

January 14, 2018

TEXT: Genesis 2:4b–9

TITLE: Christ & Cavemen – part 1

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

On the wall of a cave in southern France 30,000 years ago someone placed their right hand on the cold stone and blew red powder over it. When they lifted up their hand, what was left was a perfect handprint—as if to say “I am here. I exist.” In other caves there is artwork of large animals—creatures long extinct that roamed the hills above the Mediterranean Sea. The handprint artist and the cave painters were like us—part of God’s creation and therefore Children of God. Yet for too long we haven’t talked much about them in church.

In my sermons I strive to provide answers of faith for the questions of today. For today’s sermon and next week’s sermon, I don’t claim to have definitive answers. But I hope we will explore some questions together that need to be asked—and in so doing may we find renewed confidence in God’s activity in our world today based on God’s activity in our world long, long ago.

As far as we can tell, animals very similar to modern humans likely appeared on Earth about 2.5 million years ago. They weren’t particularly distinctive. They certainly weren’t powerful or at the top of the food chain. They were related to other hominids like chimpanzees, orangutans and gorillas, but they were a distinct genus we call “homo”—meaning human. It is fascinating to realize that within this genus, there were several species of humans roaming over the earth: Australopithecus in the South; Homo erectus in Asia; Homo soloensis in Indonesia; Homo denisova in Russia; Homo rudolfensis, Homo ergaster, and the two best known species—Homo neanderthal in Europe and Homo sapiens in Africa. These weren’t groups that evolved from one another in an orderly progression from Australopithecus to modern humans. These were different human beings existing all at once—encountering one another as they migrated in search of food; perhaps interbreeding but more than likely simply killing off one another, given our longstanding violent tendencies.

Over the years, our ancestors developed skills. 800,000 years ago they began to use fire—to stay warm and to cook things. Cooked food is faster to chew and easier to digest than raw food. This freed up time each day for the humans to do things beyond mere survival. In fact, the energy that used to go into hunting and gathering now literally went to their brains. And 70,000 years ago, with their growing skills and brainpower, something incredible happened. Scientists call it the Cognitive Revolution. Around this time humans began to communicate in actual languages. They shared information about their world. They gossiped. They told stories. Suddenly they could work together to kill larger animals, erect larger shelters, and live together in large groups of 150 people or more. Near the end of this Cognitive Revolution the idea arose for things like our artist’s red handprint—a mark left on a cave wall to say “I am here. I am conscious of my existence. I know that I am part of a wide world of life and wonder.”

For too long the church has either pretended the story I've just shared doesn't really exist or that it has no place within our sanctuary walls. Some Christians are embarrassed about evolution. For them either cavemen exist or Adam and Eve exist. So how do we reconcile these two descriptions of our prehistory? Surprisingly the Genesis creation stories are quite helpful for this.

Let's start with Genesis 2—which is actually the oldest creation story in scripture. The Cognitive Revolution happened 70,000 years ago, followed by an Agricultural Revolution that happened 10,000 years ago. Back then *Homo sapiens* mastered the art of cultivating crops like wheat, peas, lentils, and barley, as well as domesticating animals like goats, sheep, and horses. So it is not surprising that the oldest story of creation focuses on agriculture. Listen again to it and notice what are the first living creatures mentioned: *In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, ... no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up* (Genesis 2:4b-5). Whenever this story was first told, its setting was a community that depended on agriculture—on food crops planted near streams of water and tended by people who used tools and the labor of their hands to till the ground and raise these crops.

What's important here is that the first biblical creation story identifies God as the provider of the food of life, the resources we need to survive. Yet one of the sad realities of modern life is that we have no real awareness of where our food comes from and what was involved in getting it to our table. For most of human history people could only eat what was grown by them or near to them and their diet changed according to the different seasons of the year. But our eating habits were transformed about 100 years ago by the invention of grocery stores and improvements in mass transportation. Today you can go to Giant Eagle and buy a bag of mandarin oranges for \$6.00, even though it grew in China, not Pittsburgh. The point is this: God's first act of creation involved food—not cars and computers, but plants and herbs. And not food as a capitalist commodity, but food as the foundation of life for all people. What we eat—what we waste—who is full and who is hungry: All of that involves our faith because it is our most direct connection to our Creator God, who has known us from the dawn of time and still asks us today to till our earthly garden.

The second thing Genesis 2 teaches us comes from verse 7, where it says: *Then the Lord God formed [adam], a human being, from the dust of the ground [adamah] and breathed into the nostrils the breath of life and [adam] became a living being.* We tend to take this verse quite literally. We picture God shaping a creature and breathing into it so that it lived. We see something analogous every time a child is born; when a baby emerges from the waters of the amniotic sac and takes her first breath, it is like creation all over again. But since the creation story first developed in an agricultural setting, of course the language of creation involves the image of God shaping human beings out of earth. However the power and truth of the story lies in the other detail—not the soil, but the gift of God's breath, the spirit of life that turned a mere creature into a conscious, thinking being.

Human consciousness is miraculous. By God's grace and intentionality, it developed over 70,000 years and moved us from being biological creatures into spiritual, conscious, living beings. There is nothing wrong with seeing this consciousness as a gift of God to all Homo sapiens. By this new creative capacity, we can reflect God the Creator. By this new emotional capacity, we can reflect the God who loves us. By this new social capacity, we reflect the Triune God—three in one, revealed and known through relationships, just like us.

For some people it is important to see this gift of consciousness as uniquely given to just one pair of hominids—to Adam and Eve. But there's a problem here. Form right now in your mind a picture of Adam and Eve, especially like the versions you saw growing up. I would wager for almost everyone, our first image of Adam and Eve is of two Caucasians—probably very white people, like Norwegians. If the gift of life was bequeathed to two people of one ethnicity and gender identity, what does that say to the rest of humanity? Should a story of creation restrict itself to one race or one model of gender expression? Wouldn't that too easily be used to propagate racism, homophobia and xenophobia against others? Wouldn't that defeat Dr. King's vision of a world where we are judged by the content of our character and not the color of our skins?

The truth is: The story of our prehistory can include both God and early hominids. It can be one that embraces both Jesus Christ and cavemen when it is told as a story of a God who is patient—who works with us even while transforming us—and whose eternity isn't just some extension of time into the future but is also a timelessness that extends back to our beginnings millions of years ago. Instead of diminishing us, this biblical creation story expands us—beyond pale skin, blue eyed Adam and Eve to a God whose creation has always been bigger and more diverse than any one culture—a God who has been working on us and with us for millennia—a God whose breath dwells in us, whose spark of creativity lives in us so that we might be children of God and not just creatures of God.

The comfort of this Genesis creation story is that it reminds us that the pain and suffering of this life have never been far from God's thoughts, whether we go back thousands of years or just a few days ago. We know that to be true because such compassionate thoughts are Christ-like in every way and Christ has been with us since the dawn of time. For as scripture says, *In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God; and all that is came into being through him, through Christ, this Word.*

So I leave you with a two questions to ponder. First, if our creation story truly begins with food, how well are we tending God's earthly garden and caring for all God's people? And second, if what makes us Homo sapiens, living beings is God's breath, God's spirit, within us, then how much longer will we allow racism and fear distort that spirit by treating others as things instead of bearers of divine breath like us? Shouldn't we use our knowledge of good and evil, and especially our Christ-given awareness of God's abiding love to work for change on earth that sustains, that inspires, that heals?

Long ago someone blew red powder over his or her hand and left a mark on a cave wall that said, "I am here. Remember me." Not so long ago someone drew a picture of a cross and a Good Shepherd on a catacomb wall that said, "God is here. Do everything in remembrance of me." Now what mark will you leave on your wall? To be continued.

AMEN