

Tree of Life Church  
September 15, 2024—Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost  
Season of Creation—Humanity



**OLD TESTAMENT LESSON**      **Genesis 1:26-28**

Then God said, “Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

So God created humans in his image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.

God blessed them, and God said to them, “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.”

**PSALM**      **Psalms 8**

Divine Majesty and Human Dignity

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 humans 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!

## **LETTERS    Philippians 2:1-8**

Imitating Christ's Humility

If, then, there is any comfort in Christ, any consolation from love, any partnership in the Spirit, any tender affection and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

who, though he existed in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be grasped,  
but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
assuming human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a human,

he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross.

**GOSPEL     Mark 10:41-45**

[James and John, the sons of Zebedee, asked Jesus to “Appoint us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” But Jesus says to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” They replied, “We are able.” Then Jesus disagrees and reminds them that sitting at my right hand or at my left is not mine to appoint, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.” This exchange upsets the disciples.]

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; instead, whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.”

**SERMON             Season of Creation: Humanity     Rev. M. Courtenay Willcox**

There are communities or parts of our country more tuned into the relationship between humanity and creation. Some of our family gathered in Vermont on Lake Champlain a couple of weeks ago and explored the area. Burlington and its surroundings are made for an outdoor crowd. We had perfect weather and made good use of the bike paths and breweries. Above bathroom doors at the Fiddlehead Brewery in Shelburne, VT, is the following quote by Wendell Berry from his poem, “The Peace of Wild Things.” He writes, “When despair for the world grows in me and I wake in the night at the least sound in fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be, I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds. I come into the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief. I come into the presence of still water. And I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light. For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.”

It seems like Fiddlehead Brewery and Wendell Berry knew about my sermon this week and our work in the Season of Creation, looking at scripture that raises our awareness of God as creator.

Today is Humanity Sunday, and that gives us pause to consider, in the midst of all the scriptures we’ve heard from today, the ways in which we as people are not separate or

disconnected from the various forces and domains of nature. We are completely dependent on the various ecosystems of Earth for survival, and these ecosystems have existed for millennia, so this is nothing new. The movement of oxygen into the atmosphere is necessary for us to breathe. The movement of moisture in the clouds and the seas is essential for us to enjoy a drink. The movement of worms in the soil is vital for us to receive our daily bread. (point to vases)

We are children of Earth, made of earth, air, and water. Earth penetrates our being and replaces each cell in our body every seven years. We eat Earth and are made from Earth. We are Earth beings...mud-babies, dirt-people, and dust-creatures. On Humanity Sunday, we celebrate our connection with the creation, our dependency on Earth, and our intimate relationship with a Creator who continues to meet us "in, with, and under" this creation.<sup>1</sup>

Our Old Testament scriptures today, through interpretation over centuries, are viewed as human-centered or anthropocentric. The most important part of creation is, well, us! We are ruling and subduing, and we have dominion. In Genesis, we see a marked difference in the first creation story in Genesis 1, which is writ large, on a grand scale. I can read the Genesis text while listening to Aaron Copeland's *In the Beginning*, a 16 minute acapella creation that uses Genesis 1:1-2:7 from the King James translation, and my head just about explodes from the grandeur of it all. It is big, challenging, magnificent, prayerful, and I am reminded that God is and was and is to come. The words, "In the beginning God" from Genesis 1:1, say right from the start that God is in our beginnings as well, which we would do well to remember. Copeland's composition, in words and musical movement, parallels the intentionality, creativity, and pleasure that God expresses during creation.

These verses from our Hebrew scripture are not a science textbook's account of the world's creation in seven days, but rather a description of God creating and ordering life and gifting us the world, and gifting the world us. We hear this creation is good; that order comes out of chaos and it is good and that life comes out of what was not life, and it is good. This is a beginning where God says, 'it is good.' God does not say, 'it is finished.' That's for another time. There are generations of people working to be faithful, and our God-seeking relationship includes God's creation placing us in the in-between, sandwiched between the good of Genesis and the finished of end times. We are determining how this story is being played out.

This story of human creation is an outpouring of God's abundant goodness. God sees what is needed, light and dark, seas and land, plants and trees, stars to give signs to

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<sup>1</sup> The Season of Creation: A Preaching Commentary, Habel, Norman C, David Rhoads, and H. Paul Santmire, Eds., Fortress Press, 2011, pp 143-144.

the seasons ruling over the night and the sun ruling over the day, fish and winged birds, and every kind of creeping thing that creeps upon the earth. Finally, God creates humankind from the dust. If we worry that we are forgotten or even worse, an afterthought, God employs the intimate act of breathing life into us. Then God blesses us and proceeds to gift us everything...everything. We have dominion, and in Genesis 2, we are told to till the earth and keep it. We are immediately in relationship with God and with God's handiwork. Then God rests in the remarkable goodness of all God created. Are we being faithful to God's goodness to us through creation?

Psalm 8 also paints a beautiful picture of the glories of creation and puts humankind in a position of dominion.

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars that you have established;  
what are humans that you are mindful of them,  
mortals that you care for them?

As we try to silence Earth, to crush Earth with our power and intellect, Earth responds, I am not the pawn, the plaything, or the slave of humans. Those who portray me in this way have misread the mind of the Creator. Return to the story of Genesis 1. What happens on Day Three? God does not simply say: Let there be Earth! No, God summons the waters to part, to burst. Then God calls me to emerge from the waters, to appear like a child being born. Then God names me "Earth" and invites me to green the landscape. I have agency, voice, and I am God's partner in creating life on Earth. And when I am born, God looks at me and declares, "very good!!"<sup>2</sup>

In our New Testament scriptures, we can see a shift as we look at humankind's relationship with the earth because of Jesus, who was there at creation, in the beginning was the Word.... Jesus' relationship to all is not one of dominion but rather one of humility and servitude. Jesus divests himself of the royal majesty, power, and rule of God and in doing so, is the opposite of the images we see in Psalm 8.

Do you remember the story I told about the friendship between the elephant and the dog at the elephant sanctuary in Tennessee? The relationship between dog and elephant was so strong and so filled with trust, that although the elephant could crush the dog, she did not and instead, would rub the dog's belly with her enormous foot. We are called by the Creator to temper our dominion and lordship inclinations with humility and obedience, so that we can be in relationship, with each other and with God's creation.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, pa148.

Mark echoes this shift in being, "whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many, we need to recognize the reality of our role as Christians and as children of God. This is a paradigm shift. We follow Jesus' example of what it means to be a genuine human being instead of the role of power, dominion, mastery that the world sets out for us. We are to serve rather than to rule. We have a commitment to nurture our Earth home rather than exploit it. We are made up of the things of earth, dirt, water, and air. We are in communion with creation and can help Earth regain her voice. We need to find ways to hold creation gently and reverently. Rest in the grace of the world, be in relationship with what God has created, and be free. Amen.