

So, Whatcha Gonna Do?

August 20, 2023

Rev. Ann Eichhorn



Readings

Genesis 1:1-28, 2:7

from Eugene Peterson's *The Message*

First this: God created the Heavens and Earth – all you see, all you don't see, Light, Dark, Waters, Sky. God spoke, "separate" and there it was the land – Earth, the pooled water Ocean, God spoke, "Earth, Green up, grow all varieties seed bearing plants, fruit bearing trees," and there it was – evening and morning. God spoke, "Lights! Come out! Shine in Heaven's sky, separate Day from Night, stars, seasons, days, years," and there it was. God spoke and the oceans filled, birds filled the sky.

God spoke, "Earth, generate life, cattle, reptiles, wild animals." God spoke, "Let us make humans in our image, make them reflecting our nature so they can be responsible for the fish in the sea, the birds in the air, the cattle, yes, earth itself." And so God created them Godlike, reflecting God's nature, male, female and God blessed them. And said it was so good. And then God rested.

Matthew 22: 36-40

"Teacher, which commandment in God's Law is the most important?" Jesus said, " 'Love God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence.' This is the most important. The other is 'Love others as well as you love yourself.' "

I feel like I've been encountering Eugene Peterson's picture of creation for the past ten weeks! The encounter literally began in the church parking lot where we had loaded the RV. Driving our car, I followed Bill as we traveled through the California valley with its lush agricultural fields of rice, sunflowers and wheat, acres and acres of olive and almond trees, through green wooded and wildfire-charred forests, past Shasta mountain and lake, into Oregon with its winding roads through mountain passes, miles more of plowed and planted fields, into Washington and its spectacular snow-covered mountain ranges, miles of roads close to flowing rivers and bays. When we finally arrived at Rasar State Park, going past the buffalo farm and elk resting areas and spotting an eagle, we settled into our familiar host camp site. There, the everyday journey of experiencing God's creation in different ways continued to be revealed day and night.

We were hardly “back to basics” there camping in a little RV, but certainly more conscious of the preciousness of being in the out of doors, where you have a chance to hear the birds at 4:00 a.m. singing in the sun, or to walk among the green of neck-high vegetation and trees everywhere during the day. Or see the ever-changing clouds in the blue sky above, watch the chipmunks, squirrels, hummingbirds, rabbits, elk, eagles, dogs, children and lots of people that cross your path every day. There is a special quiet that descends with the setting sun, and a quick darkness that follows, especially if you don’t have a flashlight, along with the appearance of stars, and the hoots of owls. Short walking trails to the Skagit River bring into view the large clover-filled meadow, the smell of the shoreline, the sound of the rushing water, the presence and pleasure of ripening blackberry bushes everywhere.

All of these experiences brought to my mind the Genesis verses you just heard, about how the ancients tried to convey their understanding of creator God, involved in the formation of the world we live in. We know centuries later about the Big Bang theory and we scientifically question the seven-day creation picture, but we also know that what was being communicated in Genesis was that we as humans didn’t just appear magically out of nowhere, and that there is a larger force/presence always in and among us.

These experiences and events with nature, people, and creatures, captured my attention and brought me closer to the tiniest as well as the expansive reality of the world we live in. The 168-acre old forest park at the foot of the Washington Cascade mountains had us in the middle of a much different environment with its diverse cultures, people tending the fields and their various crops, tourists seeking adventures, communities living in abject poverty, folks living “off the grid” who ventured into a safe area for a little everyday relief and cheap fun with their kids, people from many other places and realities, camping and sitting on the river shore next to each other, seeking a pleasurable experience. Just this summer, we met and interacted with people from at least fifteen different countries. We were in the middle of “Trump-supported country,” Confederate flags, anti-everything folk, dealing with change happening whether they accepted or liked it. A few examples from our park and Rockport, the neighboring one a few miles away: open and out, transgender, lesbian and gay employees have been hired, and many of the store clerks serving us in the little rural towns were older than we are. One of our rangers who welcomed their first baby gave him the name Parker, intentionally seeking a “neutral” name should the child decide somewhere down the line that he wanted to be known as a she. It was exposure to our ever- and rapidly-changing world.

Over the years we have seen an increase in the amount of garbage and litter accumulating everywhere – on the highways, at the edge of most every town, big and small, the expansion of homeless camps, the cans, the plastic and cardboard containers, cigarettes, beverage cans and bottles tossed anywhere, the river and ocean shores riddled with leftover debris from family outings, on and off the water. We do recognize and acknowledge that if there are trash containers anywhere near, most folks try to make good use of them. It's not hard to understand, living in this context, how collectively we as humans are killing our planet. We go about our days, not really paying much attention to our “carbon footprints” or ignoring the aggressive disregard for public shared spaces and resources. It doesn’t seem to register or matter much as a deep concern how quickly growing planetary misuse is leading towards more and more catastrophic “natural” events.

As a campground host, every Saturday evening Bill shows a family movie to the campers. Unfortunately we discovered that someone had made off with a box of Disney movies we had been leaving there each summer when we left. Fortunately, in our RV we had Disney's "Jungle Book," so we showed that movie several times while we were there. I think not only do we have it memorized, but we can both probably sing our way through all the good songs connected to it, including, "Look for the Bear Necessities," "The Elephants Morning Patrol," and "Trust in Me," but there was one that stood out that I decided to link to my sermon title. It is "That's What Friends Are For," which you will hear in its entirety soon. When thinking about today's reading from Matthew, for me this song is a picture of the possibility of learning to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Preceding that song in the movie is where four cartoon buzzards are sitting in a treetop, trying to figure out what to do next. One says to the other, "So, Whatcha gonna do? He answers, "I don't know, whatcha gonna do?" The first one answers back, "I don't know whatcha gonna do?" And that same back and forth exchange, goes on for a long while. The movie goes on to reveal that when they spot Mowgli the jungle boy, they first see him as "the other" and as tasty but skinny possible prey, but they soon discover he is very distressed and sad. They change their tactics and try to see and understand what Mowgli is experiencing as they discover that they too have hearts and compassionate feelings. They begin to try to cheer him up and soon invite him to sing along with them, which he does, singing "That's what friends are for." Those responses and invitations not only worked to lift his spirits, but the buzzards proved themselves real friends later by helping Mowgli and themselves escape being eaten by the nasty jungle tiger.

All this brings me to the question that is the sermon title today. Given what we know and our constant exposure to the expansive nature of our ignorance, what am I, what are we/you gonna do? Where are the opportunities for each of us to add our small individual responses like getting a grabber, a sack, a pair of gloves and taking it along when you go for a walk on our Marin paths or when we're at the shoreline. Pick up some of the trash you see and dispose of it appropriately, or write those get-out-the-vote post cards, or send your dollars to organizations that try to help the disadvantaged; the list goes on.

Bill and I do believe that as a congregation we are on the threshold of some big opportunities God is putting before us to act more collectively. Maybe the Palmers' gifting us as a congregation with more money than most of us could even imagine is an invitation to use it to either begin or increase our responses to some of the human and environmental disasters we face. Or to envision and implement opportunities to gather folks seeking to deepen their faith and relationships, create healing and restorative actions, and develop new ideas and loving practices to reunite us as families, communities, a nation.

Many of these possibilities were acknowledged and exemplified by most of the Sunday message presenters you heard from this summer. One was the pitiful picture of the homeless painted by the street minister right here in Marin. Another, the work of forming here and Internationally community groups tackling one or two things negatively impacting collective life experiences. We heard again the painful daily experiences of sexism, racism, random acts of violence, especially of people seeking to be heard, seen and believed, respected and valued for who they are or are becoming, regardless of their sexual identity.

So, Whatcha gonna do about sexism, racism, elitism, disrespect for the elderly, disinterest in the youth? Beloved Community, there is an opportunity to do something before us right now, in this following week as a congregation, and our search team is bringing information this morning about the culmination of the year-long process they have been in together to seek a special candidate to become our next minister. We are so fortunate that our denominational United Church of Christ polity believes in the democratic practice that each congregation is its own power and authority vessel where we can seek and individually vote for our next faith leader. People are not just sent to us or instructed to be with us, or moved around every three years without question. We get to choose! With a little introduction offered in the letters that have gone out to you, members and non-members, and with a brief preview today of what the search committee would like for you to hear and know from each of them about their journey together, I am sure you will be presented with a number of “Whatcha gonna do?” questions.

I trust, coming from our hearts of deep faith, love, compassion, generosity, and the engagement of our minds and imaginations, we can in fact learn and act more on the hope God put before us in creation, to treat others as we would like to be treated, offer meaningful actions that honor, nourish, repair, heal our neighbors and planet by doing the co-creative work God intended us to do to, assuring a more pleasant future for all to come. There is so much to be done, so choose whatcha gonna do, and let’s get on with it ... now!

Amen