

How is a Poem True?

What does a thinking person of the 21st century do with the creation story of Genesis 1? What does a person of faith in the 21st century do with the story? And most importantly, what do we who are thinking persons of faith do with the remarkable, strange, wonderful words and images we've been immersed in this morning?

To answer this important question, let me start with a popular song written in 1970 by Joni Mitchell entitled "Woodstock." Maybe you're thinking, "She's sure dating herself with a reference to an old hippie song! What could that have to do with the awe-inspiring Biblical story of creation?"

Well, if you remember the song, popularized by Crosby, Stills, and Nash, you probably remember its famous refrain. "We are stardust, we are golden, and we've got to get ourselves back to the garden." I think Joni Mitchell knew more than she knew when she penned those words.

Poetry speaks the language of imagination. It helps us to see with new eyes, hear with new ears, and understand with an expanded mind what we may not have perceived before. Poetry clears away the excess words to expose something beautiful or meaningful which is otherwise hidden, the way a sculptor removes the stone to reveal what lies within. Poetry speaks truth, but not the same way as non-fiction writing aspires to do. Emily Dickinson described it this way:

Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind —

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/56824>

"We are stardust" is poetry. "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth" is poetry. "And there was evening and there was morning, the first day" is poetry. "And God saw that it was good" is poetry. It is the truth, told slant. It provides a safe glimpse into the terrifying awesomeness of God's creative genius, "as lightning to the children eased with explanation kind." It dazzles us gradually with its wondrous beauty.

Poetry is not the same as science, but sometimes the two converge in a surprising way. Last week on our mission trip to the Dakota Presbyterian Churches on the Ft. Peck Reservation in northeastern Montana, we were privileged to spend time again with a tribal elder named Lois Red Elk. She shared some traditional wisdom with us about using plants for medicines and healing. She also shared some traditional understandings of her people. "We are made of stardust," she told us. "Neil deGrasse Tyson says that too, but our people have always known that we come from the stars."

Lois is a published poet. She tells the truth, not as a scientist trained in Western rational thought would speak it, but through the artistry of poetry. A scientist such as Tyson would explain that massive stellar explosions in the galaxies are the source of all the material which makes up everything in the universe, including Earth; that living things are in a constant state of decay and regeneration; and

that human bodies are thus made of the remnants of those stars. We are always in the process of being renewed. This is science, approaching poetry.

(<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/2015/01/150128-big-bang-universe-supernova-astrophysics-health-space-ngbooktalk/>)

It seems to me that the debates about creation and evolution, or creation and science, or creation and the big bang theory, are all rooted in a mistaken starting point. The Bible and science are not in competition with one another. The Bible is not a science book, and science books are not scripture. The six days of creation described in the first chapter of Genesis do not aspire to be scientifically provable. They are poetry, and they are true as poetry is true. By the same token, the big bang theory cannot give us insight into the purpose of life or the spiritual quest which is inherent to being human. It is science. For the record, in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), we value science and appreciate its discoveries, even when those discoveries challenge a literal reading of the Bible. Science, like religion, is a search for truth.

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann warns against allowing the first chapter of Genesis to be caught in what he calls “the unfortunate battle of modernism,” which pits “literalists” against “rationalists.” Instead, he tells us, we should begin with understanding this liturgical poetry in its original sixth century B.C.E. context, the time of the exile in Babylon, when the people of Israel felt the bottom had fallen out of their world. This word about God’s creative power was written for people in despair. It makes a theological claim very different from the message of their Babylonian captors. Our scripture announces that God is bound to the world, and the world is bound to God.

This is proclamation, he says. It is proclamation which evokes doxology, that is, praise of God. (Brueggemann, 1982, *Genesis*, John Knox Press, Atlanta, pp. 25-29)

So this first chapter of Genesis, the priestly writer’s story of creation, this worshipful, poetic praise of God’s creation of everything from nothing, is foundation for hope and trust that the one who made us, made us out of love. God and God’s creation are bound in a never-ending relationship. This is eternal truth, as meaningful now as when first spoken. Evermore and evermore.

“In a deep, unbounded darkness,” today’s song reminds us, God began creating. Light began. Waters were separated. Sky and earth and vegetation created a habitat humans recognize. But that habitat needed inhabitants, so the sun, moon and stars were made to inhabit the skies. And on earth, creatures were made to live in the waters and fly in the air. Fishes and birds were given freedom and blessing to fill the seas and multiply on the earth. Five days were completed. God saw that it was good, lovely and wondrous. Still, more was needed. So creatures were made to live on the land—snakes and skunks, lizards and lions, bugs and beasts galore. And—imagine hearing this when your people are in exile, when all the hope is gone from your life, when you are beaten down and in despair—the crown of creation occurs when God makes humankind, male and female, in God’s image. This is a stunning claim, a singular claim setting humanity apart from the rest of creation while in the midst of creation. It proclaims God’s gracious self-giving nature and humankind’s exceptional authority and responsibility in the world.

For as we know through our Servant-Lord Jesus Christ, the one who rules is the one who serves. Dominion is not domination, but the responsibility to secure the well-being of all others.

And God saw it all, and called it VERY GOOD.

My friends, we live in a part of that created world which is extraordinary. We know the blessing of looking at the glory of the mountains, seeing the springtime’s blossoming flowers, watching the awesome summer skies with their changing clouds and colors and rainbows. We know the rhythm of

fall and its shortening days which signal the birds and animals to prepare for the mystery of winter with its snow and chill, its slanted light and quiet. We know, because we live in Montana, how dependent we humans are on the earth, its rivers and fertile soil, wetlands and weather. Traveling across our amazing state last week, we saw cattle grazing in green river bottoms, antelope among the sagebrush, flocks of pelicans soaring above waters, and colorful rock formations where life is hidden. It's the beginning of summer, when we like to spend more time outdoors, hiking or biking, fishing or just sitting by water listening to it ripple. This first chapter of Genesis serves to remind us that it all began with God, that God has given it to us for a home, and that God keeps the earth and all its inhabitants in his heart. We live in the freedom and wonder of a world that is always changing, always being created, for after all, we are stardust. What is constant is God's loving care, and loving call to us to live in God's image as loving caretakers of this beloved world. This we proclaim, and this we celebrate. Praise be to God, our creator, redeemer and sustainer!

Our scripture for this day has so many facets, so many implications, that we could spend the summer exploring them week by week. But instead we'll move on with this as our foundation. There's good reason for this to be the first chapter of the first book of the Bible. It is the ground on which the story of our relationship with God stands. It is the poetry which tells the truth that provides us perspective. We are creatures among creatures among a creation created by our Creator. We owe reverence to God, and respect for God's creation. This we proclaim, and for this we offer our praise.

And there are few poets who give us better voice for our praise, our doxology, than the one who sang what we today call Psalm 8. I invite you to enter into the psalmist's song of praise as I read it.

O Lord, our Sovereign,
 how majestic is your name in all the earth!
 You have set your glory above the heavens.
 Out of the mouths of babes and infants
 you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
 to silence the enemy and the avenger.
 When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
 the moon and the stars that you have established;
 what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
 mortals that you care for them?
 Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
 and crowned them with glory and honor.
 You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
 you have put all things under their feet,
 all sheep and oxen,
 and also the beasts of the field,
 the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
 whatever passes along the paths of the seas.
 O Lord, our Sovereign,
 how majestic is your name in all the earth!

May we join the eternal chorus praising our triune God--Father, Son and Spirit--Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer--the One who was and is and is to be--from whose goodness we are made and to whom we will return--with the poetry of the universe. Alleluia! Amen.