

Jenneke Barton: Outside the Box

A sermon preached at Seekers Church on May 26, 2002
by Jenneke Barton

Outside the Box

So much biblical ecology to share in this, my last sermon! There is so little time! It is impossible to explore the highlights of **one** Testament, let alone two, in the next few minutes; so surely it was a big chunk of grace that today's lectionary readings came to my rescue and solved my dilemma! In the past I haven't worked with the lectionary very much when I preached, but one of the nice things I have learned from having been at Seekers is that I have come to enjoy the challenge of studying the readings and reflecting on how I might use them. The grace is that finally I realized that today's three readings were presenting me with a solution "outside the box". For the first time I am letting **them** suggest to me what to focus on! So today, we will be looking at a few lectionary-inspired themes from **both** testaments.

It would be impossible to find a more earth-oriented text than the first creation story in Genesis, our Hebrew Bible reading for today. In all cultures, creation stories locate human life within the cosmic order, helping us understand who we are in a framework of larger significance. They explain the basic relationship between human life and the world of nature, and reassuringly confirm the structures of integration and creativity over against the powers of chaos and destruction.

In Genesis 1, God created each part of the cosmos "and saw that it was good." A man and a woman are the last act of creation – the culmination of God's work – and their role is

to be one of intimate relationship with the land and its creatures (although I also like poet James Weldon Johnson's version in his poem "The creation," in which he pictures God creating humans after everything else because God was still lonely!). While I have been at Seekers, I have talked a lot about interconnectedness. In Hebrew, "human" and "earth" are seen as one substance, as expressed in the Hebrew root for each: "Adam" for "human," "adamah"—a female noun in Hebrew—for "soil"—and the related "Adonai" for Yahweh! The idea of "mother earth" is very old indeed!

The passage tells us that God created humankind in God's own image and gave people "dominion" over every other living thing on earth. A literal, and misunderstood, interpretation of the Hebrew word for "dominion" – "rada" – has shaped Western attitudes toward the natural world ever since, producing the worldview that pits people against nature and seemingly gives us permission to exploit the earth for our own needs. However, "rada" means "rule" or "lordship" in the sense of guardian, protector, defender and preserver. The prophet Isaiah describes the ideal ruler (assumed masculine) and his rule thus:

The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. With righteousness, shall he judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. [11:2-5]

It is clear that "dominion" means that we humans are to foster and protect the well-being and flourishing of all our earthly family.

God's first commandment has to do with a tree, which Adam and Eve did not treat as holy! It has been suggested that God's

curse of banishment on Adam and Eve was not only to restore the proper relationship between God and humans, but also between humans and the earth, where they are to fulfill their essential responsibility of “rada” and “abad.” We see the author of Psalm 8 struggling with that very issue of humans’ relationship to God and earth: the awesomeness and magnificence of creation provokes feelings of deep humility and unworthiness that God cares for us. Yet at the same time, we were created “a little lower than God” and have “dominion over the works of [God’s] hands.”

We get a new kind of creation story in the New Testament, in the Gospel of John. First, we need to look at an important link between the two stories, the Hebrew Bible concept of the Wisdom figure. As presented in the so-called Wisdom Books of Job, Proverbs, and others, God created Wisdom before all else. Proverbs states, “The Lord by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding God established the heavens; by God’s knowledge the deeps broke open, and the clouds drop down the dew” [3:19]. So Wisdom is understood to have founded the earth, and because God created wisely, in an orderly and life-enhancing way, wisdom is inherent in creation and that is where we find her. Wisdom is understood as being female: a nifty balance to the traditional view of God as masculine, and the male Jesus. Proverbs goes on to describe her as “more precious than jewels. ...she is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her.” In the Wisdom literature nature, creation and order are emphasized as a way of finding guidance, meaning, and purpose in our lives and helping people see their proper place in it. For example, Proverbs further says, “Go to the ant, you lazybones; consider its ways and be wise.” Wisdom provides a guide along the right path to what we need to do in order to navigate and understand life. If we choose Wisdom, we choose life – and if we do not, we are choosing death.

Now, whom does wisdom sound like in the New Testament? Jesus! In the beginning of **his** creation story, the author of that

gospel declares,

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...All things came into being through him, and without him, not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life... [1:1-4]

Therefore, Jesus is the New Testament reincarnation of Wisdom – who is now a man. Actually, this was not a new idea in Christianity: in Colossians I, Paul quotes an ancient hymn about Jesus that says,

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; in him all things in heaven and earth were created...In him all things hold together. ... For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to God’s self all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.”

Jesus is not only the agent of creation, but also the coordinating power holding all things together. He has become the Cosmic Christ, and his crucifixion and resurrection spell out the triumph of **all** creation over death, and the ultimate reuniting of **all** reality with God. In this way, all creation is sanctified, meaningful and worthy. As Paul makes clear in Romans 8 [vss.19-21] where he talks about creation waiting and groaning for its freedom from bondage and decay, redemption is not only for people; it’s the liberation, healing, and fulfillment of **all** bodies. According to Mark and Luke, Jesus’ crucifixion was also a cosmic event marked by darkness and earthquakes; the ripping of the temple curtain, which had been put there to separate the sacred from the profane, the holy from the earthy, becomes the symbol of the cosmic reuniting of what had been divided.

In John, Jesus is also identified as the Word, or Logos, which

reflects the Hebrew understanding of the active word or creating breath that we encountered in the Genesis story. Later, in John 20, Jesus breathes on the disciples and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Last Sunday we celebrated Pentecost. According to the reading from Acts 2, the sending of the Holy Spirit was a cosmic act involving rushing wind, tongues of fire from heaven, and people suddenly speaking in languages they did not recognize.

We have explored the New Testament understanding of God as (among other things) creator, sustainer, source, and breath of all existence. This is something that the early Israelites understood: that all components of reality are bound together in a kind of cosmic empathy. They had a sacramental understanding of the world as the manifestation of God, as Psalm 8, and Psalm 104 last week, describe so eloquently. We have looked at how the Cosmic Christ is both the representative and the voice of all creation.

Christianity is the incarnational religion per excellence. It recognizes that bodies are important. Paul speaks of the body of Christ having many members, all of them important and necessary for the functioning of the whole, and, later on, of the church as the Body of Christ. We know bodies are important from the healing and miracle stories in the Gospels; in these stories basic things are at stake, parts of the body that are important contributions to full humanness and acceptance. Theologian Sallie McFague, in her excellent book, *The Body of God*, suggests that it isn't a great extension to think of the world as God's body, God's creative act: continuous, diverse, endless, and universal, everything woven together in a complex and magnificent universe.

Today we observe Trinity Sunday. The reading from Matthew is one of the few times the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is mentioned in the New Testament – and McFague has some creative ideas how we might rethink and re-conceive this fundamental Christian structure, incorporating and elaborating

on some of the themes we've looked at today. She suggests a Trinity of transcendence, immanence, and the spirit: first, the transcendent God, the invisible face of God, the unknowable God-ness of God; second, the visible God, the physicality of God, embodied in creation (and this would of course include Christ); and, third, the spirit or third person: the dynamic, life-giving breath that moves in all things.

In today's Matthew reading, the Cosmic Christ, the one who has "all authority in heaven and on earth," commissions and sends forth his disciples, reassuring them that he will be with them always, to the end of the age. He is still with us: how might we, here at Seekers in Washington, DC, understand that commission in May 2002?

The New Testament is full of land imagery (we need only look at the parables to see this). For example, Jesus knew that couching his teaching in such familiar images would enable his listeners to hear and understand his message. We see this in the Book of Revelation, where the author, John, is describing the New Jerusalem, which has "the river of the water of life" flowing through the heart of the city. Along its bank grows the tree of life, and "the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations." (That last phrase never fails to send shivers down my spine!)

The healing of the nations will not happen without the healing of the earth. What if we thought of ourselves as leaves of the tree watered by the river of life? Out of many possible ways of embodying that image, I will share three (it being Trinity Sunday). One is to be aware and to live from our knowledge that everything in nature expresses the divine reality. Another is to be wise, beneficent and humble caretakers of our fellow members of creation. Lastly, to trust that Christ **is** with us always, and that his sustaining and **encourage**-ing spirit that brings special, unique gifts to each of us. The Holy Spirit enables us, both individually and as a

congregation, to carry that breath of life to all of creation, and to work for the shalom of God's realm on earth, which is the well-being, fulfillment, and salvation of **all** of God's body.