

January 14, 2018 – Journey worship

TEXT: Genesis 2:4b–9

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

The theme for our January worship services is “Distance.” It’s interesting that we almost automatically think about “distance” as future oriented, as looking toward the horizon and seeing into the distant future as the only direction possible for this topic. But there is another direction to face and that is backward—to look into the distant past, to consider the rear horizon from whence we’ve come. Looking backward can tell us a lot about where we’re going and the God who has been with us every step of this long journey.

There are two creation stories found in the beginning of Genesis. The problem is that they are in the wrong order. The story in Genesis 1 focused on the creation of the cosmos and was likely composed around 600 BC, around the time the Israelites were in exile in Babylon. The story in Genesis 2 focuses more on the creation of human beings and is 400 years older, likely composed around 1000 BC. Now most of the time in church, we blend the two creation stories together, since the editors of the bible helped make sure they flowed into one another. So Genesis 1 ends with the creation of birds, fish, and animals including human beings—male and female—who are given the task of having dominion over all the earth before God rested on the seventh day.

Genesis 2 then picks up the story, as if it is just providing additional details to what we’ve already read. We hear a long opening sentence that stretches from verse 4 through verse 7: *In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth and water the whole face of the ground—then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.* After that long intro comes descriptions of the Garden of Eden, the rivers of Eden, and then details about Adam and his helpmate Eve, who was bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh.

Now just because that is how we read these stories and for far too long how the church has told these stories doesn’t make it right. It is time to look into the distance of human prehistory and reconsider what this creation story truly tells us. To begin with: When I say to you “Adam and Eve,” what image comes to mind? How have Adam and Eve been depicted in illustrated bibles and Sunday School worksheets? Do they look something like this? (show slide) Haven’t they far too often been depicted as Caucasians—serious white folk like they are from some country, I don’t know, like Norway? Certainly not from Haiti or Africa. We laugh at that, but there is no denying the explicit and problematic racism with those recent comments. And while we’re considering Adam and Eve, aren’t they usually depicted as exuding heterosexuality? This is the initial problem with our creation story: We’ve overlaid it with ethnic and gender identities that distort what the stories are really trying to say. It allows for the story of our beginnings to be used as the basis for longstanding racism and persistent

claims of white privilege, white exceptionalism, and heteronormity. And honestly, it's time to cut it out. (next slide)

Based on what we know today, we believe that early creatures similar to modern humans likely appeared on earth about 2.5 million years ago. They weren't particularly distinctive; they weren't at the top of the food chain. And what is fascinating to me is to realize that there wasn't just one species of these early hominids. They roamed and evolved all over the earth—from early Australopithecus in the south to Homo erectus in Asia; also Homo soloensis, Homo rudolfensis, Homo denisova, Homo ergaster, Homo neanderthal in Europe and Homo sapiens in Africa. They didn't just evolve one from the other in an orderly fashion. Just as cats and dogs have different species in their one genus, we too had different human species until finally around 12,000 BC Homo sapiens finally won out over the rest. Where did the others go? Some died due to changing habitats; some disappeared through interbreeding; some, given our longstanding violent tendencies, were likely killed off by Homo sapiens.

These varied ancestors of ours developed skills over the millennia. They adapted to changing climates and new terrains. They harnessed the power of fire, which let them stay warm, cook food, and clear fields of plants so they could make a home in the land. But 70,000 years ago something unusual happened. Scientists call it the Cognitive Revolution. Around this time humans began to communicate in real languages—not just warning grunts but actual languages. They began to share information about the world. They began to talk about their clan, about who to trust and who to avoid. They began to gossip. They began to work together—coordinating their efforts verbally and physically to kill larger animals, build bigger shelters, and establish communities of 150 people or more. Near the end of this period they began to create art (like cave paintings and jewelry) and tell stories about the world—about their understanding of life and death, even about what they believed about the god or gods that ruled it.

For too long the church has either pretended that the story I just shared didn't really exist or that it has no place within our church walls. Some Christians still try to reject evolution. For them either cavemen existed or Adam and Eve existed. Yet this is precisely where the creation story in Genesis 2 is so helpful.

Since the early Hebrew people who composed the first creation stories were agriculturalists—people who grew crops and domesticated animals—of course their version of creation focused on how God first made a place of plants and herbs and streams of fresh water. The problem comes in verse 7. We tend to fixate on the material out of which God made humankind, instead of the loving, God-given gift that made us “living beings.” We focus on the soil, the dust of the ground from which God is described as creating us.

The Hebrew word for earth is “adamah”, so verse 7 says that “The Lord God formed a human, “adam”, out of earth, “adamah.” Of dust we are and to dust we shall return—that is a simple reality human beings have known for millennia. What is distinctive here is that God breathed into “adam” the breath of life and “adam” became a living being. This

points to something dramatic—something unique and revolutionary—like that miraculous moment when a child breaks free of the amniotic sac and takes her first breath. It was a miraculous moment by God’s grace and design long ago when hominids developed consciousness; when they broke free of being just biological creatures and became conscious, spiritual, living beings. Now they too could create things, like God their creator. Now they too could love sacrificially as God loves. Now they too could exist in true relationships, just as the Triune God exists eternally in self-relationship as the Creator, Savior and Spirit. For the breath of life, God’s breath, was in them.

God’s act of creation doesn’t need to be restricted to just one couple, who conveniently have become the precursor of one dominant and dominating race. The distant story of our prehistory can embrace both cavemen and Christ—because it is truly a story of a God who is patient (acting alongside creation longing for the time to breathe the breath of life into us); a God who sees both our beginning and our end, and who knows our story is far deeper and wider than just one species, one race, one definition of humanity; a God who has been beside us every step of the way both long ago and still today—who knows our pains and struggles, and who longs for us to be “living beings”, true children of God and children of earth.

And remember, all along the way, the one we have come to know as the Christ has also been with us. Remember the promise from John 1: *In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God; and all things came into being through him; without him not one thing came into being. For what has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. This same Christ said, Do not be afraid. I will send to you the Counselor, the Holy Spirit... And I will be with you always, even to the end of the age.*

I’ve said a lot today that you likely need to ponder over on your own. I still have more thinking to do about all this. I wonder about the fact that if our creation story is largely about food and tending God’s earthly garden, does the food we eat, the food we waste, the food we hoard or withhold from those who are hungry reflect God’s will for creation or distort it? I wonder how much the prejudice and racism of a Caucasian Adam and Eve is in our cultural DNA, distorting the very breath of God given to all people? I wonder what God is calling us to do, willing and breathing into us, as we head into the distant horizon before us? And can we ever hope to reach that horizon if we don’t strive for it together? May the God of yesterday, today and tomorrow—who was, who is, and who will be—help us each answer the questions God has placed on our hearts.

AMEN