

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, August 23, 2009, dedicated to the Rev. Barb Cunningham on her birthday, to Jerome Dailey in memory and love on his birthday, and always to the glory of God!

“Creation Stories from the Beginning”

Genesis 1, John 1:1-14

**(Part I of III in the sermon series
“Earth Prayers”)**

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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*In the beginning, the Great Spirit created the universe. Now the universe was dark. So the Great Spirit said, “**Let there be light.**” And behold light appeared.*

*Then the Great Spirit said, “**Let the heavens be.**” And behold, the heavens blossomed into galaxies filled with stars, planets, and moons.*

*The Great Spirit said, “**Let the plants be.**” And behold the Earth began to green with mosses, ferns, vines, trees, flowers and grasses.*

*Then the Great Spirit said, “**Let the animals be.**” And behold*

countless creatures emerged to crawl, walk, fly, and swim over the land, sea, and sky.

All creatures needed and helped each other to stay alive. The sun gave its life to the plants; the plants gave their lives to the animals; the animals gave their lives to the worms; the worms gave their lives to the soil, and soil gave its life to the plants.

The sun's heat formed clouds that watered the rainforest; the forest's canopy caught the lashing rain and dropped it gently into streams and rivers that continually watered the lowlands. The rivers passed through the mangrove forests bringing water and soil for the trees. The swamp, in turn, purified the muddy rivers for the coastal reefs which need crystal-clear water to survive.

Soon, all creatures began to sing:

**This Earth spun of soil and sun,
Water and air for all to share,
Lives or dies by the work and play
Of every creature, every day.**

Then the Great Spirit danced to the song of her creation. **"We'll I'll be,"** she exclaimed. **"This is wonderful."**

Then suddenly, the first human beings appeared, for the Great Spirit had accidentally created creatures in her own image when she said, "Well I'll be." And today, human beings feel most alive when they dance with the song of the Earth and sky. (A Filipino creation story told to Matthew Fox, reported in *Christian Spirituality*, spring 1995, found in Ann Rowthorn, *Earth and All the Stars*, pp.22-23).

Well I'll Be is a creation story from the Filipino people, in which the Great Spirit is a feminine spirit. This is not uncommon. The Rig-Veda, one of Hindu's most ancient texts (3000-2000 BCE) and the oldest of the world's living religions creation stories begins, "In the beginning was the golden womb of the sun."

One common thread ties together all humanity across religions and cultures throughout time. It is our need and desire to explain our origins. How were we created? Who created us? Where and when did life begin? Who was there “in the beginning?”

Creation stories emerge from all people who seek to name the the creative spark that brought them into being. These creation stories come from all ages, all tongues, all races, all faiths. They come from science and the birthing stories of the most ancient people. From the Lakota Sioux and Tao Te Ching to Albert Einstein and the scientists of the Big Bang Theory, it only takes imagination, insight, faith and creativity to see moment by moment that we are being recreated each day.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning has written:

*Earth is crammed with heaven,
and every common bush afire with God,
but only those who see
take their shoes off.*

The creation of the earth is central to all creation stories. But, the creation stories of all people across time, seek also to explain how humanity came into being.

In Africa, each tribe has its own creation story, much like our Native American sisters and brothers. Listen to the stories from the Shilluks, from West Africa, from two Bantu tribes. We learn the core values of each tribe from their central stories of creation.

The Shilluks of the Nile region tell a story in which humankind is fashioned out of clay. In each region of the world in which the creator traveled, he created humans from the materials available, making some white, others red or brown and the Shilluk black. He then took a piece of earth and gave them arms, eyes, etc. This story says much about their values and culture. In distributing the characteristics to man, he chose first to give them the ability to do work through the use

of their arms and legs. They were then given the ability to see and taste their food. Finally, they were given speech and hearing with which to entertain oneself.

For the Shilluks, their story shows the value system at work among their people. The Creator gave them arms to work with, placing work above all else. They also explained the differences between men of various races by telling how they came about.

A West African creation tale explains how two spirit people were accidentally sent down to earth by the sky god. Lonely, the people decided to create children from clay, but feel they must hide them when the sky god comes down. Because they are hidden in fire, the children soon turn to various shades based on how long they had been exposed to the heat. Over time, these clay children grow up and move to various regions of the earth, ultimately populating it (Fader).

Much like the Shilluk people, this story serves a two-fold purpose: it explains both the creation of humanity as well as accounts for the differences among the human race. This tale shows that West Africans value these differences because they feel that all humanity is created equal and should be treated as such.

The Boshongo, a central Bantu tribe of the Lunda Cluster, tell a different story. For them, their creator was a man named Bumba who created both the sun and moon along with various creatures before man ("An African Cosmogony"). The Boshongo take a long time in their creation story to tell how each creature was made and how each relates to the other creatures, showing the deep relationship between the Boshongo and nature. The Boshongo believe they were the last to be created rather than the first, making them no more important than any other living organism. There is a oneness that exists in their society, for they all work for the betterment of their world.

From another Bantu tribe in another region comes this story:

In the beginning there was nothing but Nzame. This god was

really three: Nzame, Mebere, and Nkwa. It was the Nzame part of the god that created the universe and the earth, and brought life to it. While the three parts of Nzame were admiring this creation, it was decided to create a ruler for the earth. So was created the elephant, the leopard and the monkey, but it was decided that something better had to be created.

Between the three of them they made a new creature in their image, and called him Fam (power), and told him to rule the earth. Before long, Fam grew arrogant, he mistreated the animals and stopped worshipping Nzame. Nzame, angered, brought forth thunder and lightning and destroyed everything except Fam, who had been promised immortality. Nzame, in his three aspects, decided to renew the earth and try again. He applied a new layer of earth to the planet, and a tree grew upon it. The tree dropped seeds which grew into more trees. Leaves that dropped from them into the water became fish, those that dropped on land became animals.

The old parched earth still lies below this new one, and if one digs deep enough it can be found in the form of coal. Nzame made a new man, one who would know death, and called him Sekume. Sekume fashioned a woman, Mbongwe, from a tree. These people were made with both Gnoul (body) and Nissim (soul). Nissim gives life to Gnoul. When Gnoul dies, Nissim lives on.

Despite their differences, these four stories share the belief that they were created by a god. While they vary in their description of how this occurred and why, they all serve the same purpose. Through their explanation of how this occurred, one can see what they view their place in the world to be. By answering their questions, these stories served as both a comforting basis for the African people and a way of connecting to future generations. As such, these tales of creation are works of truly great literature.

Our creation stories comes from the first chapters of Genesis and John. Genesis begins, "In the beginning, God created." The Hebrew translates it, "When God began to create heaven and earth." The first

word of the Torah is “b’reishit.” The Hebrew letter *bet* is enclosed on three sides and open to the front. As one commentator says, “From the beginning of time and creation we are encouraged to face forward rather than (attempting) to look backward.” We must remain open to what is in front of us. While what is beside us and behind us is closed to our view, the rest of the world is open before us!

The second word *reishit* is synonymous with Torah, or the law God gives as life itself. So the creation story for Judeo-Christian people is a book of morality, not cosmology (like many of the stories we have just heard). From the opening words, the overriding concern and emphasis of Genesis is about our relationship with God. It is truth about life rather than scientific truths. We see a world fashioned by God as “good.” There isn’t the tension you feel with other creation stories. It is ALL good because it ALL comes from God!

The same is true for John. Before the world had shape and form, it our deepest understanding that Jesus Christ, the Word of God was there from the beginning. John emphasizes that Jesus was grounded in God’s creative energy as the first “word” of life. We can’t lose track of this. He was in the light which came into being at the beginning. He was in the Earth and the seas at the beginning. He was the Alpha (the beginning of all energy, space and time). He will be the Omega – the end of all things. The embodiment of God as the one in Christ at the beginning of all things, is our call to be completely connected with the creation!

As followers of Christ, we don’t have the luxury of ignoring the creation. We are connected with it through our baptisms and in the wholeness of God. To build off Thich Nhat Hanh’s writing, we are called to be at one with the Earth. We are to *be* rivers and the mountains. We are not just to be *on* them.

Through Christ, we have a cosmic connection with all creation that calls us deeper and closer to the heart of God. Our God should say of God’s blessed children (all of us): “*Well I’ll Be! Look at my beloved ones! They have turned out just right!*”

In the spirit of the Filipino creation story, I invite you all to stand (don't worry, the hymn is coming next!). I want you to move around, to dance and to sing the "Doxology." *Praise God from whom all blessings flow, praise God all creatures here below. Praise God above ye heavenly hosts. Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.*

Well I'll be! Don't you look spectacular! Thanks be to God for God's creation and for the creative energy God has given us to sustain and care for this Earth! Amen.