that is, Old Testament lessons – on this day, texts that clearly talk about caring for all of God's creation. Maybe from the first verses of Genesis: “In the beginning when God was creating...” or from the next page, where the second creation story tells us, “In the day that the Lord God made the earth and sky – before any wild plants appeared on the earth, and before any field crops grew ... God formed a human from the soil, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the human became a living being. And God planted a garden; and put the human there. Out of the ground God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. And God took the human and settled him in the garden to tend it and keep it.”

The New Testament has no stories about God creation of the world or about humans' place in creation. There aren't any long passages describing the natural world like we find in the prophets or the Book of Job or the Psalms. The Hebrew Bible speaks of salvation for all of creation. The New Testament is all about human beings. Unfortunately, this has led to centuries of people believing that only we matter.

Yet when we look for a New Testament vision of creation, we can find that views that include that natural world implied here and there or tucked deep in the messages throughout the New Testament. In Mark's gospel alone, we read that John the baptizer was in the wilderness and ate wild honey. God as Spirit alights on Jesus “like a dove” then he spent forty days with wild beasts. Jesus is often on or near the sea and when he's not, he's likely in the country, on the mountain, or in a deserted place. He tells stories of soil and seeds, sun, birds, and thorns; of mustard seeds and shrubs.

There are so many examples of Jesus being present in the physical world. And of his actions to mend it. He calms seas, heals people who are deaf, blind, or mute. He speaks of signs in the sun and stars.

In both the Old and the New Testaments, human history and the natural world are intertwined. They're not two different things held together. It's simply God's world. We miss this when we go to scripture assuming that we know what we'll find there. Yet perhaps if we were to read the New Testament through green lenses, we might find new surprises in store. That's what we try today.

After his baptism, Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness with wild beasts. These animals

represent the nonhuman world. Through them, Mark shows the conflict between humanity and nature. The word wilderness stands for all that is wild and dangerous beyond the edge of civilization. All that threatens human existence.

As Mark's gospel explains it, the very real threat of nature is just one example of God's created order gone awry. Then and now, humankind faced many threats, many forces that are more powerful than we are – storms on the lake, the lack of food in a desert, illness, demons, other human beings and cultures.

As people, as cultures, we fought back against those threats – through learning, through medicine, through agriculture. Until the last two centuries, we humans were only a generation or two away from extinction from natural things like bacteria and starvation. That was then, though. Today, we may be a moment or a lifetime away from extinction also, but it is due to our own choices – to weaponizing and to abusing our earth home.

Although it is not at all explicit, we might wonder if Mark means to imply that human beings are meant to have authority of God's created order – as we find in Genesis – rather than to be oppressed by it.

Mark begins his account by saying, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” The good news is that God is among us, with a goal of restoring . . . not just people but all of creation. God is among us, setting the world aright, realigning everything and again offers us the authority, under God, to care for those forces that have been oppressing people. To care for everything

Through Christ's access to God's power, disciples, then and us today, are sent to exercise that power themselves as we practice authority over the wind and sea, over illness and death.

Have you ever considered that during his time in the desert, Jesus was with the wild beasts and they were no threat to him? Mark is hinting that, Jesus has come to restore creation to its proper order – an order in which human beings are under God and in harmony with the rest of creation, as we exercising God's authority by caring for the animals, plants and rocks. And when we do this, they are no longer such a threat to us.

Centuries before Jesus, the prophet Hosea had spoken of a time in which God would make a covenant with the animals. God would abolish war from the earth and all creatures could lie down in safety. Putting this together with today's scripture, the animals lie down with Jesus because they are safe in his presence. And he, in turn, is safe with them.

As we read Mark's account through those green-tinted spectacles, a picture emerges: Nature is potentially threatening, yet with the arrival of God's kin-dom revealed through the ministry of Christ Jesus, creation is restored. We as human beings are reset into our proper role within creation.

As we grow in faith, we and other followers of Christ participate in the restoration of creation. Isn't that awesome? I mean, I have long accepted the idea that God's creation continues. It was not a once-and -one adventure. But now, through Christ, we are co-creators with God, working to reestablish what has been lost through our own willfulness. We do this by coming into harmony with nature and by working within nature's systems to allow God's order to flourish.

The point I believe we need to take away from this is that even in the New Testament – which seems to be totally about Jesus and about human salvation – all of creation is of a piece.

We are inclined to find differences and separate elements, even when they're really all parts of one thing. We separate eggs, then use the yolks in the lemon custard and the whites for the meringue on top. We separate 3rd graders from 7th graders, math from science, and church from politics. We distance ourselves from each other and from nature. We are good at building walls, but as I only learned years after leaving school, Robert Frost meant the opposite when he said, “Good fences make good neighbors.”

Between us and the mysteries of nature, between us and our neighbors, between us and God, we need connections not walls. If we are going to be able to live in community – and if nature is going to survive at all – we need to accept something we find on the first page of the bible. God creates *all* of it – the sky and soil, the dung beetles and the giant squid, gelatinous lichens, aspens, and us – and only then is it “very good.”

This week I finally learned the meaning of the word *ineffable*. I love it. It's so fitting for us today. When something is ineffable it is too great to be expressed in words. That's God. That's God's hope for all of creation. And that's God's hope for us.