

God's Creation: Awareness and Awe
Genesis 1:1-25
Preached by Bill Blair
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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I am an astronomer and I am a Christian. Some find this melding of scientific and Christian perspectives to be an odd match, but I don't. It comes naturally to me, and I attribute a lot of that to my personal creation theology, an inherent appreciation of God's creation.

The universe was created; it had a beginning. Science and religion agree on this. It is the purview of science to ask (and attempt to answer) questions about "how" this happened. It is the purview of religion to ask (and try to answer) the questions "who" did this, and why. Both types of questions are valid. They are complementary, not in conflict (at least to my way of thinking). The main conflict between science and religion occurs when these boundaries are not recognized or understood. The Bible is not a science text book, and neither is a science text book the Bible.

Science tells us some amazing things about our universe. It is vast beyond comprehension, it is littered with large groupings of stars we call galaxies, and in at least one location, in one spiral galaxy we know about, an amazing thing has occurred: Life in tremendous abundance has arisen out of inanimate material. We are here, and we are part of creation. But we have not always been here.

Modern cosmology now tells us not only that the universe is "billions" of years old, but that it is 13.7 (+/- 0.1) billion years since the creation event. This is amazing (in more ways than one). It is an amazing and incomprehensible number, and it is amazing that we can make scientific instruments that allow us to measure it.

How can we fathom the age of the universe? In his book "The Dragons of Eden," Astronomer Carl Sagan devised something he called the Cosmic calendar. Consider all of time compressed into a single calendar year, with Creation (the Big Bang) on the first second of January 1 and today being on the last second of December 31st. To the best we can determine things, here are a few events that have happened over cosmic time:

- May 1: Milky Way galaxy forms
- Sept. 9: Solar system forms
- Sept. 14: Earth forms
- Sept. 25: First forms of life on earth
- Dec. 1: Oxygen atmosphere develops
- Dec. 16: First worms
- Dec. 19: First vertebrates
- Dec. 26: First mammals

Dec. 28: Dinosaurs become extinct

Dec. 29: First primates

Dec. 31, 23:46: Domestication of fire

23:59:46: The Bronze age

23:59:59: The Renaissance, World wars, moon landings, space exploration.

We are Johnnie-and-Janie-come-latelys. The universe (creation) existed for billions of years before humans became part of it. For us to understand our special place in creation, it is important to realize this.

If this bothers you a little bit, think of it this way: Time was also part of Creation. Since time is part of creation, God exists outside of time as we know it. And yet, God is present in time. (God is present in God's creation, in time and in space.) This is a mysterious, yet wonderful relationship that is made alive by our faith. We know God is present with us, because we sense His presence. Amazing.

The Triune God is often described as God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer. Our post-modern Christian tradition seems to spend more time talking about the latter two persons, and less about God the Creator. In doing so, we inadvertently miss (or at least minimize or ignore) an important aspect of our relationship with God and our connectedness to God. We miss out on the "creation connection."

Modern ways tend to insulate us from creation. We are surrounded every day by human-made "creations", everything from our transportation infrastructure to our electronics. Even our food supply primarily now comes from a huge, air-conditioned supermarkets, not the garden. Nowhere is this insulation more apparent to me than by looking at the night sky. Have you ever seen the Milky Way? I mean really been out where it is dark, away from city lights? When I go observing in Arizona or Chile, I see the night sky the way it used to look to everybody—myriad stars and an awe-inspiring band of diffuse light that marks the plane of our Galaxy, the collective light of 100 billion stars too faint to see individually, and yet visible to the unaided eye. What has taken this dramatic pleasure away from humankind, this awesome connection to the Creator of the universe? It has been replaced, even overwhelmed, by the manmade glow of millions of street lights and security lights across our land. What a loss.

In reality, though, we don't have to look light-years away to see the Glory of God. It is all around us every day. Maybe we can't see the Milky Way from Towson, MD, but we can see the intricate beauty of a spider's web, the color and variety of flowers and plants in our gardens, the color of fall leaves, the fury of a thunderstorm, or any of the hundreds of little miracles around us every day. We need to open our eyes, realize these things for what they are, and reconnect to God the Creator through an appreciation of God's creation all around us.

When we study God's creation, it only makes it more amazing. One of my favorite examples is the Monarch butterfly. This amazing species of small insects somehow manages to migrate from southern Canada and the northeastern US to central Mexico

where it hibernates over the winter, a one way trip of 1800 – 2500 miles! Yet even more amazing is how they do it. Each generation of adult Monarchs only lives for 4-5 weeks. As they leave Mexico and head northward, the torch of existence is passed to the next generation, and the next. By the time the Monarchs return to Mexico in the fall, *none of these creatures have ever been there before*. They are the great-great-great-great-great grandchildren of the butterflies that were last there, and yet they find their way back to the same location in Mexico.

This is but a single example, one of millions of little secrets that are part of God's creation, many of which we don't know (and may never know) about. In our New Testament lesson we are told to "Consider the lilies..." God loves us more, but God does not love us exclusively. We are part of creation, not all of it.

When we reconnect to God the Creator through an appreciation of God's creation all around us, the sense of awareness and awe we feel translates naturally into a desire to respond to God. What form does that response take?

Surely our first reaction must be to turn to God in praise and thanksgiving! This is a part of our weekly worship, through the prayer of Praise, and through many of our hymns. The famous hymn by our own Maltbie Babcock called "This is my Father's World" was one of my favorite hymns as I was growing up. (Verse 2)

This is my Father's world, the birds their carols raise,
The morning light, the lily white declare their Maker's praise.
This is my Father's world, He shines in all that's fair.
In the rustling grass, I hear Him pass. He speaks to me everywhere.

Becoming more aware of creation has an enriching effect on one's Christian life and experience, as those connections are re-established in our brains.

But in this world, where the instruction to "be fruitful and multiply" has been taken to extremes unthought of in biblical times, our response must go beyond praise and thanksgiving. Since I have been alive, the world population has nearly tripled, from just over 2 billion to well over 6 billion people! (By mid-century, 9 billion projected.) The needs of these people (for food, energy, clean water, etc.) are putting huge strains on our environment. As Christians, we need to realize humankind's complicity in damaging creation, and take responsibility for caring for God's creation in ways that are sustainable. Quoting Harry's sermon from last week, we need to learn how to "live gently" with creation. We will talk more about this aspect next week.

Prayer: God, Creator, we come to you awed by your creation, by its vastness and beauty and intricacy, and by our place in it. As it says in Psalm 8, we can't help but wonder who we are, mere people, that you are mindful of us, and that you care for us. And yet we know you do. We have felt your presence in our lives, and in your church.

Open our eyes to your eternal power through an appreciation of your creation, both near and far. Help us to take our responsibility for your world seriously, including especially our responsibility to each other, your most divine of creations.

In Jesus name, Amen.