

Planet Earth Sunday (12Aug18)

Genesis1; Psalm33; John1:1-5,9-14

It's one way of talking about this enormous thing, to say that it is well ordered and in harmony, that each part has its place and time, that all of this is good and doing what it ought, that there is fullness and intention about creation.

With Genesis, we've been warped for around a century to think it's primarily trying to convey a timeline of seven days, and that that's the detail trying to assert itself over against some other as the Bible talked about this enormous thing of existence on planet Earth. But let's hold as most important the harmonious order and blessedness as what Genesis is trying to help us comprehend of creation: It is good.

Another way of talking about it, of course, is a story where the planet was formed 4.5 billion years ago, consolidating out of interstellar dust of a solar nebula, taking shape with gravity and volcanoes and tectonics, gradually over eons and eras, epochs and ages. It comes out of an even more enormous story, three times as long, across the expansive scale of an expanding universe. It resolves that we may in the end not be unique or alone, but we are rare: one planet with breathable oxygen and liquid water, in a Goldilocks zone of neither too hot or cold. Is this one also, then, a story about good order coming out of former chaos? Maybe. At any rate, it is another way of trying to help us understand this enormous planet.

Sure, it's a different way of talking about this enormous topic of trying to comprehend planet Earth. Actually much of any overlap between the two versions could almost be a surprise, other than that they're both trying to understand it all. For one example, the word "planet" doesn't even appear in the Bible, since at that time they thought all of this was fairly well established and didn't know we could be wandering through a solar system and so on. But neither was their perspective entirely limited; in the language of the heavens and the earth, they were still trying to comprehend the enormity of everything, as much as they could understand.

On the other side, we may appreciate the greater knowledge of the scale of a globe in orbit and delineated fields of study, but that approach is still limited in scope or capability since the audacity to claim or label or attribute or value "good" is not a scientific category or term, much less themes of blessing and God.

So in the beginning of this Season of Creation with planet Earth, there's something about trying to wrap our minds around incomprehensible enormity. The Bible talks about the "ends of the Earth" as the term for what is incredibly distant and different, but still as if we could eventually get there if we knew the right direction to point our camel or if we trusted our boat. We now talk about the core and mantle, seismography, atmospheric and oceanic currents, as if we could go there or know where they were going. By one measure, 99% of species that have existed have gone extinct—over 5 billion. By another estimate, there are 1 trillion species existing right now, and we have identified .001% of them and hardly know where or how to look.

Explorations, vacations, and learning may enrich us, but what finally do we do with this Incomprehensible enormity? Well, one thing is to shrink the planet to our scale. I only partly mean the scale model of globes and maps, though those do help us understand. More, I mean that I personally comprehend the planet Earth better by driving north. I got to do that this week, where at about Black River Falls it feels more like my neck of the woods, eventually on to where my dad and I fitted together some pieces of the Earth to build our cabin. The opposite for me is driving south and at about the Illinois border I feel out of place, the flatness feeling featureless, not its own problem but for me making the Earth less comprehensible. The deepest in my soul is at about Shell Lake heading north, where trees get bigger and thicker and the clouds are somehow the right white puffiness, or when winter hits, all imprinted on my identity (or so my hunch goes) from my Spooner birthplace.

In spite of that knowable location to feel secure amid the incomprehensible enormity, I'm

not ready to concede our mobile society suffers from rootlessness, that we're just tumbling weeds across a vacant landscape, at risk without connection to place. We are still and always earthlings from the earth, *adams* from *adamah*, humans of the humus, still and always part of this creation, amid the web, inextricably linked, no matter how well we recognize or comprehend it.

Nor, clearly, am I trying to say people shouldn't move, that migration is unacceptably against our nature or that people would be best to stay in the place or country where they were born.

Maybe the two enormous stories we've been considering actually commend immigration to us, that there are reasons and explanations for why not only people or birds or whales or monarchs move around the planet, but also those air and water currents and cycles, and on bigger scale erosion and deposition, forming and dissolving the very rocks and whole continents, and the spinning planet Earth itself. We can explain but not control this far-from-stationary existence.

The Genesis story, meanwhile, encourages us to understand that our stations and movements are for good, in service of life, as a part of the whole. It may seem to be described as more ordered and ruled and domineering in Genesis—that everything is in its place, there are prescribed times of night and day and season, that the moon shouldn't shine at day and a penguin ought to be in the air as a bird and so is in the wrong place if it's swimming. It was written by priests, guys who liked classifying and defining and knowing what's what, like the scientist who tries to explain and categorize her research.

So it's left to the rest of us to live in the overlaps, the gray areas, the reality of life that can't be fully explained or ordered or comprehended, that doesn't fit easy descriptions or precisely narrowed categories.

But rather than that just returning us to our own small corner of creation, that we do the best we can to make sense of our individual lives, identifying the place we like, where we feel we fit in, ignoring all the distinctions and complexities for others, rather than being relegated to such a

weak resolution, as if that's the best we can do or understand and that the enormity of the whole thing is too much, let's turn to the even more enormous—to take the complex incomprehensible gray areas, the uncertainties of life, of more than we can possibly know, even the unclear distinctions of good and bad and what really is our place and infuse that with the presence of God. That's really when we lose track of being able to explain.

Yet this is the trustworthy message of Scripture: the glory and presence of the Lord fills the earth, spreads across and through it all. We are never separated from God's love, least of all when we feel most overcome and defeated, uncertain and lost. The point of talking about the "ends of the Earth" in the Bible is that even as far away and different and unknowable as that might be, it is not out of God's reach. There is nowhere to go apart from God.

You can bet that if the Bible's authors had known planets or galaxies or space travel or paleontology of dinosaurs facing an asteroid or quarks and neutrinos or even something so obviously part of creation as the band at a biergarten as Karen Schwarz pointed out, then those authors would've included those among the certainties of God's blessing for goodness.

If they could have comprehended your life more clearly, directly because the promise seems so incomprehensible, they would have more clearly offered assurances of God's blessing and goodness for you.

Instead that's why you come for sermons, for this weekly updating, confronting the latest incomprehensible complexities and disorder of your life—or sometimes the predictable routines—the stuff you see as good and the stuff you struggle with as not good at all, your explorations and investigations, all met with the renewed reassured promise of God's goodness and blessing not only at the center of a solar system or layered across a planet or in generic life cycles, but specifically for you and with you. God loves Illinois as much as the northwoods, junkyards as much as wild canyons, you as much

as the saints of old, even if in different ways, as unfathomably incomprehensible as that might be.

And that is also the place of faith, receiving the incomprehensible, receiving this one who comes for enlightenment, to dwell with you. You know it in Jesus, the Word who became flesh and lived among us, and you know it as he now is present in this Word, becoming flesh and living again in you.