

“Celebrating the Integrity of Creation”

Genesis 1:1-18; Psalm 8; Psalm 148 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might rejoice in the glory of your creation and commit ourselves to protecting its integrity. In the name of the Risen Christ we pray, Amen.

“And God saw that it was good.” Since the days of the New Revised Standard translation of the Bible, scholars have confessed that this sentence is a very restrained White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant version of what’s being said here. Good, followed by a period. There are so many other words that could better express the enthusiasm that it seems God was really experiencing in these moments. Imagine that the sentence ended with an exclamation point. What word would you use to replace “good,” a word that’s more emphatic, more exciting, just more? (Great, Superb, Incredible, Marvelous, Fantastic, etc. till we have six different words.)

You know that this story – and it is just the first of two creation stories at the beginning of Genesis – you know that it keeps going. I wanted to include the psalms too, so I just read us the first part, cutting it off just after the plants arrive. What’s next? Sea creatures and birds. And then land animals. And then us! And after each arrival, each invention, each manifestation of the creative love of God, God “saw that it was good.” And in verse 31, “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it

was very good.” Six repetitions of this affirmation. It’s almost like it’s the part the writer wants us to remember. God saw that it was... (six bigger words).

And in so many ways, we do remember that. We aren’t that different from the writers of the psalms, who looked around at the hills and trees and were inspired to praise the Creator. I learned something from the internet last night. You may have heard about a “trigger warning,” a preface attached to something that has the potential to be upsetting. Well, last night I heard of something called a “glimmer warning.” A glimmer, the post said, is the opposite of a trigger. Instead of inciting trauma, a glimmer is a moment that shifts us into wonder and awe. Maybe it’s a story, maybe it’s a picture, maybe it’s a hug or a movie ending or a memory. But often, our glimmer moments are inspired by nature. Clouds, mountains, trees, fields of flowers blooming after the winter rain... We see the beauty and we follow God’s example and declare, inwardly or even out loud that it is GOOD.

I wonder if we could celebrate some of that right now. Could some of you share with us what your favorite thing in nature is? And when I repeat it, the rest of you can raise your hand if you like that thing too. ... So many [adjectives] things!

I’m going to let you in on a secret now. Sometimes, there are issues in our world that preachers need to talk about because they are problems that scripture addresses, and even more importantly, they are problems that God cares about. But some of those issues, despite being human problems, have gotten talked about in ways that have created ideological barriers to listening; that is, the issues have been

what we might call “politicized.” So the terms and phrases that are normally used to discuss a particular issue have become loaded, with a list of “buzz words” that would cause half of an audience to immediately stop listening. And yet, preachers know that we can’t avoid these issues, because scripture shows us that the questions involved are near to the heart of God. And so here’s what we do: we cast about within the language to find new words, unique turns of phrase to get at the reality of the problem without using any of the buzz words that would turn people off.

If you can imagine, 20 to 30 years ago, the concepts of ecology and environmentalism were hot-button issues. It was kind of “fringe” to bring such things up in church. But church leaders knew that these issues were a problem the church has a special obligation to address, given how clear the Bible is about our duty to care for God’s creation. So rather than calling us to honor our commitment to environmentalism, the church started talking about the “integrity of creation.” It wasn’t a phrase that was used in the wider debate about what to do about pollution or global warming or the hole in the ozone. It still sounds pretty churchy, doesn’t it? “The Integrity of Creation.” And what’s interesting about when the church re-claims an issue society thought had been thoroughly politicized, is that by applying the language of theology, we often open up entirely new ways of thinking about the problems. I think this phrase, in particular, does that.

I would ask you now to shout out some one-word synonyms for “integrity,” but to be honest, I’m not sure there are any. Microsoft Word offered me honesty,

truth, truthfulness, veracity, reliability, and uprightness. But none of those get at the whole depth of the word “integrity.” “Integrity” is actually one of my favorite words, but I’ve always been disappointed that English offers us no adjective form.

“Integritous” is not a word, nor is “integritful” or “integritified.” At some mystical, linguistical level, I’m pretty sure this speaks to the power of the word. So to speak of the “Integrity of Creation,” is to say something quite powerful indeed. Remember how the most important thing for us to remember from the creation story is that God saw that it was GOOD? Remember how that truth is planted deep within our souls, reflected in these psalms of praise we read and so many others, and reiterated multiple times a day in our own glimmer moments? This is Big. The Integrity of Creation and our role in relation to it is a huge part of why we’re here at all.

And yet, there’s a disconnect here. So often, when we turn to nature for inspiration, it’s what we might call “pure nature.” And what we really mean by that is nature without any humans in it. But what we forget is that we are part of creation too. It’s right there on the sixth day, where we arrived as part of creation, and God saw that it was GOOD. So what can we do to re-connect these two parts of our reality? I wonder if we have favorite things about humanity, the way we do about nature? Can we come up with six? Somebody tell me something you like about humans, and if the rest of you like that thing too, raise your hands. ...

Can we imagine these human things also being things we like about nature? Can we include ourselves in the integrity of creation? One of the fun things about the

word integrity is that it sounds very ephemeral, almost too abstract, but then we can recall the phrase “structural integrity,” and it becomes pretty concrete again. Is part of the problem is the part of creation that is humanity has compromised the structural integrity of creation? Is it helpful to think about it that way? There are things we can do to shore up the structural integrity of something that is faltering. There are things we can do to restore integrity, to relationships, to institutions, even to our own lives. Often, these processes involve breaking down what is and building back better. In relational terms, that can mean confession, restitution, reconciliation, and doing the hard work of finding better ways to live going forward.

So often, when we read about the extremes to which we’ve pushed our environmental crises, it can be overwhelming and make us want to turn away and think about something else. But there’s another way to spin that. When a problem is this big and this complex, it means that there are lots of entry points. We can’t get hung up in paralysis because we can’t solve the whole thing, when there are plenty of different ways to make a difference. And maybe part of what we can do is to keep preaching and celebrating the gospel of cherishing the Integrity of Creation, reminding ourselves and others that we are part of creation, and that God sees creation as GOOD. God calls us to see creation – including the big, messy part of it that is humanity – as GOOD. May we be inspired by the beauty here and the beauty we see in one another, to live our lives in ways that honor the integrity of all that God made. Hallelujah and Amen!