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Sunday 10th Sept – 2nd Sunday in Creation

Listening to and Learning from Planet Earth..

Genesis 1

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. ³Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

⁶And God said, 'Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.' ⁷So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. ⁸God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

⁹And God said, 'Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.' And it was so. ¹⁰God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. ¹¹Then God said, 'Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.' And it was so. ¹²The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. ¹³And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

¹⁴And God said, 'Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, ¹⁵and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.' And it was so. ¹⁶God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. ¹⁷God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, ¹⁸to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. ¹⁹And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

²⁰And God said, 'Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.' ²¹So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. ²²God blessed them, saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.' ²³And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

²⁴And God said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.' And it was so. ²⁵God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

Intro: A planet in Crisis

We live in fascinating times and our children will become adults in a world and society that will be very different to the one those of us 30 and over grew up in.

In my lifetime indeed in the last 20 years, we have witnessed what is now an overwealming consensus develop among the Scientific community, that our Planet Earth is warming and an ever increasing rate as a result of human activity. The main culprits being the burning of fossil fuels and the destruction of the vast majority of forest cover on the planet. For example, Carbon dioxide from fossil fuel burning for totals about 26 billion tonnes per year, that's about 50K tonnes per minute going into the Earth's one and only atmosphere! Energy from the Sun is trapped under this blanket of gases that results in the accelerated warming of the average temperature of the Earth. Carbon dioxide has now increased 31% since 1750 to a higher level than any time in the last 420,000 years, and probably 20 million years. It contributes 60% of the warming effect. About three quarters of the human-induced carbon dioxide emission is due to fossil fuel combustion.

It was established just recently that the polar icecaps are now melting at least 3 times the rate that previously was acknowledged over the last few years.

Most significantly, The Greenland Ice Sheet shrank at a rate of about 239 cubic kilometres per year from April 2002 to November 2005, three times the rate previously measured. The Greenland Ice Sheet holds about 2.85 million cubic kilometres of ice - 10% of the world's ice mass. If it all melted, it would raise the average sea level about 6.5 metres. Even a rise of just 1 metre would be

catastrophic for vast coastal human habitation around the planet. Not to mention the possible extinction of up to half the species of animal life we now know of over the next 50 years or so.

Climate change is another effect of global warming and is now becoming increasingly noticeable around the planet. In our own country the rainfall patterns are changing dramatically. Even the weather forecasters who are normally very cautious about saying any anomaly is an indication of a bigger change are changing their tune. As reported the other day in the Age: "The length of southern Australia's current drought has even normally cautious climatologists suggesting it is due to climate change. "It is approaching my personal threshold of being convinced," said Michael Coughlan, director of the National Climate Centre."

But it is not all bad news. I sense a growing world-wide awareness of the problem that is slowly drowning out the deniers and Oil Barons who just want us to consume more oil and electricity.

It is not too late to start changing our ways and I believe our children, if we encourage and cooperate with the next generation of leaders that is emerging, will participate in a rapidly expanding sustainable energy industry that will transform the world as we know it..

But where does God come into all of this? It is of course well known that much of the Western world's exploitative attitude toward nature has not just been based on ignorance of its fragility. It has grown out of a "dominion" philosophy that has its roots in a particular reading of Genesis chapter 1.

"Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."

Has come to mean, the earth is created for you to use however you like, take and use as much as you can with no real regard for the consequences ...

But just as there has been a radical shift in thinking about the how this living green planet works to an emerging understanding of its fragility and interdependent nature so there has been a corresponding renewal in a radical re-reading of the Genesis creation narrative and an understanding of our place in the creation as one of deep interdependence as creatures made out of earth and just one of the millions of species of life that share this planet together.

On this Planet Earth Sunday, the second Sunday in our Season of Creation, I want to spend a few minutes looking again briefly at Genesis 1 and then ask from this reading – how we might live differently as a result of this.

So, first, **A radical re-reading of the Creation Story**

and then 2. A radical response to being part of Earth

1. A radical re-reading of the Creation Story

Norman Habel, has a very helpful resource on the Genesis passage and I want to point out a couple of points he makes regarding this key text in the Hebrew Bible..

Read Genesis 1.1-2

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

Now the first thing to note is that the Hebrew word translated ‘heavens’ is more accurately translated ‘sky’ or ‘skies’. That word ‘sky’ in verse 8 is the same word as the term usually translated ‘heavens’ in verse 1.

It is clear, therefore, that this chapter is about the creation of the physical universe as people then knew it: Earth and Sky. There is nothing here about spiritual or heavenly realms.

The second key insight comes from verse two. After the summary of verse 1, the narrative introduces the first character in the story—Earth!

Verse 2 describes Earth, its primal condition and its location. Earth is already there!

What is the condition of Earth in verse 2? The Hebrew expression *tohu wabohu* probably means something like ‘unformed and empty’. Earth is there, present, but has not yet assumed its final shape and has not yet been filled with life.

Where is Earth located? In darkness and under the waters of the deep! Later in verse 9 it is clear that Earth emerges from beneath these waters. The character called Earth is waiting below, a character yet to be developed by God.

And what was God doing? God’s spirit or wind was hovering over the waters that covered Earth. The image of Earth is an unformed mass, waiting deep in primal waters, with the spirit hovering above! There is a potential of life that suggests an image of pregnancy in the waters of a womb..

Read Genesis 1.9-10

9 And God said, ‘Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.’ And it was so. ¹⁰God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.

After God creates light on Day One and Sky on Day Two, the character of Earth is again introduced on Day Three. Perhaps light (Day One) and space (Day Two) were needed to set the stage for Earth to take centre stage on Day Three.

God does not say ‘Let there be Earth’! Earth is already waiting below in the primal waters. Instead God speaks to these waters and summons them to separate. Why? So that land or Earth might ‘appear’! The image of Earth emerging from the waters recalls a birth.

More significant, perhaps, is the word ‘appear’. It is remarkable that this expression should be used here. The Hebrew term employed is normally used of God’s appearing, what we call a theophany! So the birth of Earth is a revelation, like the appearance of God. Earth is indeed something special, a valued part of the cosmos.

This is confirmed after God names the land ‘Earth’ and looks at what has been created. There is a sense in which God is delighted with this new “baby” that has just been born from the waters below.

Read Genesis 1.11-13 ¹¹*Then God said, ‘Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.’ And it was so. ¹²The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. ¹³And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.*

After Earth appears, God calls on Earth to be a co-creator. He summons Earth to bring forth vegetation. God does not say, 'Let there be plants and trees and flowers'. God works with Earth as a mediator from whom all plant life appears. Earth is the physical source of life.

Similarly, on Day Six, God does not say 'Let there be animals and reptiles'. Rather, God again speaks to Earth and asks Earth to bring forth animal life. This means, in effect, that Earth is a mother from whom all life emerges at the impulse of God's word. Earth is a key character in the story of Genesis One, a character who first comes forth from the water and then brings forth life.

Verses 14- 19 describe the origins and function of the sun, moon and stars. Why are they created? To make the sky beautiful? Much more!

The lights in the sky are for the benefit of Earth. Earth continues to be a character in the story. These sky creations are to 'give light upon Earth' and thereby separate the light from the darkness on Earth. They also provide the seasons needed for the cycles of life for both the fauna and flora of Earth.

And eventually humankind are brought out of this same Earth and made a part of it.

No wonder the Psalmist declares:

*For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb.
14 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. ... 15 My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven **in the depths of the earth.**
16 Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.*

But we are also made in God's image – that is we are made to be conscious of the process of the birth of the Earth and its identity as the source of all life. And in God's image to be co-creators with God in the sustaining of this beautiful and interdependent sanctuary of God's presence and life. Our primary calling as human beings was to be stewards of creation, that was what God created us to do - that was and is our destiny.

Is it not an irony then that the very creatures who as part of the Earth know about its nature are the very ones responsible for its present sickness..?

So here we have at the heart of our Christian Scriptures – a theology of creation that in forms a very solid basis for acting to preserve and care for the creation – for the whole of Earth our mother out of which we were born and out of which we are sustained.

The word radical – means “relating to or affecting the basic nature or most important features of something.”

Thus we have a radical re-reading of the Genesis story based on a careful listening to the text..

This of course must lead to a radical response in the way we relate to the Creation practically..

2. A radical response to being part of Earth.

One of the most exciting things that is happening as a result of the growing awareness of the interdependence of biosphere of the earth is that there is a convergence of Christian and Scientific perspectives on the nature of our role in the preservation and care of the Earth.

Gavin has been talking about Biomimicry. Janine Benyus is an American biologist who in recent years has been collecting stories of people who have made significant innovations through mimicking the natural characteristics of an organism.

Gavin mentioned Velcro, Termite Hills, Box Fish and Kevlar verses Spider's silk.

There are many other examples:

Lotus leaves. Lotus is a water plant that is seen as sacred partly because they emerge out of mud looking pristine, water and dirt seems to roll off them. It was discovered that microscopically, the surface of a lotus leaf is not smooth to allow easy cleaning, but very mountainous – dirt teeters on the pinnacles and water stays as a droplet, which rolls off, collecting the dirt particles as it goes. A German company has now manufactured a paint which recreates this texture, and means that instead of using poisoning detergents, rainwater keeps the building clean.

A moth's eye-view

Autotype, one of the world's leading developers and manufacturers of film and chemical products, has launched a revolutionary new anti-reflective, anti-glare film that has been inspired from detailed research into the eye structure of night flying moths. Called MothEye Anti-Reflective the new film has been designed for use in a wide range of applications, including flat panel displays, touch screen interfaces, electroluminescent lamps and lenses for mobile phones and PDAs, and can even be processed using the film insert moulding process.

The Blue Mussel and 'sticking' to the road

Researchers at Perdue University have discovered potential industrial applications for the natural adhesive used by saltwater mussels to stick to rocks. The mussel uses dozens of tiny filaments that stretch from the mussel to attach itself to a surface - the mussel uses an organ (called a "foot") to attach each filament to the surface with a small deposit of glue until it is secure enough to withstand pulling forces from the external environment i.e. tides.

There is so much yet we could learn and there are many more stories like these in Janine's book on the topic. But she finished a recent lecture saying that in fact we need a new rhythm to life in four steps that resonates very well with a Christian radical response to being part of the Earth itself.

She says we need to 1. Quieten down, 2. Listen. 3. Echo and 4. Give thanks

First, we need to Quieten down – to stop making so much noise ourselves.. or to be so self-obsessed.. (illustration of Boot Camp group at Newport Lakes)

Second, we need to Listen - to observe, notice, and learn from what the rest of creation is telling us..

Third, we need to echo what we hear. Develop sustainable and clever practices that have been staring us in the face in nature for thousands of years..

And then she said there was an important forth stage... that wasn't just about profiting from nature - the fourth stage was to give thanks..

To illustrate this forth point she told another story...

The humming-bird (size of a thumb) flies up to 56 Km/hr and migrates about 3000 Kms per year. Those journeying down the eastern flyway reach t the lip of the Gulf of Mexico and then pause for awhile, fuelling up on 1000 blossoms a day. Finally, they burst across 960 Km of open water without stopping, on a whopping 2.1g of fuel. And that's not jet fuel: it's nectar.

But here's what amazes me even more: in the process of fuelling up, the humming bird manages to pollinate its energy source, ensuring that there will be nectar next year – for itself, for its offspring, or for completely unrelated species of nectar feeders.

In the process of meeting their needs, organisms manage to fertilise the soil, clean the air, clean the water, and mix the right cocktail of atmospheric gases that life needs to live.

In other words we give thanks by learning to live in ways that give life.

As we learnt from our look at Genesis 1, our primary calling as human beings is to understand that we are both stewards of creation but part of creation as well. And as God's people – we need to be modelling that we can be at home in God's creation.

This rhythm that Janine Benyus suggests is very much a version of that which we can find in our Christian theology of creation, for God is to be known in all of creation and the biblical rhythm for all life could be summarized in those four words.

Quieten, Listen, Echo and Give Thanks

And as we practice and learn to rediscover this rhythm we will find ourselves to be truly at home again in this only Earth that has given us life..